

The Varieties of the Spiritual Tourist Experience

Alex Norman

Introduction

Spiritual tourism has been proposed as a phenomenon in leisured travel. It is defined as tourism characterised by a self-conscious project of spiritual betterment. A small number of scholars have commented on it both directly and indirectly, and it is clear from these reports that there are a wide variety of practices in a great many locations around the world. What has not received sufficient scholarly treatment yet is the phenomenological taxonomy of spiritual tourist experiences, in part due to the divergent conceptions of what the term encompasses. By proposing a focused yet malleable frame of reference for the term it is possible to create a taxonomy that is empirically driven and that has application in the broader field of tourism studies. As such, this article argues that spiritual tourist experiences should be roughly grouped into five varietal categories – healing, experimental, quest, retreat, and collective – that often overlap, and which serve to illuminate broader social currents in Western societies.

William James commenced his series of lectures that resulted in the famous text, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, with a statement encouraging the scholar to look to the productions of their subject for primary material. James argued that, “[t]he *documents humains* which we shall find most instructive need not then be sought for in the haunts of special erudition – they lie along the beaten highway.”¹ This article looks to the *documents humains* of spiritual tourists, along with a scholarly discussion of them, in order to propose a categorisation of spiritual tourist experience types that signal methodological avenues for further research. The lasting legacy of James’ work has been to impel scholars to look not to formalised structures or texts so much as the reported experiences of those we study. The privileging by Western academia of text over praxis has placed experience towards the bottom of the empirical and analytical hierarchy. Revisions of this error are now taking place, but the canon of nearly two-hundred years of scholarship is a slow boat to manoeuvre. With this in mind, a brief examination of the sources available generated by

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¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Rockville: Arc Manor LLC, 2008), p. 12.

and about spiritual tourists serves as a useful point of departure. Discussion of the scholarship on spiritual tourism follows this, before returning to set the emphasis on the experiences of tourists themselves. The varieties of spiritual tourist experiences are shown from there to be methodologically useful to an assortment of tourist phenomena.

Towards a Working Definition of Spiritual Tourism

What have been called ‘spiritual tourists’ can be found throughout the contemporary world engaged in a variety of practices or behaviours that are self-consciously seen as contributory to meaning and identity, and/or beneficial for the individual’s health and wellbeing. Typically these practices are coupled with those of religious movements and institutions, although as the following survey illustrates, this is by no means always the case. As the term itself is relatively new to scholarly discourse, literature on tourism phenomena labelled ‘spiritual tourism’ is, to date, erratic. There is, however, an emergent field of research from which it is possible to sketch provisional boundaries and make connections with other area studies for which its findings will have relevance. Further, given James’ direction to search for the *documents humains*, we have a range of sources to draw from regarding the types of activities and experiences spiritual tourists can be found having.

What we can find that is called ‘spiritual tourism’ or ‘spiritual travel,’ or that is loosely grouped into categories such as spirituality, wellbeing, or self-discovery, is observable across a range of media and investigative sources. Blogs, especially those kept by tourists as they travel, make for excellent sources of performed self-reflection. For example, a blog about a family walking the Camino de Santiago together is filled with reflections on happiness and letting go of worries.² Meanwhile, writer Kate Thorman illustrates that spiritual tourism can as much be about fashion or popularity – doing what ‘is the done thing’ – as it is about self-knowledge.³ So too, traveller-oriented websites, such as *Matador Network*, offer numerous examples of traveller tales that we can easily classify as spiritual tourism using the rubric outlined above. Thus we find, for example, an article weighing up the spiritual possibilities of

² Ann-Mari Mitchell and Juliana Mithcell, ‘Somewhere to Go ... Not in a Hurry,’ *Somewhere to Go ... Not in a Hurry* (2008), at <http://beautywelove.wordpress.com/>. Accessed 15/04/2012.

³ Kate Thorman, ‘Haridwar/Rishikesh: Buddy Om,’ *Chasing Hemingway: A California Girl Goes Rogue* (30 April, 2009), at <http://laparisienne.wordpress.com/2009/04/30/buddy-om/>. Accessed 15/04/2012.

Ayahuasca use while travelling,⁴ and another looking at the experience of a non-witch attending a ‘Witch Camp.’⁵ News network CNN also reports on the phenomenon, with a recent story on Western spiritual tourists travelling to Myanmar for Buddhist meditation retreats, illustrating the popular status of spiritual tourism.⁶

Common to these sources is the personal or individual focus that characterises spiritual tourism. Indeed, the introduction to the ‘Spirituality’ section of the *Matador Network* website states: “Whereas religion describes a shared system of beliefs and participation in typically public worship, spirituality is personal, describing one’s inner path and the practices that enable a person to discover the essence of his or her being.”⁷ We can take this as a self-conscious, emic definition of the field. Further, to this end, novels and biographies – those fabulous exercises in narcissism and self-import – make for similarly useful empirical data. Sarah MacDonald’s memoir *Holy Cow!* presents as close to the ideal-type of various spiritual tourist experiences as she experiments, heals, searches, and discovers herself through the religious traditions of India.⁸ Similarly, in Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*, we find the protagonist spending three months in India to ‘find her spirituality,’ engaging in religious practices she has little social or cultural connection to.⁹ Away from India, Wade Davis’ book *One River* – set largely in the Amazonian countries of South America – at times reads less like the tale of ethno-botanical research that it purports to be than one about a journey of self-discovery and knowledge.¹⁰

⁴ Ryan Hurd, ‘The Possibilities and Risks of Ayahuasca as a Sacred Pilgrimage,’ *Matador Network: Travel Culture Worldwide* (8 November, 2010), at <http://matadornetwork.com/bnt/the-possibilities-and-risks-of-ayahuasca-as-a-sacred-pilgrimage/>. Accessed 15/04/2012.

⁵ Pat Hennessey, ‘Witch Camp: The Magic of Connecting with Nature and Spirit,’ *Matador Network: Travel Culture Worldwide* (9 September, 2010), at <http://matadornetwork.com/bnt/witch-camp-the-magic-of-connecting-with-nature-and-spirit/>. Accessed 17/05/2012.

⁶ Paula Hancocks, ‘As Myanmar Opens up, Spiritual Tourists Journey In,’ *CNN – Belief Blog* (25 May, 2012), at <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/25/as-myanmar-opens-up-spiritual-tourists-journey-in/>. Accessed 15/05/2012.

⁷ Matador Network, ‘Spirituality,’ *Matador Network: Travel Culture Worldwide* (2012), at <http://matadornetwork.com/topics/culture-religion/spirituality/>. Accessed 15/05/2012.

⁸ Sarah Macdonald, *Holy Cow!: An Indian Adventure* (Sydney: Bantam Books, 2002).

⁹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

¹⁰ Wade Davis, *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

What confusion that exists over the term ‘spiritual tourism’ seems to be, in fact, largely a scholarly creation, as the emic voice is quite clear in its focus on individual self-discovery and wellbeing maintenance. Scholarly use of the term has been much less consistent. Donn Tilson, for example, refers to “religious-spiritual tourism” in an article on the Camino de Santiago.¹¹ While joining the terms ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ does little to explain how we might position such tourists sociologically, it does serve to remind us that in certain contexts (such as the Camino de Santiago), religious tourism and spiritual tourism take place alongside each other. Tilson, however, typically uses the term to describe what other authors describe as ‘religious tourism,’¹² and includes such explicitly institutionally religious phenomena as fairs and saints’ days, and locations such as the Vatican or Lourdes, and leaves the ‘spiritual’ part of his term unexplained.

Vinnie Jauhari and Gunjan Sanjeev provide a somewhat cursory survey of the business opportunity offered to India by cultural and spiritual tourism,¹³ and Kanika Gupta and Anju Gulla explore the use of internet technologies by a shrine in India.¹⁴ Both articles, however, inadequately describe what ‘spiritual tourism’ actually refers to, and both problematically conflate it with religious tourism. Indeed, this is an all too common occurrence in the academic analysis of spiritual tourism. David Geary’s article, for example, which like many others uses the term ‘spiritual tourism’ in the title, discusses the urban planning and heritage politics surrounding the recent re-development of the area around the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya.¹⁵ Similar to other writers, Geary’s use of the term ‘spiritual tourism’ is uncritical, lacking any sort of explanation or delimitation, and the term is employed as a synonym for ‘pilgrimage’ or ‘religious tourism.’

¹¹ Donn James Tilson, ‘Religious-Spiritual Tourism and Promotional Campaigning: A Church-State Partnership for St. James and Spain,’ *Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing*, vol. 12, nos. 1–2 (2005), pp. 9–40.

¹² See, for example, Kiran Shinde, ‘Religious Tourism: Exploring a New Form of Sacred Journey in Northern India,’ in *Asian Tourism: Growth and Change*, ed. Janet Cochrane (Oxford: Elsevier, 2008), pp. 245–258.

¹³ Vinnie Jauhari and Gunjan M. Sanjeev, ‘Managing Customer Experience for Spiritual and Cultural Tourism: An Overview,’ *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, vol. 2, no. 5 (2010), pp. 467–476.

¹⁴ Kanika Gupta and Anju Gulla, ‘Internet Deployment in the Spiritual Tourism Industry: The Case of Vaishno Devi Shrine,’ *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, vol. 2, no. 5 (2010), pp. 507–519.

¹⁵ David Geary, ‘Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism and Spiritual Tourism in Bodhgaya, Bihar,’ *Anthropology Today*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2008), pp. 11–14.

One of the most prolific authors to employ the spiritual tourism label has been Farooq Haq, typically examining the economic factors that arise from spiritual tourism phenomena. In the context of the Islamic Hajj, Haq and John Jackson describe a spiritual tourist as “someone who visits a specific place out of his/her usual environment, with the intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth, without overt religious compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature, but within the Divine context, regardless of the main reason for travelling.”¹⁶ Their extensive qualifications seem messy and imprecise; for example, it is unclear what a practice ‘without religious compulsion’ but of a ‘religious nature’ is. The inclusions of the apparently necessary ‘Divine’ – which we must presume the tourist will have a reasonably clear conception of – makes this definition seem more like a blurring of religious tourism and something else (probably, though not certainly, spiritual tourism). Haq and Jackson’s definition, however, recalls the connection with religious traditions; that is, that ‘spiritual’ is generally understood as a dimension of human experience that takes place within religious traditions, even if it can do so outside them. Similarly, while Haq, Ho Yin Wong, and Jackson note that recent scholarship has suggested that ‘spiritual tourism’ can include elements of religious tourism and pilgrimage, they nonetheless seem to have no clear way of distinguishing between ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious.’¹⁷

A number of scholars have attempted greater precision in their analyses of spiritual tourism phenomena. Curtis Coats uses the term both in the title of his article and four times in the text itself, to describe eco-conscious New Age tourists to Sedona for whom identity formation is central.¹⁸ Frustratingly, and somewhat confusingly, Coats reverts to the term “pilgrim-tourist” towards the end of his article, shying away from the spiritual tourist label and perhaps unintentionally suggesting that scholars tend to view such behaviours as “inauthentic navel-gazing”¹⁹; a dangerous assumption he himself warned

¹⁶ Farooq Haq and John Jackson, ‘Spiritual Journey to Hajj: Australian and Pakistani Experience and Expectations,’ *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2009), p. 143.

¹⁷ Farooq Haq, Ho Yin Wong, and John Jackson, ‘Applying Ansoff’s Growth Strategy Matrix to Consumer Segments and Typologies in Spiritual Tourism,’ *Refereed Paper Presented at 8th International Business Research Conference* (2008), at <http://www.wbiconpro.com/Marketing/509-Haq,F%20%26%20Others.pdf>. Accessed 16/05/2012.

¹⁸ Curtis Coats, ‘Is the Womb Barren? A Located Study of Spiritual Tourism in Sedona, Arizona, and Its Possible Effects on Eco-consciousness,’ *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2008), pp. 483-507.

¹⁹ Coats, ‘Is the Womb Barren?’, p. 484.

readers against early in his argument. Continuing with identity formation/maintenance, Bob Hodge provides yet another contribution that utilises the term, though unhelpfully without sufficient explanation. Hodge uses himself as a case study for New Age spiritual tourists who are treated to an analysis that sees the behaviour as “one strategy in a contemporary search for (re-)enchantment.”²⁰ Meanwhile, Shalini Singh and Tej Vir Singh provide an unfocussed but stimulating essay on the aesthetics of spiritual tourism, which proposes transformation of the individual as the characteristic experience, but that spirituality itself “denies rationalization and theorization as the experience is intensely personal and subjective.”²¹ Such an exasperating assertion does little to further scholarly discussion and analysis.

Others scholars do not use the epithet ‘spiritual tourism,’ though they are nonetheless speaking directly to the subject; this indicates not only the newness of the field but also the extent to which the field of tourism studies has historically been excluded from the field of religious studies.²² Examples include Brooke Schedneck, who has written a thorough and long overdue examination of meditation centres in Thailand,²³ and Glenys Eddy, whose examination of Buddhist conversion includes an examination of meditation retreats highlighting important outcome issues for spiritual tourism studies.²⁴ Thankfully, a number of critical and deliberate treatments of the subject have emerged recently that seek to employ the term precisely. In this vein, Melanie Smith discusses “holistic or spiritual tourists” as those searching for “an authentic sense of self” in which “[t]he tourist’s own self thus becomes the object of the tourist gaze, rather than any external attractions or activities.”²⁵ Indeed, Smith’s article closely accords with many of the arguments within the

²⁰ Bob Hodge, ‘The Goddess Tour: Spiritual Tourism/Post-modern Pilgrimage in Search of Atlantis,’ in *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*, eds Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 27.

²¹ Shalini Singh and Tej Vir Singh, ‘Aesthetic Pleasures: Contemplating Spiritual Tourism,’ in *Philosophical Issues in Tourism*, ed. John Tribe (Bristol: Chanel View, 2009), p. 143.

²² For a thorough critique of the size of this gap, see Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy, ‘Tourism and Religious Journeys,’ in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, eds Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-21; and, for spiritual tourism specifically, see Alex Norman, *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society* (London: Continuum, 2011).

²³ Brooke Schedneck, ‘Constructing Religious Modernities: Hybridity, Reinterpretation, and Adaptation in Thailand’s International Meditation Centers,’ Unpublished PhD Dissertation (Arizona State University, 2012).

²⁴ Glenys Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist: Experiences of Socialization and Self-transformation in Two Australian Buddhist Centres* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

²⁵ Melanie Smith, ‘Holistic Holidays: Tourism and the Reconciliation of Body, Mind and Spirit,’ *Tourism Recreation Research*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2003), p. 104.

present essay, though she cites little empirical evidence to support the case for the appellation. Finally, my own research on spiritual tourism worked toward the notion that it was “tourism characterised by an intentional search for spiritual benefit that coincides with religious practices.”²⁶ This, however, is in need of a slight revision in the light of touristic practices that clearly are conceived, emically, as being of ‘spiritual benefit’ but that do not coincide with institutional religious practices, as was suggested in my earlier definition.

What is worth restating here is the methodological purpose of an appellation and its associated taxa. As Tim Edensor notes, they should be used to highlight regularities and to describe different tourist practices, but not to explain types of people.²⁷ It is clear that many of the scholarly discussions of ‘spiritual tourism’ either lack the definitional precision needed to be able to contribute, or are overly inclusive to the point of degrading the visibility of common traits. They become a mixed salad rather than a careful selection. My own investigations offered a tentative, if slightly imprecise, testing of the water,²⁸ and it is from this that I now make an argument for a phenomenological taxonomy that can be used to further understanding of the phenomena as we find them.

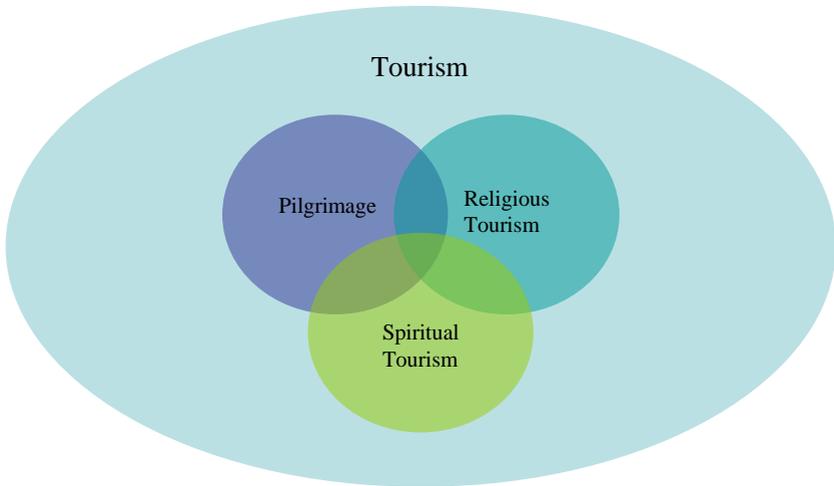


Figure 1: Spiritual tourism in relation to religious tourism and pilgrimage traditions.²⁹

²⁶ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, p. 1.

²⁷ Tim Edensor, 'Performing Tourism, Staging Tourism: (Re)producing Tourist Space and Practice,' *Tourist Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2001), p. 59.

²⁸ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*.

²⁹ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, p. 200.

Spiritual tourism is identified by the identity and meaning-making projects of individuals. Of particular note is the argument that spiritual tourism could take place within pilgrimage traditions, and could resemble religious tourism. What differentiated it from the latter was the tourist's intent for "spiritual growth in a secularized form,"³⁰ and from the former its uncoupling from associated orthodoxy concerning *telos*. This form of tourism is emblematic of the late modern religious milieu in which the tourist may or may not be formally connected with the religious tradition being practiced, and the reasons for this are highlighted elsewhere.³¹ What is of interest here, though, are methodologies that provide useful frameworks for understanding the experience of such 'non-religious identity/meaning tourism,' or spiritual tourism. To be sure, classical tourism studies methodologies, such as those used by Graham Dann or Erik Cohen, give us critical tools for analysis; Dann helped to unpack the relationship between the tourist and the destination,³² and Cohen helped with phenomenological relationship of home and away.³³ Methodologies from studies in religion, however, give us a new set of lenses with which to examine the experiences of spiritual tourists.

The Varieties

What has been made clear in the reporting of spiritual tourism phenomena is that there are certain thematic recurrences of note. These can be roughly grouped together under five headings which bring together experiences based on resemblances. The purpose of such taxonomy is to provide methodological direction that is oriented towards empirical frameworks, rather than abstract conceptual frameworks. The taxa themselves are drawn from gathering thematically similar accounts together. There is, as a result, a great deal of overlap. The point, however, is firstly to highlight that spiritual tourism occurs variously and in ways that can appear quite distinct, and to mark parallel traits and commonalities that makes the taxonomy methodologically fruitful for extrapolation of the social explanations. Thus, the varieties of spiritual tourist experiences give us useful insights as to how meaning and identity projects can be undertaken in travel, through a variety of practices.

A second reason to develop a taxonomy of spiritual tourist experiences is to allow the conceptual taxa to be applied to forms of tourism that are not

³⁰ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, p. 200.

³¹ See Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, pp. 112-135, 183-208.

³² Graham M. S. Dann, 'Anomie, Ego-Enhancement and Tourism,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1977), pp. 184-194.

³³ Erik Cohen, 'A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,' *Sociology*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1979), pp. 179-201.

immediately 'spiritual' or 'religious,' or in which the emic use of the term spiritual is absent. Thus we might find forms of, for example, eco-tourism more effectively understood when we examine them using the spiritual tourism model in addition to more conventional methodological frameworks. This in itself is reflective of the plasticity of the religious/spiritual in contemporary Western societies,³⁴ and the understanding that spiritual projects are not affixed to corporate religious structures and symbols.³⁵

The following types present a summary of the research and primary sources as they relate to the experience of travel. Typically, spiritual tourists will be found exhibiting two or more of the characteristic taxa described below, making the ideal type spiritual tourist a phenomenologically-complex subject for the researcher.

Spiritual Tourism as Healing

This type refers to tourist experiences that are oriented towards practices that seek to correct or ameliorate elements of everyday life perceived as problematic. Among this type we will find tourists examining the status and value of relationships. Such tourists will use the time away from home, typically engaged with religious practices, in order to analyse the self in a way reminiscent of counselling. This may be in the form of psychological healing, as has been reported for the Camino de Santiago,³⁶ as well as for ashram stays and meditation retreats.³⁷ This type will also include tourist experiences that we might characterise as 'wellness' oriented in which physical wellbeing is closely associated with psychological health. Elizabeth Gilbert's tale of post-divorce self-repair in *Eat, Pray, Love* typifies this category.³⁸ Smith's examinations of wellness or holistic tourism illustrate that they should be included in a taxonomy of spiritual tourism,³⁹ and there are other sources that clearly fix the spiritual project as one focused on repair or maintenance of self. Spiritual tourists engaged in this type will report the experience of travel as one largely oriented towards healing. In explicitly labelled 'wellness tourism,' Melanie Smith and Catherine Kelly note the extent to which spirituality is

³⁴ David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 52-61.

³⁵ See, for example, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

³⁶ Nancy Louise Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*.

³⁷ Schedneck, 'Constructing Religious Modernities'; Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist*.

³⁸ Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*.

³⁹ See Smith, 'Holistic Holidays'; and Melanie Smith and Catherine Kelly, 'Wellness Tourism,' *Tourism Recreation Research*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2006), pp. 1-4.

articulated as central to the experience.⁴⁰ These phenomena evince theories of the psychologisation of religious praxis in the West since the twentieth century, which place the psycho-therapeutic at the heart of late modern identity.⁴¹ The inner harmony of Abraham Maslow's fully actualised self⁴² is a telos for this type of spiritual tourist.

Spiritual Tourism as Experiment

This type involves tourists trying out alternatives when normal lifeways appear problematic, or in need of review or revision. Sometimes found as an outcome of healing or wellness practices that have turned up unsustainable patterns of thought or behaviour, experimental spiritual tourists seek experiences that offer substitutes. These tourists can often be regarded as 'seekers,' though rather than "floundering among religious alternatives" and "fail[ing] to embrace the specific ideology and fellowship of some set of believers" proposed by the term's originators,⁴³ spiritual tourists see choice and choosing positively. Indeed, as Campbell points out, such movement is taken as evidence of progression.⁴⁴ Erik Cohen's experimental type of tourist offers a clear theoretical parallel,⁴⁵ and in practice we are likely to find experimental spiritual tourists seeing truth in many, if not all, forms of religious praxis.

In the literature so far published, India and 'The East' seem to be perennial favourites for this type of tourism, at least insofar as Western tourists are concerned. Richard Sharpley and Priya Sundaram noted the alterity articulated by ashram tourists at Auroville, perhaps enhanced by the serendipitous nature of their discovery of the location.⁴⁶ Similarly, both Norman and Strauss also noted experimentation by tourists in Rishikesh attending yoga courses and ashram retreats.⁴⁷ So-called backpacking tourists

⁴⁰ Smith and Kelly, 'Wellness Tourism.'

⁴¹ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 66-78.

⁴² Abraham H. Maslow, 'A Theory of Human Motivation,' *Psychological Review*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1943), pp. 370-396.

⁴³ John Lofland and Rodney Stark, 'Becoming a World-saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,' *American Sociological Review*, vol. 30, no. 6 (1965), p. 870.

⁴⁴ Colin Campbell, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,' *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, vol. 5 (1972), pp. 122-123.

⁴⁵ Cohen, 'A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,' p. 189.

⁴⁶ Richard Sharpley and Priya Sundaram, 'Tourism: A Sacred Journey? The Case of Ashram Tourism, India,' *International Journal of Tourism Research*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2005), pp. 161-171.

⁴⁷ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*; Sarah Strauss, 'Re-orienting Yoga: Transnational Flows from an Indian Center,' Unpublished PhD Dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1997).

also offer useful examples of this experimentation. Ari Reichel, et al, found that experimentation was a central aspect of travel to 'The East' as a spiritual destination.⁴⁸ The experimental touristic experience can, of course, be an encounter with local cultures and, as Huxley points out, this is a crucial aspect in casting alternatives to the tourist's everyday world.⁴⁹

Spiritual Tourism as Quest

This type of tourism sees the experience conceived as a quest for personal discovery or knowledge; the act of finding in and of itself as a spiritual experience. If there were a single ideal form of spiritual tourist experience, this would be it, and certainly in the vernacular this is how the term seems to be understood. Here we find numerous examples in the popular literature in which the act of travel itself becomes a spiritual experience. For example, MacDonald's *Holy Cow!* follows the author's search for meaning through the religious practices and beliefs of India.⁵⁰ Robert Pirsig's famous meditation on knowledge and meaning illustrates the way travel is articulated as a journey not only to a place, but as a search to discover a new self.⁵¹ Even popular philosopher Alain de Botton notes the search for meaning as core to the authentic tourist experience.⁵² This also fits with what Singh and Singh call 'wanderlusters' who are "on a constant itinerary of discoveries" in which travel itself becomes the medium of the spiritual experience.⁵³

This type of spiritual tourist experience can be understood as part of Anthony Giddens' reflexive project of the self that seeks the elusive self-knowledge. Further, in so far as the experience is conceived as a 'search,' there is a corresponding pressure for something to be 'found'; something Giddens characterises as "the capacity to keep a particular narrative going," rather than in any particular behaviour or social setting.⁵⁴ Tourism theorists such as Dean MacCannell and Nelson Graburn have noted the quest for authenticity or the

⁴⁸ Ari Reichel, Galia Fuchs, and Natan Uriely, 'Israeli Backpackers: The Role of Destination Choice,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2009), p. 234.

⁴⁹ Lucy Huxley, 'Western Backpackers and the Global Experience: An Exploration of Young People's Interaction with Local Cultures,' *Tourism Culture & Communication*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2004), pp. 37-44.

⁵⁰ Macdonald, *Holy Cow!*.

⁵¹ Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (London: Random House, 2011).

⁵² Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁵³ Singh and Singh, 'Aesthetic Pleasures,' p. 137.

⁵⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 54.

sacred as central to modern tourism,⁵⁵ and while problematic when applied universally, for spiritual tourism of this type it works well. Accordingly, numerous scholars have referenced tourist experiences of the quest for authenticity or self in what we can identify as spiritual tourism. Thus, Hodge notes his own search for the self and re-enchantment in spiritual tourism,⁵⁶ while Coats highlights the identity formation outcomes sought by New Age spiritual tourists as an objective, rather than an inevitable outcome.⁵⁷ Similarly, the Camino de Santiago seems to demand of its pilgrims, both somatically and mythologically, a quest narrative;⁵⁸ it is almost inconceivable, amongst pilgrims, that one could be walking the route without a spiritual/psychological goal in mind.⁵⁹

Spiritual Tourism as Retreat

In this type of spiritual tourism we find the experience characterised as one of escape from the everyday, or of sacred time or ritual renewal. Often this form is linked with wellness, but not necessarily so, as we can find tourists often seeking socio-geographic escape rather than emotional or psychological repair, even though the language used to describe the after-effects may turn out to be similar.⁶⁰ That is, while the experience of travel is one of temporary release from certain bonds and expectations, used as such as ‘time for the self,’ it is not necessarily characterised as healing. We can therefore expect a range of touristic practices that do not look ‘spiritual’ to be nonetheless articulated in the language of self and meaning.⁶¹ Here we will also find the variants of

⁵⁵ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Nelson H. H. Graburn, ‘Tourism: The Sacred Journey,’ in *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, ed. Valene L. Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), pp. 21-36.

⁵⁶ Hodge, ‘The Goddess Tour.’

⁵⁷ Coats, ‘Is the Womb Barren?.’

⁵⁸ See Sean Slavin, ‘Walking as Spiritual Practice: The Pilgrimage to Santiago De Compostela,’ *Body & Society*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2003), pp. 1-18; and also, for a further discussion of the imperative of narrative in the Camino experience, see Alex Norman, ‘The Unexpected Real: Negotiating Fantasy and Reality on the Camino De Santiago,’ *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 50-71.

⁵⁹ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, pp. 202-203.

⁶⁰ See, for example, the reports of ‘purifying’ or ‘uplifting’ experiences of desert 4WD tourists in Yamini Narayanan and Jim Macbeth, ‘Deep in the Desert: Merging the Desert and the Spiritual through 4WD Tourism,’ *Tourism Geographies*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2009), pp. 381-382.

⁶¹ See, for example, Chris Gibson and John Connell, “‘Bongo Fury’”: Tourism, Music and Cultural Economy at Byron Bay, Australia,’ *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie*, vol. 94, no. 2 (2003), pp. 164-187.

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tourism as 're-creation' thrown up by the slow tourism movement;⁶² the retreat in these cases being away from the manic cycle and pace of Western urban life. We will also find tourists of this type 'retreating' from a world busy with expectations and obligations. Further, my own research also noted the 'career break' aspect of pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago expressed by many spiritual tourists.⁶³

With this type of spiritual tourism, the travel experience can also be conceived as sanctuary from a troublesome world (rather than a troublesome self of the 'healing' variety). As such, we will find retreat spiritual tourists alongside healing spiritual tourists at such places as meditation retreats, health spas, and eco-tourism journeys. Research has begun to demonstrate this aspect. Fly-fishing, for example, recently received a treatment as a religious practice in which communing with nature enables the fisherman to perceive great personal insights; something not possible in normal life.⁶⁴ Similarly, Yamini Narayan and Jim MacBeth's examination of repeat 4WD tourists notes the way the 'sacralised space' of the Australian desert is experienced as surrender to an awesome and powerful natural world.⁶⁵

Spiritual Tourism as Collective

While rare as an experiential phenomenon on its own, at least in certain areas, the incidence of spiritual tourist experiences as being part of a collective are more than simply noteworthy. Again, the Camino de Santiago provides a useful example of this type of spiritual tourism, where one goes to participate in part because it is the 'done' thing, because others have done it, and because, while there, one will have experiences with others of like persuasion.⁶⁶ Other locations also have an element of trend or fashion to the experience of spiritual tourists. Glastonbury is noteworthy for its ability to draw large numbers of spiritual tourists interested in simply being at the location with others.⁶⁷ With this type of spiritual tourism, we should be careful not to divorce the notion of

⁶² Simone Fullagar, Erica Wilson, and Kevin Markwell, 'Starting Slow: Thinking through Slow Mobilities and Experiences,' in *Slow Tourism: Experiences and Mobilities*, eds Simone Fullagar, Kevin Markwell, and Erica Wilson (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2012), pp. 1-10.

⁶³ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, pp. 53-55.

⁶⁴ Samuel Snyder, 'New Streams of Religion: Fly Fishing as a Lived, Religion of Nature,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 75, no. 4 (2007), p. 896.

⁶⁵ Narayanan and Macbeth, 'Deep in the Desert.'

⁶⁶ See, for example, Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*.

⁶⁷ Justine Digance and Carole M. Cusack, 'Glastonbury: A Tourist Town for All Seasons,' in *The Tourist as a Metaphor of the Social World*, ed. Graham M. S. Dann (Wallingford and New York: CABI Publishing, 2002), pp. 263-280.

image, particularly in tracing the threads of motivation, of the ‘push’ and ‘pull,’⁶⁸ that lead a tourist to a place and an experience. Motivations, however, are not the focus of this paper, the varieties of *experience* are.

With this type of spiritual tourist, Emile Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence offers some explanation to this type of phenomenon⁶⁹; however, we should be careful to note the “chain of memory” that Danielle Hervieu-Léger argues cements the historical continuity of such places or traditions.⁷⁰ Thus we find that the famous Jackson Square, in New Orleans, has become known as a tourist destination for those interested in occult practices and New Age ephemera. While possibly as much a ‘curiosity’ as part of a genuine project of self-improvement, it seems that spiritual tourists make their way there because of the popularity of the place and what it offers.⁷¹ Other spiritual tourist ‘hub’ locations, such as Sedona or Rishikesh, similarly draw a certain amount of patronage simply because that is where one goes if one wants a spiritual holiday.⁷² While it may seem contradictory to seek experiences with others as part of a self-oriented project, a number of contemporary theories of self-spirituality argue that this is articulated as integral to wider human potential and progression.⁷³ Where this is the case, we should expect to find spiritual tourists seeking their fellows to pursue the project of world-saving through self-actualisation.

Useful Varieties? Suggestions for Researchers

To greater and lesser degrees, and with varying levels of attached importance, each of these varieties of spiritual tourist experiences has outcomes for what Charles Taylor describes as ‘knowing who you are’:

To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what is not, what has meaning for you and what is trivial and secondary.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Dann, ‘Anomie, Ego-Enhancement and Tourism.’

⁶⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷⁰ Danielle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

⁷¹ Rebecca Sheehan, ‘Tourism and Occultism in New Orleans’s Jackson Square: Contentious and Cooperative Publics,’ *Tourism Geographies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2012), pp. 73-97.

⁷² Coats, ‘Is the Womb Barren?’; Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, pp. 37-39.

⁷³ Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

⁷⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 28.

For Taylor, identifying the location of the self in the social universe formed a central individual drive of modern identities. To those familiar with the literature on, for example, heritage tourism or adventure tourism, many of the ideas related to this will be familiar.⁷⁵ Thematically, it seems, we have strong parallels between these different kinds of spiritual tourism and other forms of tourism we find in a range of contexts. What is of interest, and hopefully of use, are the methodologies used to locate these practices in terms of modern religious studies that can be used to help us understand meaning and identity projects in non-religious settings.

To move forward with such an analysis, a rubric is needed to join what appear to be the disparate methodologies of religious studies and those of tourism studies. The most appropriate in terms of the use we can gain from such a tool is the potential for seriousness in tourism, and, therefore, how we can read leisure seriously. For this, the appropriately named theory of 'serious leisure,' talked about at length by sociologist Robert Stebbins, comes to mind.⁷⁶ Stebbins was trying to understand (and collect data to prove) why people became interested in particular, often peculiar, leisure practices. His research led him to the conclusion that certain leisure practices became deeply significant in people's lives, and went towards personal wellbeing, self-location in the social sphere, personal identity, and in developing a sense of meaning. Stebbins shows that leisure can range from casual, fleeting engagements, to intensive short term projects, to more serious lifetime commitments that require a great deal of time, money, and energy. Indeed, Stebbins shows that leisure is anything but 'trivial' to the more serious and devoted participants of, for example, motorcycling, kayaking, fishing, mountain climbing, or amateur astronomy.⁷⁷

To take from N.J. Demerath's own homage to William James' work (and from which this article itself draws inspiration), we should seek to 'compare the incomparable' to test the use of our taxonomy.⁷⁸ Studies that look at specific instances of spiritual tourism are important and interesting in their own right, to be sure. The full methodological value of the category spiritual

⁷⁵ See, for example, Tim Edward Coles and Dallen J. Timothy, *Tourism, Diasporas, and Space* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Noga Collins-Kreiner and Jay Gatrell, 'Tourism, Heritage and Pilgrimage: The Case of Haifa's Baha'i Gardens,' *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2006), pp. 32-50.

⁷⁶ Robert A. Stebbins, 'Serious Leisure,' *Society*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2001), pp. 53-57.

⁷⁷ See Robert A. Stebbins, 'Serious Leisure: A Conceptual Statement,' *Pacific Sociological Review*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1982), pp. 251-272; and Robert A. Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals and Serious Leisure* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

⁷⁸ N. J. Demerath, 'The Varieties of Sacred Experience: Finding the Sacred in a Secular Grove,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2000), p. 9.

tourism, and its varieties, however, will be highlighted when it is compared with forms of tourism that are not explicitly spiritual in orientation. Now this, of course, means that we are comparing journeys in which the goal is some kind of progress towards eternal salvation with journeys defined by the desire to land a nice little 1kg brown trout; that we will look for similarities between spiritual tourists in wellness retreats in Bali when compared with heritage tourists in Lebanon. However, this should not be a methodological problem for us as much as a problem of data. Certainly such comparisons would not be without problems, and they would, no doubt, be attacked for the deconstruction of the supposedly hermetically sacred category 'religion' with the profane one of 'leisure.' Nevertheless, such research exercises are worthwhile for the potential illumination they can bring to both the touristic and the spiritual, and the extent to which we may find both (or neither) as part of ongoing self-construction projects.

Indeed, it is at this overlapping point that we get value out of using theoretical frameworks from religious studies to study non-religious tourism that is meaningful. This, of course, could be read as lending weight to the thesis that tourism is the modern equivalent, the replacement for pilgrimage.⁷⁹ There are, however, a number of problems with this reading. Firstly, this understanding suggests that pilgrimage and tourism are mutually exclusive. While there is a vernacular use of the terms somewhat in opposition to each other, there is no scholarly data to support the assertion. Indeed, there is, in fact, data to suggest pilgrimage is synonymous with 'meaningful tourism,'⁸⁰ though even this too is problematic for its rejection of emic terminology. The terms, it is clear, are political and normative, rather than simply descriptive. Secondly, there is a dangerous potential to read pilgrimage as 'meaningful' and tourism as 'frivolous.' The danger here is that tourists become the cultural pariahs of the modern age, and pilgrims those travellers lauded by the nostalgic.⁸¹

The fact is that the data simply do not support such a position. Indeed, we have ample data that tells us tourism practices of any kind can be deeply meaningful, intellectual, or culturally significant. This, subsequently, leads to the third problem with the 'tourism as modern pilgrimage equivalent' thesis;

⁷⁹ MacCannell, *The Tourist*.

⁸⁰ Justine Digance, 'Religious and Secular Pilgrimage: Journeys Redolent with Meaning,' in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, eds Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 36-48.

⁸¹ For such arguments, see Louis Turner, *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery* (London: Constable, 1975); and Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (Harmondsworth and Middlesex: Penguin, 1963).

reading tourism as the modern replacement of pilgrimage sounds too much like a reiteration of the simplified 'secularisation thesis' for there to be any serious scholarly value in it. If the last 150 years of religious studies have shown us anything, it is that secularisation is at best a category in need of numerous qualifications. If anything, the process of secularisation has resulted more in the privatisation of religious praxis, and not its disappearance.⁸² The notion that modernity spells the inevitable death of religion has simply been debunked. Scholars like Steve Bruce, however, remind us (quite stridently at times) that secularisation as characterised by Peter Berger – as in the removal of the religious from a central place in the public sphere⁸³ – has indeed taken place in the West and is ongoing.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, plenty of religious phenomena is still to be found; tourism, therefore, cannot be the secular replacement for the religious pilgrimage if religion itself is not disappearing. With that caveat aside, we can then begin to unpack meaning and identity for what they are in and of themselves.

Religions should be important but not exclusive to our study of spiritual tourism. For example, it may be that spiritual tourists simply pass through the forecourts of religions, as in the case of traditions like the Camino where they 'do something religious' but hardly at all under the administrative or theological supervision of the group itself.⁸⁵ Then again, we certainly find identifiable (and sometimes self-identified) spiritual tourists doing religious things without a religion, *per se* (e.g. some retreats, some New Age activities⁸⁶). We also find supposedly non-religious activities, in non-religious settings, that have spiritual consequences (such as 4WD tourism⁸⁷). Where these consequences are intended and deliberate, we must surely include them in our analysis of spiritual tourism. Where they are the unexpected fruits of a journey well taken, we may need the qualifier 'unintentional'; nonetheless, the epithet 'spiritual tourist' retains some analytical value in terms of narrated experience.

⁸² M. D. Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2011).

⁸³ Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber, 1967), p. 107.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Steve Bruce, 'Christianity in Britain, R. I. P.,' *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2001), pp. 191-203; and David Voas and Steve Bruce, 'The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred,' in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, eds Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 43-62.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Slavin, 'Walking as Spiritual Practice'; and Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*.

⁸⁶ Kathryn Rountree, 'Journeys to the Goddess: Pilgrimage and Tourism in the New Age,' in *On the Road to Being There: Studies in Pilgrimage and Tourism in Late Modernity*, ed. William H. Swatos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 33-60.

⁸⁷ Narayanan and Macbeth, 'Deep in the Desert.'

Finally, our sources for the varieties of experience need, in some sense to be 'live.' Literature, blogs, community forums, traveller forums, and social media are valuable sources of such research data. With appropriate acknowledgements of the tinting effects of performance and social expectation, economics, and the potential for fabrication, the self-authored tales of travel with spiritual consequences are there to be surveyed, analysed, critiqued, and discussed by the academy. Likewise, insofar as our categorisation rests on experiential reportage, scholars must collect data from tourists themselves – before, during, and after travel – in order to draw a satisfactorily complete picture. Much scholarship needs to be produced on spiritual tourism in order to determine its actual value to individuals and to the societies they depart from and return to. This, of course, strays into the dangerous territory of macro-sociological speculation; the notion that spiritual tourism is all too easily viewed as a singular phenomenon found throughout the Western world which has persistent and easily segregated causative effects. The danger in taking such a view is, firstly, that it strays away from the data supplied by individuals, and, secondly, that it assumes a Western homogeneity that patently does not exist. With these cautions in mind, however, scholarship on spiritual tourism can move forward.

Conclusions

As seems ever the case, more data is required. If any socially or culturally useful reflection is to be gained from spiritual tourist's experiences, scholarly attention is needed. By gathering spiritual tourist experiences together and grouping them thematically as has been done here, certain avenues for research are made readily apparent. The five varieties, which themselves are by no means complete, exclusive, or hermetically sealed, are valuable waypoints for scholars analysing tourism phenomena that are characterised by spiritual projects. Similarly, by unpacking spiritual tourists' experiences in such a way, the similarities to be found in other less obviously 'spiritual' forms of tourism are highlighted. The result, it is hoped, is a richer understanding of the intricacies of human behaviours that combine travel, religions, personal wellbeing, meaning, and identity. Methodologies from studies in religion can help us to understand how a journey otherwise considered insignificant can become 'sacred'; a source of meaning and a mechanism of self-improvement. The varieties of spiritual tourist experiences demonstrate that spiritual tourism can be, and is, part of contemporary religious practice for a range of individuals, as well as part of 'non-religious' meaning and identity projects. Understanding the experiential aspect of spiritual tourism thus helps us understand a wide range of tourists more fully.