
ARTICLES

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUALITY THROUGH TOURISM. ITS ORGANISATION FROM THE OFFER SIDE

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Since the end of the last century, the development of “new” forms of spirituality has been observed with increasing clarity. These new religious manifestations emerged as a continuation of the New Age movement and its predecessors, the counterculture and hippie movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Specialised literature makes use of different terms to refer to the growing manifestations of the religious phenomena, but usually they are described, in broad terms, as an expanding phenomenon of selective consumerism which shapes religiosities *à la carte* within a changeable and flexible organisation (Champion 1995; Mardones 1999; Davie 2011). Along these lines, traditional forms of religion have been transformed into the religious, sacred or spiritual (Albert y Hernández, 2014a), and the religious experience has moved from the collective and institutionalized towards the individual and experiential.

It is in this context in which a proliferation of the spiritual or mystical journey takes place, perceived by some people as a mean to search for spirituality, answers to existential questions, well-being, self-knowledge and personal growth. In most of the cases, spiritual journeys are designed as long-distance travels to distant lands in which, with a large dose of exoticism, contact with a different culture is established. Nevertheless, the most remarkable aspect of these journeys is its interest in promoting an internal, spiritual experience, which is attained by the individual through exotic sensorial experiences which are generally shared with the group with whom one travels. The spiritual journey converges with an enlargement of the possibilities of the tourism industry that has occurred during the last decades; new forms of tourism have appeared and its offer has diversified (historical, cultural, environmental, ethnic, spiritual, etc.).

The methodology used to approach this phenomenon has consisted in a combination of in-depth interviews and observations performed during the years 2016 and 2017 in different meeting places (Fairs, Festivals, Congresses, Conferences, etc.), and with those responsible of or connected to the therapeutic, holistic, alternative, integral, etc. centres or schools which articulate the movement of the search for spirituality. The research field has been situated in the Valencian Country, taking as the central axis of our fieldwork the city of Valencia, although we consider that our conclusions can be extended to the whole Spanish geography as long as we expect to find similar touristic offers. In particular, the

work presented here is based on the field notes taken during the observations and seven of the interviews conducted during the framework research.

In the first place, our aim in this article has been to reflect on this new form of tourism that has developed along with the growing circulation of people who search for new experiences of the sacred and the spiritual. This increasing current belongs to a type of cultural and ethnic tourism that presents philosophical and religious traditions as exotic or esoteric. In this article, we refer to it as spiritual tourism, distinguishing it from the traditional religious tourism (fundamentally Christian), although in some cases both may concur in the same location or destination.

Therefore, using a theoretical and conceptual elaboration, we explore the different types of tourism around which spiritual tourism revolves. From the second half of the 20th century, as a consequence of the expansion of mass tourism, the historical ruptures occurred after the seventies, and the initiation of the second great wave of cultural patrimonialization (the first had occurred in coincidence with the first modernity wave), there was a clear emergence of a tourism which focused on culture. This phenomenon went hand in hand with two events: the important economic function that cultural heritage acquired as a factor of local development (Hernández 2002), and the growing interest of the cultural and touristic institutional policies in this type of tourism. As an example, we can refer to the Program of Cultural Itineraries that the Council of Europe introduced in 1987 to enhance the cultural heritage, cultural tourism and historical-cultural identity of the European people. In connection with the appearance and improvement of new media and technologies, this promoted the emergence of spiritual tourism. According to Hernández (2005), spiritual tourism responds to a specific profile of people who, in general, tend to have a high-medium cultural level, are able to make a greater economic investment in their trip and express a special interest in connecting with the people, landscapes and traditions of the place, as well as respect for the environment and the local culture.

In second place, this article focuses on those who head the offer of spiritual journeys. We aim to answer to the question: who are they? Its principal actors are usually those who manage and/or participate in the spaces of the spiritual arena. We refer to specialized centres or schools known as centres of Alternative Therapies, Holistic or Integral, Alternative Products Shops, centres of Oriental spirituality, Psychological Therapy centres not recognized by the academy, Esoteric centres and Neo-shamanic spaces present mainly in urban areas. We address to people who experienced "their own journey", what sometimes occurs as an initial step in the spiritual journey, whereas other times it becomes the culmination of one's search for spirituality and/or personal fulfilment.

It must be noted that the most mentioned destinations during our fieldwork have been mainly Mexico and Peru in the Americas (although Colombia and Ecuador also appear frequently), and India and some nearby countries such as Nepal and Bhutan in the East (in some cases, also China).

The next posed question, regarding those who organize the offer of spiritual journeys, refers to what are the main incentives which lead these people to promote the offer of spiritual tourism. In all the cases examined for this article, answers refer to a desire to share with others the positive lived experience and facilitate the expansion of this type of spiritual experiences. Regardless of the economic benefits that can be acquired and that, as

they express, do not compensate the work and the effort that is made, the main objective is to promote an expansion of consciousness. Therefore, solidarity seems to be, in general, the first motivation of these people. It is expressed in two different ways; sharing with and showing the way to those who identify themselves in the search for spirituality. This creates specialized niches which respond to the demands of the new postmodern tribes.

In third place, this article raises a series of questions which lead us to examine the main characteristics of this type of journey: How does the idea arise?, What kind of trips are they offering?, How is the trip organized and managed?, What makes it different?, What is its purpose?.

Spiritual journeys are conceived as a commitment to what has been experienced and learned with a particular indigenous group or, instead, to a specific spiritual lesson. Therefore, they are offered to those who seek to live "authentic" mystical experiences (attending an ashram, a Buddhist monastery, sacred places, etc.), but also to those who search for new experiences around the world in order to discover ancient secrets of the indigenous groups.

Participants on the activity travel to a unique destination that is, in a certain way, connected to spirituality. Beyond the destination and the "touristic" route that is carried out, what must be emphasised are the activities (meditation, yoga, cleanses, visits to masters, etc.) offered as part of the journey that are usually arranged by the coordinator of the event, who will accompany the group during the whole experience. The spiritual journey involves the establishment of friendship and affinity bonds within the group in order to conduct the activities in a fluent and comfortable manner. For this reason, a series of periodic meetings are organized with the group as a preparation for the journey before its start. Through these meetings, participants get familiarized with the characteristics of the place they are going to visit, the activities they will perform and, most importantly, they get to know the people who will integrate the group, what allows them to start creating certain bonds of friendship that will consolidate during the journey. It should be noted that all the journeys englobed by the term spiritual journey form an alternative circuit outside the traditional travel agencies and are offered beyond the lucrative interest. Furthermore, these trips are practically not publicised. Instead, the information propagated by word of mouth every year is what shapes the groups.

In conclusion, although spiritual journeys can be attractive in many aspects, those who offer them point out as a fundamental aspect the search for spiritual experiences. The spiritual experience is culminated through the participation in different activities and the use of different tools; from silence retreats to different practices or sessions carried out during the journey (yoga, meditation, shamanic cleansing, therapeutic treatment, etc.). These activities facilitate the connection with the self and/or the surrounding environment and favour the mystical experience, "the connection with your own essence", that often means a personal transcendent change for those who participate.

The emergence and proliferation of the spiritual journey becomes an insightful example of the process of *re-enchantment* in which the world is nowadays immersed. In other words, it becomes an example of the global appearance of a new holistic, transversal and individualistic spirituality that generates new interpretations about what can be understood as religious. According to Ritzer (2000), in this *re-enchantment* of the world, tourism plays a decisive role.

