

Is there a Tourist Culture?

Observations of a man coming from one of the birth-places of tourism

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Tourism supplies many a country in the world with a considerable amount of their national income. The cultural heritage frequently contributes greatly to the attractiveness of a country to tourists: What would Egypt be without its pyramids, Greece without its Acropolis, China without its Great Wall, Switzerland without its alpine scenery?

In the advertisements for tourists issued by every country the cultural assets play an important part. Without ever having been there, the potential tourist knows the religious customs of Bali, the Golden Temple in Bangkok, the Maya sites in Mexico or the Upper Town of San Salvador the Bahia from promotional pictures in travel agencies.

All well-known monuments must now have a tourist infrastructure: In the Imperial Palace in Vienna the path to follow to the Spanish Hofreitschule is cordoned off on either side by a fixed barrier. Huge parking lots spread over the whole mainland surrounding Mont St. Michel in France. Abu Simbel in Egypt runs its own airline to pamper the tourists. In palaces like Schonbrunn, Herrenchiemsee or Versailles, the visitors (several hundred thousand a year) move through the halls on real tourists' paths, complete with sisal mats, cordons and plastic coverings to protect tapestries and curtains. It's not a question of "visiting", one "does" the Medici Graves in Florence or the Alhambra in Granada.

Today's tourists destroy any cultural monument

Therefore it is not surprising that the cultural monuments suffer from constant overuse.

Visitors in great numbers alter the climate in these important interiors.

The caves of lascaux with their famous paintings had to be closed to the public for that reason. An exact reproduction nearby now renders the impression of this subterranean world for the visitors. Damage due to the same fungal disease can be observed on the ceiling frescoes of any larger church.

The graffiti tourists have inflicted to monuments in order to immortalize their visit, affect those works of art considerably. How many staircases of church towers aren't covered with carved names. The wall paintings are not spared either. Even the Ramses statues in the front hall of the great temple of Abu Simbel bear ornaments like "SUMMERVILLE 1786".

Everyone knows that the flash of a camera is extremely damaging to paintings and therefore is forbidden – and rightly so – in beautiful interiors. Still, you can observe at least one flash emanating from any group in any guided tour.

The floors are equally affected. They are damaged by stiletto heels, which cannot be forbidden; even the carpet slippers often provided cannot prevent damage. Deterioration of the floor can also be the result of inappropriate carpeting in the visitors line or constantly being stepped on.

Little thefts are the order of the day. Some items of furniture were replaced by copies long ago, either because the originals had been stolen or because they had to be removed (as a whole or partly)

in the legitimate fear of thefts. The table in the hermitage of one of our Swiss national saints has to be replaced every few years because the pious and less pious visitors are in the habit of cutting off shavings and taking them home.

The tourist infrastructure makes the destructure complete

How delightful the surroundings of every palace, how enchanting every temple gate or convent entrance when gushing with the lovely smell of hamburgers, french fries or candy floss. How nice the stands stuffed with souvenirs, sweets and groceries, built up to please the stressed tourist. They make everyone automatically feel at home, because everyone already knows the same trash from home, as in the forecourts of the famous monuments in his native country. Does it really matter finding Nefertiti's head being offered for sale in Egypt, Michelangelo's David in Florence or little Eiffel Towers in Paris?

Above all floats the mist of carbon dioxide from the private cars or motorbikes, the buses and the planes that bring Europeans, Americans, Japanese quickly and quite safely to Tahiti, Sri Lanka or Luxor. Those fumes spread, even without tourism through great cities like Paris or Rome. They are the plague of civilisation, even in places where there is otherwise hardly any threat to people or monuments.

These little scenes of horror, show just a few of the most obvious threats to our cultural possessions. We will not mention the countryside ruined by oversized hotel resorts surrounded by their carpet of bungalows, nor the waste of water resulting from the fastidious living standard of Europeans or Americans.

But the tourism companies in every country try to attract new tourists with its historical monuments. Can those threats to a country's cultural assets be tolerated in the name of mass tourism?

We all agree, definitely not!

Tourism as a mere profiteer

In which countries – except maybe in Egypt and Greece – do the guides have to pass an exam on some specific cultural monuments, that enables them to guide tourist groups through them? And even there, it is more lucrative to accompany tourist groups on a several day-long cruise on a floating hotel on the Nile, than “only” guide groups through the temples of Luxor or Kom ombo. The result of this is a natural selection to the disadvantage of cultural monuments.

Another very delicate topic in all nations with tourist trade is the participation of the tourist industry in the cost of preservation of the cultural monuments it exploits. There are hardly any tourism poster series in which historical monuments, folkloric customs or art collections to be seen in the country would not promote that destination: Yodeller groups for Switzerland, temple dances for Java, the collection of the Prado for Madrid, the Forbidden City for Beijing. . . . The cultural heritage is being called to duty by the tourism trade. And what does eventually come in as a benefit to the cultural heritage? Absolutely nothing.

Those responsible for the tourism trade point out that tourism pours a considerable amount of money into the state's coffer. The state should kindly be so decent as to take care of the cultural possessions with these funds, as they are affected by tourism – all the same there are also monuments that fall into decay all alone

In tourism – like in the automobile industry – the principle that the party responsible for the promotion of use is liable for the damage is unknown.

We all know that the tourism industry is in this way sawing off the branch it is sitting on. When tourists descend upon an area like locusts, without the local population being prepared for that contact, the locals will react with rejection and want to protect themselves from danger, that threaten their native country – patriotism and xenophobia are

so often related – and eventually those regions, where xenophobic reactions occur, will be criticised on the part of the tourism industry, which basically created the whole situation.

The experts in the ICOMOS look away

As far as I know, no National Committee of the ICOMOS in any country has endeavoured to support the national tourist organisation or private travel agencies by organising specific training for the tourist or museum guides or schooling for group leaders.

It springs from a total misjudgment of the real situation, when specialised organisations like ours believe on a national level, that they must sustain tourism in their countries. The splendid temple resorts of Angkor Vat are once again overflowing with masses of tourists again – even before the last shots of the civil war have died away. Most of the tourists do not even come because they are dying to see Cambodia and its historical monuments, but because back home in the safe world of western civilisation, they will still raise attention for having gone through the adventure of a journey to a country that has not stopped hitting the headlines for its political troubles. Maybe the publicity to raise funds in order to save Angkor Vat inspires people less that the motivation just of being one of the first. Similar phenomenas could also be observed when China first opened its doors. But still, the restoration of Angkor Vat is right now being propagated with specific arguments.

The responsible specialists in the ICOMOS or in UNESCO have always thought about saving the important cultural monuments. The impressive World Heritage List shows that clearly. UNESCO and several countries have helped with millions of dollars to save the temple of Abu Simbel which was threatened with drowning in an artificial lake because of the erection of the Nasser Dam. As a result, a flourishing tourist industry could develop. Since the completion of the rescue operation the guests have brought several times the

amount spent on the salvation of the temple to Upper Egypt. But why has the money not flowed back to the UNESCO in instalments? Probably only because at that time those responsible would never have imagined the tourist boom that would result from that rescue action. Who amongst the western professors would ever have wasted a thought on something so profane as money recovery? And still, this is the very money missing today for saving and preserving Angkor Vat or Borobudur or Sana'a.

On our trips abroad – which of course are dedicated to the exploration of the local cultural sites – we turn up our noses at the tourist groups of our home country which happen to cross our path. But what do we do to help cultural sensitivity grow amongst the potential group tourists at home?

Today we Europeans and North-Americans are facing more or less helplessly, waves of xenophobia spreading throughout our countries. These are the very people who claim they have already been “everywhere”, and yet who live “there” on Coke and hamburgers, beer and bockwurst, exactly like they do at home. These people know the “locals” only as waiters and have their assumption confirmed to be by far socially and culturally superior, when they are confronted with dubious sanitation.

What can we do to avoid the question “–Where can I get a Coke?” Immediately after a guided tour through an important monument in a foreign country. What do we, who still have cultural sensitivity, do in order to waken this sensitivity in others?

What should be the target?

The situation today could perhaps be described as follows:

Culture in tourism consists in the modesty and patience of the host country towards the foreign guest.

The target among the people interested in culture has to be a total change of these values and also work on

establishing a description of tourism culture for the future, which may sound like that: *Culture in tourism is the modesty and open-mindedness of the travellers towards the host country and its cultural situation.*

I reckon, the participants of the ICOMOS symposium all agree with this target definition. Yet we need an intensive brainstorming about the way that will lead to this goal.

Perhaps the ICOMOS could give advise to the tourism branch of each country through its National or Special Committees, which of the cultural monuments are not suitable for the visit of big groups of tourists and should be reserved for the visit of experts.

The ICOMOS and its National and Specialised Committees could also give advise to private owners of architectural monuments like which parts should remain closed to the public and which parts can be open to the visitors without safety problems and how the interiors and their furnishing can be protected against thefts and vandalism. Until now the owners have generally had to learn those things by suffering damages.

Then we should really work hard towards changing to the better cultural tourism, so that the visit to sites of great historical and cultural value will be promoted but also so that the visitors of those sites will be seriously prepared

through the tourism organisation beforehand – not just a few minutes before entering the monument.

The tourism to monuments and historical sites has to prove financially profitable for them: UNESCO and the ICOMOS have to work hard on having the costs for the rescue and maintenance of these tourist attractions be partially borne directly by the earnings due to tourism. This is not only because the sites are – as we have seen – highly profitable to tourism, but also because tourism – as we have seen as well – causes direct damage to them. The UNESCO has a wonderful opportunity to translate financial feasibility into reality, when including important cultural and natural monuments into the World Heritage List. UNESCO can make the inclusion to the list depend upon the condition that the financing of the monument is provided by contributions from tourism. The organisation of this contribution would of course be a matter of each state for itself. This way the inclusion to the World Heritage List will not remain a mere contribution to avoid the inevitable destruction of the particular monument.

If we do not intervene with all our strength right now, generations to come will rightly make us responsible for having tolerated the fact that the cultural past of a country would be sacrificed to the profit of a very few.

The ICOMOS, ladies and gentlemen, must never tolerate this sacrifice.