

'From British Raj tours to US theme parks, holidays evolved — there's 'anti-tourism' now'

Eric G. E. Zuelow is Professor of European and World History at the University of New England. Speaking to Srijana Mitra Das at Times Evoke, he discusses vacations — and coming home:

When did people start travelling on holiday instead of staying home?

■ Tourism, in its modern sense, originated in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe with the 'Grand Tour' — this initially meant mostly young men expected to travel for self-improvement. They were supposed to develop taste, learn languages, see art, make contacts with people abroad, all of which would help prepare them to become future leaders. This was a merger of travel and consumption, going abroad, consuming sites and essentially buying souvenirs — perhaps a little higher-brow than now but still, souvenirs. Hence, people began visiting European cities in France, Italy, etc.

Earlier, people voyaged for months since an elite class was travelling. Today, there is a fairly obvious 'tourist season' — shorter trips started when people who actually work began travelling and matched their holidays to the weather.

What is the role of nature in such breaks?

■ During the 18th century, people began re-imagining the natural world and what was desirable to look at. Places previously off-limits or thought 'scary', like mountains and beaches, were now reimagined as wonderful. The idea spread of the 'sublime and beautiful', where the 'sublime' quickens your pulse and the 'beautiful', personified by rolling hills and pastures, was soothing. People increasingly imagined when they went into nature, they were improving their health. After 1750, 'grand tourists' still went to cities but started adding natural places as well. That was also when the idea grew that nature could be 'assisted' in the process of consuming it — it could be made more attractive.



DIVE INTO NATURE: But how eco-friendly is this?



NEW MERCHANTS OF VENICE? Receiving 20 million tourists a year, Venice, which faces rising sea levels, just saw Jeff Bezos' wedding, a 'destination' event attended by the US elite and opposed by residents who feel the tourist industry is now drowning the city with crowds, noise — and inflation

Hence, 19th century designers even tried to make Niagara Falls look 'more natural'.

When did travel with children take off?

■ Young people travelled with their families at least from the 19th century — in Britain, working-class family trips to the seaside were most popular. The mass tourism of today developed post-WWII when the idea of the 'family holiday' became dominant. Tourism developers started building 'family attractions' like theme parks, etc. There was more money in the United States, Europe and elsewhere and travel grew more affordable with package tours, airplanes and the automobile. The latter grew very popular in the US and roadside attractions — such as restaurants shaped like cowboy hats — grew for children travelling on holiday during their school breaks.

What ecological impacts have occurred?

■ Christopher W. Wells has written 'Car Country', a book about the environmental history of the automobile in the United States. It explains how the automobile completely recast the landscape — everything grew from the rise of suburbs and motorways and tourism picked up on that. So, destinations and facilities for holiday-makers, like campgrounds, started catering increasingly to the car.

All of that had implications for water tables and drainage — and the prolific consumption of lithic landscapes and burning oil-based products. It only damaged the climate, plant species and animal life. Add to that the ironies of huge aviation or flying to 'enjoy nature' which, in fact, contributes to damaging the very ice you'd like to ski on or the corals you'd like to see.

Is there a link between tourism and imperialism?

■ Yes. In the 19th century, the British Raj in India used tourism as a way of selling what it imagined as its 'accomplishments', like the

introduction of railways, new farming techniques, etc. The government would direct tourists to such sites. Importantly, when colonised people started to resist and push back, they adopted all-India tourism as a means of doing so. Thus, on the one hand, tourism was an exercise in power on the coloniser's part — on the other, it was a tool of resistance for the colonised. The first package tour in India was organised by an English company but almost entirely populated by middle-class Indian tourists. In the early 20th century, Indian guidebook writers also wrote travel books that subtly promoted nationalist ideas.

Today, as travellers from Asia and elsewhere take to global tourism, do you see changes?

■ I think we are already seeing a response. Epic numbers of people are flowing into popular tourist destinations — in 2018-2019, places like Barcelona saw an 'over-tourism' or 'anti-tourism' movement begin. Then, Covid intervened and people remembered what it was like to have their cities to themselves. After the pandemic, large

numbers started traveling again and many residents felt resentful of visitors, even though their money might be welcome. It seems the 'anti-tourism' feeling is only picking up — governments will have to pay heed as there's been very little attention to making travel more sustainable or providing adequate living space for residents of places like Florence and Venice.

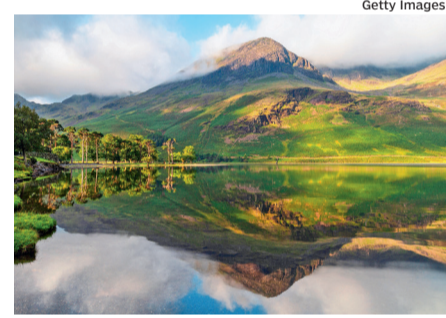
How will all this fare with the human tendency of wanting to display, especially in the era of social media?

■ Transport in fact isn't the largest force in tourism — it's 'tourism mediators'. With the Grand Tour, that meant paintings — and a particular kind where there'd be something like the Colosseum and a bunch of little figures, tourists, looking at it. Later, photographs presented the same views. Then, postcards did the same and tourist guidebooks appeared which told you what to see, how to see it, how to feel about it and what to sketch pre-camera.

Now, tourists themselves are increasingly the mediators — when you photograph something and put it on your social media, you are telling people what to see and how to see it. Those photos tend to resemble earlier postcards, sketches and paintings — there's a common aesthetic between them. With phone cameras that keep improving, humans will continue vacationing, mediating that experience for others — and encouraging them to travel.



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