

The Paradox of International Tourism



A British person, living in America, was once visited by some friends from Britain. He took them to various places to see the sights. Wherever they went, his friends kept asking him anxiously, “Is this the real America?” The puzzled man could only reply, “Yes, this is America.”

This story nicely illustrates what we could call “the paradox of tourism.” When we visit foreign countries as tourists, we tend to be determined to see the real or authentic aspects of that country, the “Japaneseness” of Japan or the “Indianness” of India. However, with increasing globalization, what represents the “real” aspects of a particular culture has become harder to identify. For example, a karaoke bar in the Philippines has become just as much a part of that country as, say, a McDonalds has become a part of the culture of Japan.

Nevertheless, tourists often go to great lengths to seek out the “real” in the countries they visit. However, sometimes the “real” proves to be unsatisfactory and tourists have to recreate the country to match their own expectations. For example, when visiting Thailand tourists might feel rather uncomfortable in the polluted urban sprawl that is present-day Bangkok. Instead, they could feel much happier when they visit the beautiful island-resorts to the south. They might feel that they had discovered the real Thailand. Soon though, they might start to notice that the island is full of foreigners and that the only Thai people to be seen are either serving food or selling something. This is because the resort is actually “Thailand” as foreigners would like to have it.

Some complain that tourists by their very presence change or even ruin the countries they visit. This helps to explain the endless quest of tourists to find more remote and unspoilt places; an ultimately hopeless endeavor in a finite world. This is self-defeating, but understandable, desire to escape from one’s own culture.

We can recently find in Japan a possible alternative to the problem of tourism. This involves the creation of theme parks with names like “Spain Village.” At such places people can enjoy the simulation of a foreign country while avoiding some of the unpleasant realities of foreign travel. Unfortunately, though we also lose what seems to be the greatest benefit of foreign travel; the way it forces us to question our assumptions and stereotypes.