The tourist gaze: leisure and travel in contemporary societies

Keith Kay Hin TAN

Published online: 10 Apr 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

CLASSIC BOOK REVIEW

The tourist gaze: leisure and travel in contemporary societies, by John Urry, London, SAGE, 1990, 192 pp., ISBN-13: 9780803981836

Introduction

Since its original publication in 1990, '*The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and travel in contemporary societies*' has managed to enter that select realm of scholarly publications whose titles have emerged as descriptive statements in civil society and popular culture. Indeed, the explosive growth of the tourism industry, which has rapidly out-paced global economic expansion since the mid-1990s has made the term 'tourist gaze' relevant to not just stakeholders within the travel and leisure industry, but to anyone who has ever travelled for leisure or met a tourist.

Although Urry subsequently collaborated with other writers to produce new editions to his work (*The Tourist Gaze 3.0* being the last, in 2011), his classic original work deserves attention not just because of the breadth of its scholarship, but also because the signposts it described at the time have, with the benefit of hindsight, proven to be prescient. Indeed, Urry's *magnum opus* on the tourism industry just prior to the digital age reads like a mini-history of leisure travel as well as a snapshot of its condition in the 1990s.

Explaining leisure travel

The book deals with leisure travel as a profoundly serious topic. It correctly identifies the study of tourism as a study of the human condition, especially with regards to behaviour that is considered, 'normal', 'relaxed' and even slightly 'deviant'. In doing so, it described 'leisure and travel in contemporary societies' in seven parts:

(1) The tourist gaze
(2) Mass tourism and the rise and fall of the seaside resort
(3) The changing economics of the tourist industry
(4) Working under the tourist gaze
(5) Cultural changes and the restructuring of tourism
(6) Gazing on history
(7) Tourism, Culture and Social Inequality

Lacking the introduction and conclusion that would perhaps be expected in a publication of this type today, Urry's early identification of tourism as having the ability to explain social practices and tourists as being 'contemporary pilgrims' seeking authenticity in 'other places' and 'other times' in the beginning of the book nevertheless sets the tone for its succeeding pages. It also combines an almost quantitative urge to categorize touristic behaviour and expectations with a decidedly qualitative understanding of history and how this has influenced the development of leisure travel since the beginning of the Victorian age in the United Kingdom.

This particularly British point of view is perhaps the greatest limitation of this book, but is itself a reflection of the period at the cusp of the internet age, when research was often led

by local rather than global concerns. Indeed, the second chapter on mass tourism and the rise and fall of the seaside resort reads like a social history of British tourism. Urry's identification of television and video-based entertainment contributing to the downfall of the British seaside resort beginning in the 1970s may however contain a warning from history for the tourist sites and tourist 'products' that fail to re-invent themselves for the contemporary internet age today, whatever their location.

Indeed, the book's ability to infer cross-cultural meaning and inter-generational relevance by connecting the British experience to common touristic behaviour worldwide and host communities' reactions to it in a generalizable way is perhaps a strength that has allowed it to maintain its relevance to the present day. Its 'quantitative' categorizing of qualitative data may also have contributed to its continuing academic appeal across a quarter-century of often conflicting opinions about the advantages and disadvantages, not to mention superiority or inferiority of quantitative or qualitative methods of research enquiry.

Like many good academic books, Urry's publication also avoids making value judgements about human behaviour, even when describing the downfall of 'failed' or 'failing' tourism products. Human behaviour is instead identified as both supreme and natural to the understanding of leisure travel, which Urry pinpoints as hinging on the search for 'different' experiences. These then contribute to the development of human character as well as places or activities which are eventually perceived as either 'authentic' or merely 'for show'.

The book then expands this dichotomy via an enlarged categorization of tourist attractions into five broad categories:

(1) unique objects
(2) 'typical' sights which exemplify their locale
(3) unfamiliar aspects of commonplace activities
(4) ordinary activities in extraordinary contexts
(5) signs that identify otherwise ordinary objects as extraordinary

Using a wealth of examples to typify each category of tourist attraction, Urry makes the important point that touristic consumerism has at its heart 'novelty' and 'insatiability'. By pointing out how a visitor to a museum may admire the original painting of the *Mona Lisa* one day only to be equally enthralled by a 'normal-looking' rock that is identified as 'extraordinary' only because it was collected from the moon by Neil Armstrong the next day, the book argues that, unlike the intake of food and drink, any increase in 'touristic consumption' in fact leads to a further demand for greater touristic products and novel experiences.

It is this connection between economics and leisure that lies at the heart of '*The tourist gaze'*. By explaining, for example, how anxieties about sites being 'spoiled' by mass tourism are a middle-class anxiety not shared by the very rich (who have 'exclusive' locations at their beck and call), Urry divides the travel industry into 'first' and 'economy' class in the same way most airlines divide their seating. Revealing an almost socialist concern for the welfare of the underprivileged, he identifies tourism as an industry disproportionately served by young and low-paid workers who are nevertheless responsible for what he refers to as the 'signposting' of the tourist gaze.

By doing so, the book captures the importance of economics for tourism from both the consumers' (tourists') and the producers' (workers') standpoint, although the book's intended audience is clearly the former. Rather than producing a 'guilt-trip' about exploited restaurant staff in the third world or sex-workers in Southeast Asia, '*The tourist gaze'* fixes its sights firmly on the relationship between the visitor and the visited as well as the 'authentic site' vis-à-vis the 'staged performance' in a judgement-free way. Importantly, it suggests that a reversal of

roles is always possible given changing tastes in human behaviour, perceptions of scarcity or demand and supply economics.

Nowhere is this possibility of change identified as more probable than via the growth of what Urry calls 'mass communication'. Before widespread and popular access to the world-wide web and social media changed forever the way tourism 'sign-posts' are erected, Urry mentioned how the era of 'mass communication' was transforming the tourist gaze through cultural change, describing 1990s society as living in a '5 minute culture' which was losing its 'historical sense' and becoming fascinated with 'immediate consumption'. He used the term 'post-modern' to describe this way of life, and 'post-tourist' to describe this behaviour when on travel. He then ascribed three tangible features to 'post-tourism' comportment (100):

(1) The option to stay at home to enjoy objects of the tourist gaze via television
(2) The multitude of choice available to the 'post-tourist' and the ability to attribute different meanings to touristic objects
(3) The knowledge that tourism is a series of 'games' with no 'authentic' touristic experience

It was the third point that Urry described as being the most important. His identification of tourism as a series of 'performances' leading at best to only 'constructions' of authenticity connected his thoughts about the economics of tourism with his concerns about the lowly-paid workers who were nevertheless serving as the 'gatekeepers' for many sites that would otherwise languish in obscurity, away from the 'constructed' tourist gaze. This led to one of the book's central questions, which Urry poses to the reader as much as he addresses it: ' … *whether it is in fact possible to construct a postmodern tourist site around absolutely any object*.' (102).

This invited readers to question the central tenets of their own experiences of travel, leisure and tourism. Whilst leaving the ultimate answer to the question up to the reader, the book serves up a 'menu' of ideas to render assistance, ultimately classifying tourist sites in the following ways:

(1) Those that are objects of 'romantic' or 'collective' tourist gazes
(2) Those that are historic and those that are modern
(3) Those that are 'authentic' and those that are 'inauthentic'

By describing how objects that benefit from the 'romantic' gaze of solitude and individual experience require different marketing, appreciation and 'curation' from those places whose success depends on mass appeal and the shared experience such as the successful nightclub or high-street, Urry manages to identify subtle but important differences in the effect of the tourist gaze on different sites. At the same time, he recognized the increasing influence of tourism on many areas of human endeavour that were previously considered mundane, including agricultural, industrial and even domestic activities.

The book argues that this 'universalization' of the tourist gaze is encouraging all sorts of places to 're-construct' themselves for tourism, resulting in shopping malls and theme parks which increasingly resemble museums and museums which resemble shopping malls or theme parks. It does not quite blame, but rather identifies competition for the same fickle, transient yet increasingly lucrative tourist gaze as being responsible for this ingress of tourism into every aspect of leisure-based activity, and increasingly, even many aspects of everyday life.

In his final chapter titled '*Tourism, Culture and Social Inequality*' Urry tagged tourism as developing into the 'largest industry worldwide', which would 'engulf' most countries with a tourist 'tidal wave'. He ended by predicting that society was developing more and more on the basis of

'democratization' of the tourist gaze as well as the 'spectacle-ization' of place (156). The global explosion in tourism over the quarter-century since the publication of Urry's book has shown most of these predictions to have been accurate.

Conclusion

The arguments presented in *'The tourist gaze: Leisure and travel in contemporary societies'* are neither a warning of impending doom waiting to engulf an unsuspecting planet via untrammelled tourism nor an indictment of the leisure traveller for spoiling the remote and romantic places of the world. Rather, the book is a relatively timeless and certainly important descriptive account of the cause and effect of increased tourism on different societies and sites around the world. By showing how the apparently insatiable growth in demand for tourism products can nevertheless be accommodated by an increase in supply of both 'romantic' and 'collective' experiences and sites, this book reads like a confident tome proclaiming the strength, and ultimately also the character and adaptability of human society, which can rise up to respond to challenges great and small, especially challenges of its own making.

For twenty-first century policy-makers struggling to comprehend the contribution of international tourism to global warming, environmental degradation and cultural erosion, this book stands as an example of level-headed scholarship which makes itself heard not because of the 'noise' it creates, but because of the depth and breadth of its scholarly arguments. It also stands as a positive contribution to the growing chorus of academic discourse calling for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in scholarly research to address issues of both scientific and social importance.

Keith Kay Hin TAN
School of Architecture, Building and Design,
Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia
✉ Keith.Tan@taylors.edu.my

Check for updates