

# Visitation to Major Heritage Sites – Some Essential Planning Considerations

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## Introduction

Culture and tourism are bound together inextricably in the management and development of major heritage sites. It is vital that the issue arising from their relationship should be closely examined. The potential for the tourism experience to be enhanced by a successful and informative visit to a major heritage site is almost as great as the potential for the values of the site to be eroded by that same visitation. Successful planning can take account of the needs of the conservator, the site manager and the visitor or tourism operator in the development of a heritage site.

This paper will establish a framework for the dialogue which must continue, after the General Assembly, between those who manage heritage sites and those involved in organising tourism.

Each of us can marvel at the emptiness of the Australian outback, watch a wintry sunset at Stonehenge or a summer sunset in the Greek islands, experience the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe or the temples of Bangkok or Bali. Who are we to say that others should be deprived of the same opportunities, even if by allowing these experiences for large numbers of people, there is the potential to hasten the process of deterioration. There is a fine line between keeping the opportunities open for the majority of visitors, on the one hand and ensuring that by doing so we do not prejudice the qualities of the place on the other.

The material in the paper has arisen partly from the author's work as a Conservation Architect and Planner on heritage sites in Australia and partly

from the experience of being a tourist and active observer of how other managers and planners have responded to the same issues.

There are four major themes discussed in the paper:

1. What does the average visitor want from a heritage site?
2. How can a site cater for large numbers of visitors?
3. Can retailing and food sales mix with cultural heritage?
4. What are some useful techniques for site interpretation?

The world has experienced human travel for as long as people have had feet. For several thousand years voluntary tourism was usually confined to wealthy individuals or small groups of people. There were notable exceptions, such as the movement of people along the pilgrimage routes of medieval Europe and the functional reasons behind the travels of trading parties which fall into a different category, but in the main few places experienced great pressures from large scale visitation.

Mass tourism is largely a phenomenon of the last two or three generations and its overall rate of growth shows no sign of levelling off. Initially, the typical response to massive increases in tourism was to welcome it as the generator of economic prosperity. Individual communities, business entrepreneurs and governments erected hotels and restaurants, provided airports and infrastructure and did everything possible to attract the new breed of traveller.

Those were the innocent days of mass tourism. Before long people realised that it was not to be a simple, one way ticket to the good life. The enormous strains placed on local services, the breakdown of traditional ways of life, uncontrolled or badly designed development and the decay that results when the tourism focus moves on to another "new" destination, have devastated many communities and the environmental or cultural qualities of important heritage sites.

There is a danger that many of those places which have not yet been hit by the tourism spotlight still see an open invitation to massive visitation as their primary way to long term prosperity. The usual experience of those places which have already enjoyed the mixed blessings of tourism is that the benefits come only from managing the growth and from careful planning for the specific sites which will generate the peak visitation.

The basic lesson is simply to "start out the way you want to finish". It is essential to maintain a rigorous management control of the directions and detail of site development if the cultural values of the place or the community, are to be protected.

Do not assume that once the visitation process has developed its own momentum, the site manager will be able to guide or control the final directions and long term security of the site and its cultural values. Mass tourism, the expectation of people to "do" a site at their convenience, the insistent pressures from commercial or government tour operators for unlimited access and co-operation, can be very difficult to withstand.

#### Visitor Expectations

Can we assume that every tourist in your neighbourhood, or even every visitor to your particular heritage site, seeks a cultural experience? Perhaps, but will it be the central part of their day or simply an entertaining distraction? Visitors, even those who become absorbed in the

messages of your particular site, require food, lodging, transportation and entertainment. Their buses and cars must be managed and their spending urges catered for.

Cultural tourism, after all, is only one part of the overall experience of travel. The more closely that a heritage site integrates with the broader range of tourism needs, the more successful will be its long term operation. The balance, however, is vital if the values of the site are not to be lost.

The typical visitor to a heritage site will bring a number of expectations. These could include:

1. They want to use their imagination to expand on the messages presented by the interpretive displays.

2. They do not want to see the site ruined by the presence of masses of other tourists, or eroded by the wear and tear of large numbers of visitors.

3. There should be a balance between the information presented about the cultural values and the simple enjoyment of the place.

4. The experience of the place should be real, not artificial or manufactured. A site should tell its own story, not be a host to other, albeit interesting but unrelated, display themes.

5. Sometimes they simply want to sit and watch the world go by, especially in historic towns or urban settings where the combination of local residents and other visitors will enliven the backdrop of an historic streetscape. If they can enjoy a meal or a snack, another of their expectations, or requirements will have been satisfied.

6. There should be good signage to encourage the search off the beaten track. For those exploring a site on foot or travelling through an area by car, the attraction of taking an unexpected detour to a signposted additional point of interest is very strong.

7. They want to gain an understanding of what there is at the site. This may be much more than that contained in the simplified image of the place presented in the marketing or travel literature.

8. They want to appreciate creative and learned approaches to the conservation and interpretation of the site and to understand those that are still in progress.

9. At the end of the visit they will almost certainly want to buy some local produce or a souvenir.

#### **How to cater for mass visitation**

The potential for large scale visitation should never be underestimated during the planning stages for a historic site. At the beginning of a project it is difficult to feel confident that any more than a handful of people will ever visit your particular place. Some places may take years before they become as popular as the site manager would like. Unless long term planning options are considered from the outset mistaken decisions could be made which will be very difficult to reverse at a later stage when the patterns of behaviour and expectation are established. It is very easy, for example, for a small, originally discrete car parking area, to ultimately dominate the visual approaches to a site after it has been gradually, but progressively, enlarged to cater for increased numbers.

In terms of large scale tourism, examples from various sites will illustrate how many difficult issues have been catered for.

#### **Carcassonne, South West France**

Some 500,000 people per year travel up from the Mediterranean coast on day trips when the weather is poor or to mix a little culture into a seaside holiday. Many thousands of other visitors visit the historic city to appreciate its qualities. No vehicles however are allowed to enter the walled precinct without prior arrangement and most of those which do are parked out of sight in courtyards. The narrow streets retain their character as attractive pedestrian places.

#### **Stonehenge, England**

In 1974 a group of hippies arrived at mid summer wanting to follow the practice of the Druids by holding a small ceremony. In recent years this grew into a huge festival occasion, for as many as 30,000 people, totally overwhelming the site. It was only with great difficulty that the managers were able to stem the demand for repeat festivals.

#### **The Island of Delos, Greece**

Delos is close to the popular island of Mykonos and is visited by hundreds of people every day in the season, but no one is allowed to stay on the sacred island overnight. There has been rigid control maintained to limit the construction of new buildings on the island.

#### **St. Paul's Cathedral, London**

Easily a million visitors a year come to this enormous church, which must also celebrate regular patterns of religious services. Their mistake was to locate the bookshop within the nave. Many tourists show little respect for the religious sanctuary, or any services being held there, as they are distracted by the retailing of souvenirs.

#### **Westminster Abbey, London**

The abbey is a major centre of English heritage, the burial place of artists and statesmen. However, in a simple exercise of responsible management, the sanctuary is closed to tourists for short periods during services, unless they also want to participate.

#### **Jerusalem**

The Wailing Wall is banned to non Jews. The Arabs close the mosques to tourists five times per day and completely on Fridays. The underlying principle is to respect the right of all individuals to uninterrupted prayer, irrespective of to whom they are worshipping.

#### **Hill Towns and Mountain Top Castles**

At towns and castles like those at Eze, Neuchwanstein and Vezeley, the tourists must leave their cars or buses below and walk to the monument. Often this is

quite a climb but it adds to the imagery and memory of the place while protecting the special qualities.

*Avignon, Southern France*

They have tourist trams, like so many towns and sites to let the visitor ride around the precinct in a short time. While these are often rather childish in design, they do assist in the movement of people and can avoid unnecessary crowding of narrow spaces.

*The Louvre, Paris*

This major monument required total replanning to handle the five million visitors per year who visit a palace which was not originally intended to become an international museum. The result was the controversial glass pyramid and a total reorganisation of the functioning of the place.

**Can Retailing and Food Mix with Cultural Heritage?**

There is no doubt that a considerable portion of total income for a historic site can come from retailing and food sales. The visitor is generally in a recreational spending frame of mind, irrespective of the cultural content of the visit. Often the expectation is that there will be things to buy, and more than just postcards.

Many sites, particularly the museums and galleries in Europe, America and elsewhere have raised retailing to a fine art. The bookshop in the Louvre is one of the best art book shops in Paris. The visitor however is very demanding, and only quality products and merchandising themes which are related to the historic site, will suffice.

In relation to food, it is well known that if visitors stay over an hour, they will buy a snack, particularly for the children. If they stay 2-3 hours, they will want to buy a substantial meal. A visit in excess of half a day will often encourage them to look for accommodation nearby. Such expenditure can benefit the local community or economy.

Do not be too conservative in the way you accommodate diners. Casual outdoor eating is well established in Europe and elsewhere, with little or no adverse impact on historic sites. In a successful, re-created gold mining village in Australia, the food outlets specialise in the meals or food items which were available in the mid 19th century, the period which has been re-created.

The French provincial towns of St. Emillion and Sarlat have successfully mixed outdoor seating with traditional streetscapes or former cloisters by using moveable, light weight tables and chairs which contrast with the historic atmosphere as a simple, ephemeral addition.

There are however, several examples where the food or retailing outlet has not been as successful.

1. The old Roman city of Caesaria in Israel has developed some of the best interpretive signage. However it also has some dreadful restaurant buildings within the ancient site.

2. Retailing need not be on a big scale to have a negative impact. The statue of Boadicea in London is one of the great images of English tourism promotion. On occasions a souvenir seller has other ideas as he crowds the base of the statue with cheap retailing and signage.

3. Junk souvenir selling abounds at almost every major site. If it is not controlled, or removed to one side, it can overwhelm the value of the place. At the Trevi Fountain in Rome, the souvenir tables almost sit on the edge of the fountain.

4. At Ronchamps, in eastern France, the marvellous Chapel by Le Corbusier is approached past a very ordinary entry building and shop. Must the tourist be asked to ignore these associated eyesores and concentrate on the purity of the monument?

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### How do other People go about Interpretation?

Some fairly brief examples of interpretation over a wide range of sites in Europe will provide evidence of the messages that they give the visitor.

#### *Masada on the Dead Sea*

The isolation of the mountain top fortress, an essential part of its significance, is emphasised by the cable car approach and the desolation once you get there.

#### *School of Archaeology at Basel University, Switzerland*

An unusual location for the only complete re-assembly of all the sculpture from the Parthenon, displayed in a way which illustrates the original context. It is all done by using plaster casts of the original sculpture, which is now scattered throughout the world.

#### *Caesaria, Israel*

Signage and partially re-constructed pathways at Caesaria are informative and stimulate the imagination.

#### *Alsace*

The medieval Castle of Haut Koenigsbourg was reconstructed by Kaiser Wilhelm at the turn of the 20th century. Models and old newspaper cuttings tell the story of this former ruined fortress and the controversial rebuilding.

A simple sign on the Maison Pfister in Colmar records past restoration work programmes, stretching back to the 16th Century.

#### *Renoir's House, Cagnes-sur-Mer*

The building retains Renoir's personal studio. There is a powerful interpretation of the artist's life by the simple means of a photo of the man at work, sitting amongst the furniture and easels which remain in the room.

#### *Santorini, Greece*

The archaeological dig at Akrotiri allows the visitor to explore the work in progress and to use their imagination to re-create the buried city.

#### *Yorvik at York in Northern England*

Excavations for a new shopping centre uncovered the remains of a viking settlement. The visitor facility known as Yorvik, in the basement of the centre, has reconstructed the viking village based on the findings of the archaeological investigations. The visitor is fully informed of the processes, including full sized models of the actual archaeological work, to illustrate the methodologies that were used and reinforce the reality and scholarship.

#### *Lascaux II, Central France*

The Stone Age caves are a scientific reconstruction of the original, necessitated when human visitation became too destructive in the original caves. The actual process of reconstruction was used to further scientific and artistic research into the original techniques and materials used to paint the cave walls.

#### *Acre, Northern Israel*

Multi-lingual signage at Acre recalls that this city has seen many waves of occupation and settlement, including Moslems and Crusaders.

#### *Paris Metro Station*

The Metro station in Paris for the Rodin Museum is particularly expressive of the treasures of the museum above by displaying copies of the master's sculpture on the concourse.

#### **Two Case Studies**

Vaux le Vicomte is a huge chateau on the outskirts of Paris. Annual visitation would number into the hundreds of thousands. An average visit takes 2-3 hours. Many sub-themes have been developed, including the stables, equipage, kitchens, restoration work, the extravagant interiors, the various owners, the gardens and major historic personalities such as Louis XIV.

Parts of the stables have been converted into an excellent bistro. The chateau is closed for one and a half hours at lunch time, thereby virtually forcing the visitor to eat at the bistro, since the chateau is quite isolated from nearby villages or towns.

By comparison, Monet's garden at Giverny is a peaceful and exquisite gem with very low-key signage and interpretation. Reproductions of his work line his old study, accompanied by a photo of him in that room. His main studio has been converted to the entry point and shop, but also displays more examples of his work in an original context.

**Summary**

In summarising, the paper stresses the lesson that you should not underestimate the potential of your site. Do not begin with sloppy management practices or site planning ideas which assume that

the forecasts of early visitation levels will never be exceeded. They can be very hard to undo later when the site hits the big time and visitation rises into the many thousands every day.

Conservation planning for tourism on heritage sites should seek to undertake a careful but creative analysis of the site to draw out the hidden themes and characteristics for interpretation. Conservation of the historic fabric is essential, but many opportunities arise for successfully managing the integration between tourism and conservation.