1. Articles

What makes a slow tourist?

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Slow tourism is gaining prominence as concern about climate change grows. Yet low carbon forms of tourism may be more widespread than is currently acknowledged.

Ways of doing tourism have varied historically, reflecting changes in how we engage with and think about the world. Global warming is one of the major environmental, political, and cultural issues of our time and this has affected the way some groups are practicing and justifying their holidays. While this is still a recent and relatively under-researched phenomenon, travel literature can offer interesting insights about the emerging ethical and aesthetic contours of low carbon holidays. Only Planet, written by the environmentalist Ed Gillespie, is one such early example of travel writing on slow tourism.

Strictly speaking, slow travel is not entirely new. When Gillespie writes that he ‘wanted to experience the intimate transition of landscape, culture, people and language, soak up the sights, sounds and smells of the journey and not just bunny-hop around the globe in an aluminium sausage’, his sentiments echo concerns and sensibilities that have been endlessly rehearsed in the history of modern tourism.

Today these historical sentiments find their legacy in a variety of styles of tourism broadly labelled ‘alternative’ and ‘ethical’. It is not surprising that slow tourism is routinely associated with or even seen as a refined or more sophisticated version of these. Only Planet itself reads like a backpacking adventure, the only difference being that flights are replaced by long train and ship journeys. Although not made explicit, the book’s inferred audience is environmentally concerned young Britons for whom seeing the world forms a crucial part of their identity, a rite of passage. In this respect the book works well. Considering that many environmentally concerned people are reluctant to give up long distance holidays, this is a welcome publication.

Despite this, my concern with this characterisation of slow travel is the tacit assumption that it possesses meaning only when complying with a prescribed mode of environmental aesthetics. Understood in this way, it blinds advocates of slow travel to forms of doing tourism that, for example, involve only a short journey or even the many people who simply don’t travel and whose carbon footprint is therefore the smallest.

That academic and journalistic writing on tourism and the environment has had little to say about this may be partly explained by the assumption that travelling should be an enlightening experience, involving novelty and cultural difference. Those who willingly travel less or whose holidays revolve around the familiar are portrayed as parochial or as unwilling to try something new. This resilient view of tourism neglects the diversity of forms of tourism in Europe and elsewhere and the extent to which some of these already are, or at least have the potential to be low carbon.

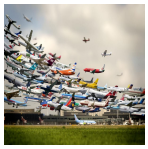
Spanish seaside resorts are a good example of places where holidays are centred around the familiar. This is not about consuming services and places that could be instantly recognized anywhere (like a McDonald's restaurant), but rather the familiar is instead given positive connotations and revolves around a re-encounter of places and people. This involves developing and reproducing friendship networks and family relations, an attachment to place and nurturing childhood memories. Practitioners of this form of tourism, often known as veraneo, describe these holidays in varied ways, including forms of belonging ('this is home'), reencounter of friends and relatives ('this is a familiar place', 'we are a big family'), time to slow down ('I come here do nothing') and health and enjoyment of the outdoors ('the sea is rejuvenating').

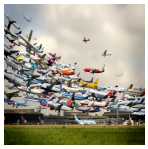
My point is not to romanticise Mediterranean seaside resorts. Rather my aim is to highlight the multiple narratives and practices that define how people experience places and encounter others during their holidays. The crucial point for the purpose of this is that these forms of holidays often involve very low carbon emissions (in most resorts tourists come from the same or a nearby region and, once in the destination, the car is rarely used and everyday routines involve a lot of walking).

If a wider definition of slow tourism based on an assessment of carbon emissions were adopted, one would find that slow tourism is already more widespread than is often admitted. It is practised by many people, but not self-consciously. These forms of slow tourism are rarely described as exciting, adventurous, or enlightening, although these meanings can form part of the holidays. These short trips are about the enjoyment of what are regarded as simple pleasures.

Gillespie's book is important for showing aspiring travellers that it is possible to travel far and wide without such a heavy reliance on flying. Yet it is important to remember the diversity of existing forms of holidaymaking. A reassessment of the diversity of tourism cultures in Europe should enable a search for positive narratives to describe the practices and motives of those who travel less or whose travel habits are low carbon.

Other publications





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