
Volume 8

Issue 2 *Special Issue : International Conference
on Niche Market Formation for Faith-Based
Tourism, Malta*

Article 4

February 2020

How Religious Tourism and Pilgrimages Can Be Beneficial to Communities

Julian C. Zarb

Institute for Travel, Tourism and Culture, University of Malta, julian.zarb@um.edu.mt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp>



Part of the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zarb, Julian C. (2020) "How Religious Tourism and Pilgrimages Can Be Beneficial to Communities,"
International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 4.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/j6j5-5459>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol8/iss2/4>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](#).

How Religious Tourism and Pilgrimages can be Beneficial to Communities

Julian C. Zarb

Institute for Travel, Tourism and Culture, University of Malta
julian.zarb@um.edu.mt

This paper highlights the distinction between tourism as a socio-economic industry and tourism as a socio-cultural activity. The defining feature of sustainable, culturally supportive and beneficial tourism is community engagement. This paper proposes that the traditional aspects of hospitality, service and experience can be fully manifest if there is an engagement with local communities, which is thus manifest in immersion by the visitor in the activities around which events are based. This can only occur when development adopts a Community Based Tourism model. If locations such as Malta wish to develop religious tourism to the benefit of all, this must maximise the adherence to socially responsible stakeholder engagement in a sustainable manner.

Key Words: tourism, pilgrimage, communities, host and visitor, stakeholder fatigue, ownership

Background and Definitions

Tourism

This section considers the definition of a socio-economic industry versus the definition of a socio-cultural activity - Quantity vs Quality.

Tourism activity today is defined in terms of quantity, it is seen as a vibrant yet resilient socio-economic activity. The UNWTO describes Tourism as:

the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes.

This very definition signifies that Tourism is seen as prescribing activities by persons outside their normal home within a specified time frame but it does not define clearly what these activities could be or the importance of the host and visitor interaction, as the very basis for hospitality and service which were key factors in the level of travel and tourism during its early development.

Raj and Morpeth (2007:4) have cited Cooper *et al* in describing the 'inherent complexities within the phenomenon of Tourism' and, indeed, this is the result of referring to Tourism today as a 'global industry', where politicians and business entrepreneurs consider the quantitative aspects before they consider the qualitative factors that really define the visitor experience which include the issues of responsible travel and tourism, the tourist as an individual not a

number and the respect shown by the visitor for local cultures and traditions. It is these issues that differentiate the socio-economic industry from the socio-cultural activity. The quantitative view of Tourism is focused on economic growth and this is measured through the statistics relevant to tourist arrivals, bed nights and revenue while the qualitative view considers the importance of building a hospitable relationship between the host and visitor where the economic benefits will grow through this holistic and combined effort. Allowing all stakeholders, including the local community, to engage in a strong sense of ownership for any tourism activity, will increase the visitors' sense of hospitality and service while also enhancing the value of tourism between the host and visitor.

Raj and Morpeth (2007) have also cited Burns and Holden (1995) in describing the commoditisation of Religion and religious pilgrimages. This phenomenon has occurred throughout the Travel and Tourism areas when one considers the development from travel agent to tour operator and the move from a sector that was supporting the tourist to one that supports groups and 'mass' tourism.

Religion

Religion is the belief that unites communities and society in acting responsibly, honestly and sincerely with each other, believing in the hope that life is transient and everlasting life is the ultimate goal of all.

In many countries, including Malta and Gozo, religion has often been projected as an intangible form of culture. Online promotion of religious tourism in Malta is limited to the number of religious denominations to be found on the islands as well as the architecture and local history of many of the 365 places of worship. Little is found, in this respect, in terms of the more social and folkloristic stories related to communities and religion. The real host - visitor interrelationship is limited during religious festivities in the towns and villages, to simply a non-participative audience. These are occasions when the host community are simply objects for observation.

The *Bethlehem Declaration for Religious Tourism as a Means of Fostering Socio-Economic Development of Host Communities* (2015) clearly states that:

Recalling that religious tourism can make an important contribution to the socio-economic development and empowerment of local communities and that it is a market segment that is more resilient to influences of exogenous factors...

Given this strong clause in the declaration, Religious Tourism is still seen today as a commodity rather than a spiritual experience.

During an international conference on Religious Tourism in Fatima, Portugal (November 2017) one of the panel sessions titled *The role of Religious Tourism in Sustainable Economic Growth and Social Inclusiveness of Local Communities* discussed the need to 'develop strategies to manage this affluence (referring to the demand for sacred places to be visited by tourists) while assuring tourists of the quality of the visit. Safeguarding cultural heritage to the satisfaction of local communities is a priority for the long-term sustainable development of the religious sites. The panel asked 'How can governments, religious authorities and tourism operators optimise benefits that religious tourism generates'? While the question certainly highlights this need for including local communities in any form of tourism planning, it is evident that in the sixteen years since the publication of the *Code of Ethics* (UNWTO: 2001) not much has been achieved in the implementation of this holistic form of tourism planning. There are enough examples of what Rinschede (1992) has described as 'short-term' forms of religious Tourism, these include the Festa nights organised by tour organisers in Malta and Gozo, which include visits to one of the many religious festivals in the towns and villages; here the emphasis is not on education and culture but more on the aspect of a 'fun'

time with the Locals, where the visitor is the observer and the locals are the observed. Rinschede also identified the long-term and organisational kind of religious tourism where the visitor has a genuine and committed reason for participating in any religious activity with locals, in fact, rather than the observer, this visitor is the main protagonist or pilgrim. There is a co-relation between community-driven tourism planning as proposed by Peter Murphy (1988) and the long-term or organisational religious Tourism proposed by Rinschede (1992) and this relationship focusses on two key factors - ownership and sustainability. To understand this relationship it is important to define and understand what constitutes and motivates community-driven planning and initiative.

Community - Definition and involvement

Fukuyama has described communities as:

Virtually all forms of traditional culture-social groups like tribes, clans, village associations, religious sects etc. ... based on shared norms and use these norms to achieve cooperative ends (Fukuyama, 1999).

Fukuyama goes on to describe communities as being, frequently, based on religion, ethnicity, or other forms of recognition that fall short of the universal recognition on which the liberal state is based (Fukuyama, 1992). Indeed, in many of the more established towns and villages in Malta and Gozo, the communities may differ in such aspects as politics and sports but are enthusiastic about the feast of the local patron saint. During a focus group with members of the community in the town of Bormla (2014) it was evident that when it came to politics or aspects of a sense of belonging and civic pride there were differing opinions but there was a definite bond when it came to speaking about the feast of the local patron saint. Here, all the residents, and those who had left the locality at some time or other, would celebrate the feast because they really felt they owned this event.

Looking for common factors that bring people and communities together could be one way to build a sense of **trust**, **commitment** and **synergy**. Without these three qualities, communities tend to suffer from 'stakeholder fatigue', that ailment which ensures that projects will have a very short-term life cycle. For the past thirty years academics have struggled to research further about community-based approaches to tourism management, among these we find seminal works by Murphy (1985); Simmons (1994) and Richards and

St Maria Feast at Mosta Rotunda Church, Malta



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/66/St_Maria_Feast_at_Mosta_Rotunda_Church%2C_Malta_GC_-_Photo_by_Gino_Galea.jpg

Hall (2003). The problem has always been one of a fragmented approach to designing the processes for CBT implementation where consultation sessions are not continuous but feature at the start and finish of a process; stakeholders, including the communities need to be totally immersed and take ownership of these processes. Harrill (2004) outlines the importance of community involvement in tourism planning yet the recent reference to ‘Overtourism’ (UNWTO, 2017) indicates that destinations have failed to implement sustainable and responsible tourism successfully. Becker (2013) refers to a situation of overbooking in Tourism with a number of case studies where sustainability and tourism planning have failed.

There is a need being felt for a more integrated approach to Tourism planning where the value added is not measured in quantitative methods but more in qualitative methods that express the experiential values rather than the social-economic statistics alone.

Historic Ties between Pilgrimages and Religion

One example that can bring about a community-based approach to Tourism in the towns and villages could certainly include the promotion of a religious Tourism strategy. Malta and Gozo host some 1.8 million visitors per year (2016) excluding those 600,000 cruise-line passengers who spend four to five hours on land, most times taking in the iconic sites such as Valletta, Mdina, The Megalithic Temples and the Grand Harbour. At one of the last international events before ending his tenure, UNWTO Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai expressed himself on this concept of experiential visitor values when he stated that ‘Growth is not the enemy’ (WTM, 2017) but it is more a question of managing tourism, and this needs to be a holistic and inclusive form of management if the experience is to remain sustainable, responsible and effective. Here, going back to basics is key to really understanding what tourism should be and how it can be managed. Tourism needs to revisit the social-cultural activity it was when early travellers visited far-off lands and were welcomed or given hospitality and service by the local community.

Religious Tourism, if properly planned and developed, is a socio-cultural activity that depends on strong host-visitor relationships, the example of the superficial ‘Festa Nights’ is not a real example of religious tourism.

Griffin (in Raj and Morpeth, 2007:59) in describing the co-relation between the tourist who happens to be at a pilgrimage site and the one who actually wants to be there, thus:

The present discussion acknowledges, but is not concerned primarily with people at the other end of the pilgrimage continuum, who intentionally travel for reasons related to religion or spirituality in their quest for meaning.

A generic definition given for a pilgrim is: ‘A traveller who is on a journey to a holy place’. Travel has, traditionally, not been limited to the pursuit of leisure activities but included reasons such as Trade, Conquest, Education and Leisure to Holy Sites e.g. Canterbury, Lourdes, Fatima, Mellieha, Ta Pinu and Jerusalem. This distinction between the tourist who happens to be at a pilgrimage site and the one who wants to be there, is also expressed by Cohen (2001) who (cited by Griffin, 2007:19) who stated:

the continuum of religious tourism ranges from pilgrims who are motivated to visit a location entirely for religious purposes to the secular tourist who visits a site irrespective of its religious provenance, perhaps for architectural or historic motives.

The real reason for any holy site is to provide a place for solace and prayer. Leppakari and Griffin (2017) describe the disparity in the objectives behind religious tourism for the pilgrim as well as for the business sector. The aspect of 'fast-tourism' and 'hit-and-run' tourism described by Leppakari and Griffin indicates the sense of commoditisation that leaves little benefit to the local community.

Developing an activity that propagates the commoditisation of a particular experience that is of a socio-cultural origin, is something that needs to be managed carefully by all stakeholders including the local community; religious tourism is about the qualification of the activity not just about numbers and statistics. After all, the pilgrim, in this context, is a traveller not a tourist; one of the qualities for any pilgrim is a strong sense of belief and purpose rather than a simple sense of curiosity. Pilgrimages led to the demand for basic services and a sense of hospitality e.g. accommodation, sustenance and religious functions. Constable (2004) refers to a 'cross-cultural institution' and the development of the *funduq* or 'commercial spaces, serving the needs of merchants for lodging, storage and security'.

The development of religious tourism so as to be a sustainable and responsible social-cultural activity must be addressed with caution, this will avoid any commoditisation of pilgrimage sites through the over-commercialisation of souvenirs and the basic aspects of hospitality and service.

The Role and Participation of Communities in Pilgrimages

The success of any community-based strategy is dependent on the level of awareness and ownership that is forthcoming from the local community or society within which the socio-cultural activity is taking place. The development of day-visits to such pilgrimage sites as Ta' Pinu in Gozo or the Mellieha Sanctuary in Malta only serves to satisfy a curiosity and is very superficial. Pilgrimage sites require the visitor to be immersed in the sacred spaces within the locality and not just appeal to the infrastructural and surrounding landscape as, solely, a place of attraction. Pilgrims must participate with the local community in

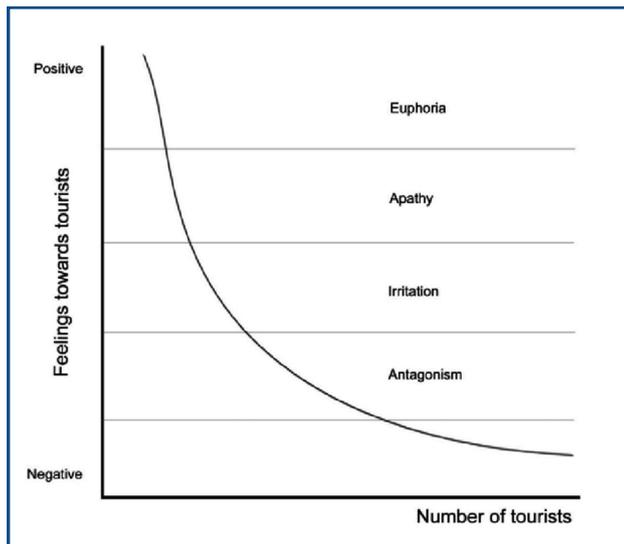
the ceremonies and religious-based activities within a site or locality; the pilgrim is not a spectator but has a primary role in activities linked to the religious nature of the site. There needs to be respect and trust in understanding the culture and traditions of the local community in conducting such religious services. The local communities need to adopt the position of hosts and should act as welcomers, offering pilgrims and travellers a sense of belonging and hospitality. First and foremost, the religious events and activities must belong to the local community and this social group should have a sense of pride in sharing that ownership, with the visitor.

The real visitor experience remains authentic only when religious activities have a strong participation by the local community, not as some staged (McCannell, 1995) event but one that is based on real tradition and local characteristic. Here, communities must play a key role in such activities. Some members of the community will take part and organise pilgrimages and faith-based events simply because they felt a sense of belonging and ownership; the author once met with a person who was knowledgeable about his hometown, Mellieha - he stated many times that he never expected any remuneration for the work he did in showing visitors round the museum at the 2000 year old sanctuary. This sort of moral satisfaction can also be considered as one of the many benefits for communities from locally managed tourism activities, yet there are other forms of benefits which include monetary or economic benefits directly to community members who act as welcomers, guides and hosts; benefits can also be shared through the sale of locally-produced food products, crafts as well as books. There are important qualities which any community must ensure if they are to promote both sustainable and responsible tourism activity within their locality and these include a strong sense of identity and a sense of belonging.

The Sense of Identity and Belonging

Beeton (2006) refers to communities as being key to the visitor sense of hospitality when Tourism was more of a qualitative experience for the well-seasoned and knowledgeable traveller. On the other hand, since the growth of 'mass' Tourism, where groups of tourists descended on a destination in their thousands, this close relationship with communities has been separated through over-commoditisation of an experience that was, once, very personal but has since become stereotyped and mundane. The scenes we have experienced on our news portals and televisions, over

Figure 1 : Adaptation of Reisinger's version of Doxey's Irridex Model



Source Scholtz, 2014

the summer of 2017, in Barcelona and Venice reflect a high level of anti-Tourism feeling which is described with more clarity in Doxey's Irridex model (Figure 1).

The situation for the Maltese islands, with respect to the 'host gaze', is surprisingly a positive one although there are pockets of some resistance in places such as Sliema and St Julian's. After fifty years of Tourism activity, that has seen a quantitative growth from around 40,000 visitors in 1963 to 1.8 million visitors in 2016, the feeling is one of resignation to the fact that Tourism is here to stay. Like it or not, the community here is more of a spectator than a key participant. The reason for this is the fact that over the last fifty years tourism has been seen as a socio-economic industry rather than the socio-cultural activity which the notion of travel used to project in the minds of those setting out on journeys.

Two factors that really strengthen the real sense of hospitality and service for the visitor and host are the sense of identity - who I am; and the sense of belonging - to which community and society I belong. Tourism is not just an activity where the visitor is completely detached from the local culture and community, this was the perception that was manifest during the time of enclave tourism that was popular forty years ago in places like Tunisia and Spain. Here, the 'staged authenticity' which MacCannell refers to can be experienced in 'local' nights where the native folklore is given a glossy cover which tended to commoditise the uniqueness of the indigenous culture.

To avoid this, pilgrimages and faith-based tourism need to express the real interaction, the authentic experience between the host-visitor by making the visitor feel a part of the activities not simply an observer.

The level or sense of identity and belonging is related to the level of civic pride and awareness which the local community manifests in each town and village. There is a correlation between civic pride and the level of hospitality and service afforded the visitor to any destination. Lashley, Lynch and Morrison cite Bell (2007:96) in describing this relationship between hospitality and the sense of belonging in any locality.

The conviviality, the commensality, the hospitableness of commercial venues is seen by Latham to spill out into the streets, generating 'new solidarities and new collectivities, and a greater sense of belonging' (cited in Hall, T., Hubbard, P. and Rennie Short, J., 2008:180).

This relationship between a sense of belonging and place needs to be nurtured through consistent and continuous participation of all stakeholders, primarily by the local community who have a key role in presenting a living experience to the visitor which is authentic and unique. Religious or faith-based Tourism activities provide one of the important opportunities for the promotion of a community-based experience for the visitor. It is important that these experiences are led by the local community, who should take ownership of the project and involve the visitor as a participant and not simply as a passive observer of the ceremonies and activities.

The final part of this paper will discuss the relationship between the development of community-based tours in Malta and the promotion of an authentic and real experience in faith-based Tourism.

An Integrated Approach to Planning - Development of a Community-Based Approach in Tourism Today

Traditionally, tourism has been led by Governments, authorities and the business community as the three key stakeholders for a successful social-economic industry; but tourism is more than an industry, it is a socio-cultural activity that relies on the hospitality, service and interaction between the host community and the visitor. This is the difference between the quantification and the qualification of tourism, where the performance is not simply measured in terms of

statistics and economic figures but an activity where the performance is gauged by client or visitor satisfaction and the host's level of tolerance and satisfaction with the 'tourist gaze'. The more positive the level of tolerance, the stronger the host's satisfaction with the tourism activity. But the involvement of the host community needs to be consistent, continuous and needs to avoid any aspect of distrust. This broad stakeholder involvement can also provide a more interesting and diverse visitor experience since it is the host community that can 'illustrate' the stories and unique history of the locality. It is the host community that can also add the authentic flavour to any faith-based tourism activity, it is through the community ownership of such events that visitors become participants rather than mere observers. The aspect of hospitality, service and experience can be fully manifest if there is an immersion by the visitor in the activities around which events are based.

Conclusion

In summary, therefore, Community-based Tourism strategies can help in enhancing faith-based or religious events because of six key reasons, these being:

Added value to the visitor

By involving the visitor through direct interaction with the host community, this 'hands-on' approach will enhance the experience making this more interesting.

A broader stakeholder shareholding

The host community and local businesses need to take ownership of the strategy and policy to develop community-based concepts in terms of faith-based activities. They are not spectators but participants. This requires consistent and continuous consultation with these stakeholders.

A diverse experience for the visitor

Faith-based Tourism requires visitors who are dedicated to the spiritual reason for travelling to a particular destination. It is this experience which will deliver the authentic and unique concept for the visitor because there is participation not just observation.

The need to avoid stakeholder fatigue

Engaging the host community is a key factor to maintaining their interest and attention to any initiative or project. With faith-based Tourism, such initiatives touch on the more personal aspects of the host community so allowing the local resident to own and manage such projects.

Consistent, continuous, inclusive process

The question of consultation with stakeholders should not be seen as a PR exercise or a superficial task to quell any negative aspects for a project or initiative. Consultation means that all stakeholders - authorities, businesses and local communities have an equal opportunity of participating in dialogue that will develop, implement, monitor and review such initiatives.

Community Based Tourism concept (Murphy, 1985)

The concept for Community-based Tourism that was conceived in the mid-1980's by Peter Murphy has been tried and tested in various situations and projects but the question of short-termism vs medium to long-termism has hindered the success of this concept. If this is to survive beyond the short-term perspective of the politician and businessperson then it needs to engage the community as a key owner of the project.

References

- Becker, E. (2013) *Overbooked - The Exploding Business of Travel and Tourism*. (Simon and Schuster, USA)
- Beeton, S. (2006) *Community Development through Tourism*. (Landlinks, UK)
- Constable, O.R. (2003). *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World*. (Cambridge University Press, USA)
- Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. (Free Press, USA)
- Fukuyama, F. (1999). *Social Capital and Civil Society*. International Monetary Fund Conference, The Institute of Public Policy George Mason University (October 1 1999)
- Griffin, K.A. (2007) *The Globalisation of Pilgrimage Tourism*, in Raj, R. and Morpeth, N. (Eds) *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Festivals Management: An International Perspective* (CABI, UK)
- Hall, T., Hubbard, P. and Rennie Short, J., (2008) *The Sage Companion to the City* (Sage Publications, London)
- Hall, D. And Richards, G. (2003). *Tourism and Sustainable Community Development*. (Routledge, UK)
- Harrill, R. (2004) *Residents' Attitudes toward Tourism Development : A Literature Review with Implications for Tourism Planning*. *Journal of Planning Literature*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (February 2004)
- Jepson, A. And Clarke, A. (2015) *Exploring Community Festivals and Events*. (Routledge, Oxon. UK)
- Lashley, C., Lynch, P., and Morrison, A. (2007) *Hospitality - A Social Lens*. (Elsevier, UK)
- Leppakari, M. and Griffin, K. (2017) *Pilgrimage and Tourism to Holy Cities - Ideological and Management Perspectives*. (CABI, UK)
- MacCannell, D. (1976) *The Tourist - A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. (University of California Press, UK)
- Murphy, P. (1985) *Tourism - A Community Approach*. (Methuen, UK)
- Raj, R. and Morpeth, D. (2007) *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Management - An International Perspective*. (CABI, UK)
- Rinschede, G. (1992). *Forms of Religious Tourism*. *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol.19, Issue 1 pps. 51 - 67.
- Simmons, D.G. (1994) *Community participation in tourism planning*. *Tourism Management* Vol. 15 pps. 96 - 108.