



The role of academic field-trip organizers as gatekeepers for emerging heritage sites in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article is the result of a multi-year study on the opinions of educators involved in organizing academic field trips to emerging heritage sites on the margins of the tourist gaze in Malaysia. Focusing on travellers from an architectural background, the study analyses the relative importance of tangible and intangible elements to the appreciation of heritage from a professional as well as personal point of view. By analysing the experiences of five different architect-academics who visited carefully chosen historical sites endangered by a variety of developmental or other threats throughout peninsular Malaysia, this study shows how potentially significant locations nevertheless require a careful curation of their narratives to attract visitor interest. It identifies the organizers of academic field trips as important gatekeepers for curating these narratives and highlights how long-term personal and professional development rather than a desire for monetary gain are powerful catalysts for local academics to evolve into cultural intermediaries championing authentic narratives for emerging heritage sites. Given the vital importance of domestic tourism in an uncertain post-coronavirus future, this study points to the need for the creation of long-term partnerships between academia and emerging heritage sites in Malaysia to fill an 'authenticity gap' threatening their survival.

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Introduction

Although educational tourism, also known as 'edu-tourism' is not in itself a new concept, it remains a relatively under-studied area; with emphasis often on students' learning outcomes, rather than how educational tourists affect the tourism industry (Moutinho & Vargas-Sanchez, 2018). When Ritchie, Cooper, and Carr (2003) defined educational tourism as 'tourist activity undertaken by those who are undertaking an excursion for whom education and learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip' (p. 18), they identified academics as important resource specialists contributing to students' learning outcomes. Many later studies on educational tourism continue this focus on students' perception or behaviour (Jason, Bik, Crystal, Ooi, & Goh, 2011; Kamdi, Jamal, & Anuar, 2018; Nair & Whitelaw, 2008) leaving the perspective of the educator / academic an under-explored area.