

Creating Relational Tourism Through Exchange: The Maltese Experience

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ABSTRACT

Tourism, like many other cultural and social phenomena, is based on exchange. It is perhaps not surprising that Malta, long a centre for trade and social exchange, has become a focus for the social exchanges promoted by tourism and other forms of long-term mobility. Exchange is also a major theme for the European Capital of Culture in Valletta in 2018. This paper looks at the ways in which the concept of exchange has changed in a globalising world, particularly as it problematizes traditional concepts of 'host' and 'guest'. In particular, attention is paid to how the concept of 'local' culture is replacing 'authenticity' as the touchstone of real tourism experience. What does it mean to be local, or to 'live like a local' in Malta, or anywhere else?

Keywords: Relational Tourism, Communities, Exchange

INTRODUCTION

An important theme for the Valletta 2018 European Capital of Culture is exchange. As the Valletta 2018 bid book says:

Born within both Europe and the Mediterranean and occupying a central strategic position, Malta is a place of diverse cross-cultural exchanges, whether for trade, tourism or even as a refuge. However not all of these encounters are necessarily comfortable ones.

Although the most uncomfortable encounters have come in recent years with the flood of refugees from Africa, in the context of the ATLAS conference the theme of tourism exchanges has been central. Tourism has always been about exchange. Tourism has been a vehicle for exchanging ideas, lifestyles, culture and money. Like many forms of exchange, however, the exchanges stimulated by tourism are not always equal or equitable. Much of the tourism literature on development, for example, was focussed on the unequal exchanges between hosts and guests, with the tourist guests usually seen as coming out on top of their local hosts.

In the service economy, tourism became a major source of economic growth, because at its most simple level, it involved exchanging tourist money for services provided by locals. This situation was analysed in some detail in a Maltese context by the anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain, who in spite of the obvious temptations to join the detractors of mass tourism, tended to take a more sanguine view of the exchanges in Malta.

He identified six circumstances peculiar to Malta that enabled this small island to benefit from tourism to a greater extent than some other destinations:

- Not having all their eggs in the tourist basket
- A relatively high standard of living
- An outward-looking attitude as a result of a long, reasonably friendly relationship with the British
- A tradition of service
- A high population density, which has permitted the Maltese to absorb a large tourist population
- The government intention to dominate the tourist industry

The Maltese are perhaps not the classic hosts of anthropological theory, cast helplessly to their fate by a rapacious international tourism industry.

The Maltese view of tourism has developed with a more equal, and equitable view of the relationship between host and guest, that has perhaps facilitated the transition to the modern network society better than some other destinations. It was in Malta, for example, that the concept of 'relational tourism' came to fruition. "Integrated Relational Tourism" (IRT) 'is based on the interaction between the traveller/tourist and the local people which provides material and immaterial gains.' (Caudullo, 2010)

This is a departure from traditional tourism, offering the tourist the possibility to immerse himself and taste local culture and traditions in the particular region or locale he/she is visiting.

Today's tourists *prefer "to be" rather than "to have"*, and therefore they want to become part of the daily life of the places they visit, and want their journey to be a source of knowledge and leisure. The tourist reclaims the old function of the journey, intent on widening his knowledge of the surrounding territory, while respecting the social and cultural equality of other populations. The tourist seems less interested in the traditional sites of mass tourism, which has damaged local identities. More and more tourists prefer less known sites and inland areas where outside influences have had little influence on local culture and folklore.

This has many parallels to the concept of 'creative tourism' that has also become popular in recent years (Richards, 2011). If one analyses what relational or creative tourism gives people, it is based on exchange – the exchange of knowledge, skills, ideas, culture, etc. In the early forms of creative tourism this was often encapsulated in specific learning experiences such as workshops and courses, but it is increasingly now bound up with the idea of immersion in local culture and creativity, or the concept of 'living like a local'.

This is perhaps the ultimate example of relational tourism – 'being' rather than 'seeing'. The growth of home exchange systems and hospitality exchange systems such as couchsurfing underlines how popular the 'living like a local' concept has become (Andriotis and Agiomirgianakis, 2013). The irony of this, however, is that this form of local experience has been supported by the growth of global networks. Without Internet exchanging lives with other locals would be much more difficult. Via Internet, however, we can easily become a local elsewhere.

BECOMING LOCAL

But this also begins to call into question what 'local' actually means in the context of a globalising, or perhaps more accurately a glocalising world? As Urry (1995) explains, the idea of being 'local' is a theoretical concept that can take on many different meanings. In fact, as Urry argues, 'what seems a relatively simple notion, the "local", is in fact really complex and involves analysis of a mixture of social and spatial processes' (p. 73).

In many ways, the 'local' has become the new authenticity. At one stage we could assume fairly simplistically that people were in search of 'authentic' experiences through tourism, as MacCannell (1976) outlined in the social process of attraction creation. However, later work unpicked the modern process of authentication into a series of different models or concepts of authenticity that vary considerably from one individual to another. The most extreme form of this shift was evident in the emergence of the 'post-tourist' (Rojek and Urry, 2002) for whom deliberately consuming 'inauthentic' tourist kitsch was that best way of confirming one's individual authenticity.

As the semantic power of authenticity waned, so appeals to the 'local' began to gain momentum. As mass tourism turned resorts and city centres into globalised, inauthentic leisure playgrounds, so the informed tourist increasingly went in search of the 'real', 'local' places to be found on the periphery of established tourist circuits, as Maitland (2010) describes in the case of inner city London. Vernacular culture began to be praised as the original, the resistant form of culture, standing up to the onslaught of gentrification, as in Sharon Zukin's (2010) praise for the 'Naked City' of New York. It is easy to assume that what was identified as 'vernacular' was original and local in origin. The term 'vernacular' was used to refer to 'cultural forms made and organised by ordinary, often indigenous people, as distinct from the high culture of an elite.' The appeal to the indigenous is important here, because it presumes an originality, a long-standing bond between a group of people and a particular place. Such presumed bonds also lie beneath territorial claims – 'we were here first'.

Going Local Travel A Blog For Travellers Looking To Break Off Track

Personally, I don't think there should be too many rules or lines. As soon as you try to define 'local', you get yourself into problems. How long do you have to have lived in a place to be considered local? Or is it less about years, more about lifestyle? If you use a travel-networking site and meet a rich Argentine who lets you stay in their penthouse and takes you to the polo, does that still count as getting 'the local perspective'? Or perhaps just 'a' local perspective? Or is local travel more about where the money goes? And, in that case, how much of that has to be kept in the local economy for a place to be considered a 'local company'?

Responsibletravel.com

Just how exceptional would you like your holiday to be? From day one in 2001, we realised something incredibly simple. If the people who ran your holiday lived and worked in the destination and really loved it they would care about giving you a different kind of experience - something really exceptional.

No matter what type of holiday you choose travelling with our partners is more than just a brief stay somewhere - it's a real connection with the people, the landscape, the culture, the food and the environment. They want you to feel a little like you really live there for a short while, and can enjoy the peace and quiet or the pace and excitement of the place as much as the people who really live there do.

We call this travelling like a local.

But in a globalising world such claims are harder and harder to prove. Who is really from here? How long do you have to have been in one place to be indigenous? This means that the concept of locality is not usually referred back to some historical past, but rather referenced in terms of the here and now; people who live in a particular locality. For tourists of course, this is often a practical solution, because they often do not have the skills or knowledge necessary to make distinctions between different groups of people who live in the localities they visit.

THE NEW CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES

This produces an interesting effect, where the 'local' can suddenly be from anywhere. When ATLAS was researching the mobility of tourism labour in the 1990s, for example, it became clear that one of the biggest challenges facing a number of destinations was finding enough 'locals' to fill front line positions (Richards, 2003). So in Dublin, for example, the hotel receptionist is just as likely to have been born in Latvia as somewhere in Ireland. While the local tourist board might worry that tourists are not being greeted by 'natives', it has opened up a range of interesting new possibilities. In fact, what the increasing mobility of labour has done is to make it possible for anybody to be from 'here', or to be a local. This physical mobility is also closely bound up with growing virtual mobility, which makes it easier to gather information and form relationships with places even before we arrive. These mobility effects are having a considerable impact on the way in which tourism, and the relationships it develops, is being shaped.

Your local guide is no longer always and 'indigenous', but is often a cultural intermediary from elsewhere. The essential skill is the ability to communicate, the authenticity of the content is often secondary. For the post-tourist the desired form of delivery is 'cheeky' or 'ironic' in any case, so 'truth' and validation become secondary to a good yarn. Vernacular culture these days is no longer 'from here', but a 'mash up' of interesting bits and pieces, much like the Internet itself:

You see a lot of what I would now call vernacular culture on the Internet; people sort of slamming together something in a weird way on YouTube. You know, it's... sure there are people who are calculating about it already and trying to create either a reputation or a career for themselves in some way. But there are a lot of people just sort of making stuff because it's like a way to almost just blurt something back at this world that's so loud and full of stuff; noise, art and commercials and junk and argument and they're sort of like making some argument back, here is something. I like that. That's vernacular culture to me. (Lethem, 2013).

The system of socialised meaning that underpinned cultural tourism, for example, has given way to a much more democratic, if chaotic, system of authentication. It is a relatively flat system in which almost anybody can gain authority by attracting attention from others. In this

new landscape of authenticity the 'live like a local' concept develops two different dimensions of authenticity simultaneously. The local, who lives in a particular place, is deemed authentic because of location or context – living in the destination. At the same time, living like a local involves the development of existential authenticity by the tourist. This system also implies a relationship between the tourist and the local. Not just experience, but also 'being' the local. So tourist and local subsist not just in a host-guest relationship where roles are clearly defined, but both parties are needed to confirm the other's authenticity – the tourist confirms the authenticity of the local lives they lead for a while, and the local in turn confirms that this is indeed a local life.

The interesting new dimension of this authenticating system is that it happens directly, without the need for intermediaries (although bloggers try hard). Whereas the travel industry used to be the major entry and point, now locals themselves can facilitate access by putting their flat on couchsurfing.com or acting as a Greeter. User-generated content is replacing the guide books and other 'official' sources of information as the authenticating agent for the local.

As Gordon (2008) puts it, we are seeing the emergence of a plethora of 'placeworlds'...

The global reach of the user-generated Web is the product of an accumulation of local information. With millions of users contributing very specialized information and documentation of their daily activities, the result is an unprecedented interlinking of local spaces. Even when user-generated content is not local in origin, there is considerable motivation to locate it. As an example, the photo sharing system, Flickr, has a feature that enables users to plot any photograph on a Google map.

Human beings, whether connected to the Internet or not, continue to communicate preferentially with people who are geographically proximate than with those who are distant. Nevertheless, people who are connected to the Internet communicate more with people who are geographically distant without decreasing the number of local connections.

The 'insider tip', that priceless marker of authenticity used to be purveyed by guide books such as Lonely Planet (Sprieszhofer 2002). Now the insider tips are given by 'real insiders' – the locals who live in a destination. This shift represents a fundamental change in the location of local knowledge. Instead of being made explicit through global publishing networks, it is now broadcast through 'local' user-generated content, which could be seen as reclaiming this information for the 'local'. In fact, as Gordon (2008) outlines, the insider tip and other information about destinations now has a 'network locality', which is *premised on the fundamental reorientation of the user within digital networks in relation to content, spaces, and other users. The restructuring of local situations is relational. The person still exists in the house, block, neighborhood, and city, but the relationship between the user and the information used to assemble those concepts has changed...*

We now have access to nearly everything—entire music and film catalogs, archives of news stories and commentary on those news stories, a massive encyclopedia magnitudes larger than Britannica, and social networks in address books, buddy lists, and friend groups. As computing leaves the desktop and extends to laptops and mobile devices, local space is wherever we happen to be.

So if the local is accessible everywhere, 'being' or 'living' like a local must have to do with local practices and local knowledge. Not just the fact of network locality, but the fact that knowledge of the locality, local knowledge is produced through particular practices. The tourist who is 'living like a local' is seeking to acquire the knowledge and consumption skills that will enable them to become a practiced local.

We used to take our (physical) stuff with us, our food, our newspapers, our pubs, and just replicate them physically in the destination. Now that we have been freed from stuff by the Internet, and globalisation has also made our physical stuff ubiquitous, we are effectively also free to engage in the local, safe in the knowledge that it will not engulf us. So the construction of the local, of specific placeworlds, becomes a different kind of task, in which a wider, networked community is able to participate.

NEW LOCAL PLACEMAKING

This new networked form of place making opens up new possibilities. Whereas the shift to cultural tourism was marked by the migration of art historians to tourism in order to translate cultural capital into economic capital, we are now seeing the emergence of the ex-pat as a new cultural intermediary. Cultural capital in terms of the tourist is added to local knowledge (however limited) to produce new formulations. Very often these exploit specific 'gaps' between the locality and the origin of the tourists.

For example in Barcelona there is a wide range of services that are aimed at tourists, long stay visitors or ex-pats by other 'paralocals' who have been in the location a little bit longer than their clients. The most visible of these involve different forms of transport, which often integrate cultural forms of the 'host' and 'guest'. For example there are a number of bike hire firms that have sprung up, often run by Dutch expats. The Dutch bring their extensive knowledge of bicycles with them, and apply this to the Barcelona content. Until recently the practice of bicycling was alien to Barcelona, where the locals preferred scooters. The importation of this Dutch practice came about largely thanks to Dutch ex-pats who were aware of their compatriots' desire to bike around the city. For example Dutch company Baja Bikes offers bike hire using Dutch bicycles with the option of Dutch language tours, guided by a 'Dutch-speaking local' (in other words a Dutch ex-pat). They also offer tours in English guided by 'an English local'. For German tourists, not famed for their knowledge of bikes, there are other options. A German launched the company Cooltra, which hires scooters and roller blades, in 2006. 'The idea was to lure young travellers off the city tour buses and on to the same mode of transport used by locals' (Mulligan, 2010). German ERASMUS student Steffi Witt is one of the tour guides, who says: 'I am not a cultural guide, I take my groups around as if they were friends visiting me. They see the city through my eyes and get a lot of insider tips.'

An interesting recent example of ex-pat tourism entrepreneurship is Hidden City Tours 'a ground breaking Barcelona based social enterprise offering walking tours of the gothic quarter... with a difference. We exclusively employ and train up guides who are homeless.' The founder, perhaps not surprisingly is an ex-pat:

Lisa Grace, a market research consultant by profession and resident in Barcelona since 2004, joined the lengthy Spanish dole queue last year and after some reflection,

decided it was time for change. “I felt I had spent far too many years helping the global food, drink and cosmetic giants flog more of their products”. Whilst looking for voluntary work in the spring of 2013, Lisa stumbled across Secret City Tours, a social Enterprise in Bath offering homeless walking tours. “From that moment on, there was no looking back.... I knew Barcelona would be perfect for a homeless walking tour project: Barcelona’s biggest asset being tourism, visitor origin correlating closely to the most generous givers to charity, the growing homeless problems in the city and increased consumer consciousness for responsible tourism”.<http://www.hiddencitytours.com/>

This makes it clear that things have changed since people began using their cultural capital to earn money from cultural tourism in the 1980s. People are now using relational and locational capital to earn a living. The fact that you are in a particular place that attracts tourists and you can communicate effectively with them is enough. So in theory, any ‘local’ with good communication skills should be able to become a postmodern tourism ‘switcher’.

The Maltese should be in a good position to do this, because as Boissevain suggests, they are relatively open to new ideas and exchange. This opens up possibilities of developing new models of alternative and creative tourism that can help to address some of the problems caused by mass tourism development. As Creative Malta recently noted: ‘Valletta’s bid to host the European Capital of Culture in 2018 is a unique opportunity to transform Malta into a hub for creative exchange.’ Not only can the ECOC help to build the cultural and creative sectors, but it can also help to strengthen the international networks, contacts and exchanges that are essential to the development of new forms of tourism. As Wil Munsters (2010) noted recently ‘stimulating creative tourism is beneficial not only to the economic and cultural development of Malta, but also contributes to the realization of the social objectives by enhancing awareness of the own identity with the local population.’ He emphasised particularly the way in which renewed interest in the local was helping to strengthen and re-invigorate creative activities and traditions, which could provide a rich basis for the development of ‘local’ tourism.

It also seems that the tourism authorities in Malta have become aware of the possibilities of developing local tourism products, although the best way of achieving this may still be the subject of discussion. In 2012 the then Tourism Minister Mario de Marco appealed for Malta to make “better use of its unique character, heritage and attractions to entice more visitors”. In particular he highlighted the potential of developing ‘authentic’ local experiences off the beaten tourist track. However, the Times of Malta (2012) commented: “The marketing of the “authentic” Maltese experience will require careful definition and clever packaging. It will not work if it were to consist of a trip in a bus to a village or old town core with visitors dropped off and simply left to fend for themselves.’ This is clearly true, but neither the Minister nor the Times seemed to consider the new intermediaries who are already packaging and marketing the authentic Malta – the Maltese locals themselves.

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