

Innovations in Volunteer Tourism: A Case Study of Fundraising Adventure Tours

Kevin D. Lyons

Contact: kevin.lyons@newcastle.edu.au

The popularity of volunteer tourism as a form of alternative tourism has grown significantly over the past decade (McGehee, and Norman, 2002). Volunteer tourists can now be found throughout the world participating in a wide array of social, educational, political and environmental projects. While these projects continue to use volunteer tourists as a significant source of labour, the NGOs and community organisations that provide and support them have begun exploring other innovative ways to attract and engage volunteer tourists who may wish to provide their voluntary labour in less direct ways. As a result programs are now emerging that move beyond the convention established in volunteer tourism where participants travel to a destination community to volunteer their labour while simultaneously being a 'tourist' in the broadest sense of the word. Instead, these new programs fuse adventure, volunteerism and philanthropy incrementally into an innovative tourism experience that challenges traditional debates about the decommodifying processes (Wearing, McDonald, and Ponting, 2005) embedded in volunteer tourism. One example of this new type of volunteer tourism is the development and provision of fundraising adventure tours. Fundraising adventure tourism has been adopted by a number of NGO's who recruit participants willing to raise a pre-determined sum of money half of which is used to support the NGO's core business and the remaining funds are used to fund an adventure tour.

Previous arguments have suggested that volunteer tourism does not fit into the commodified regime of mass and packaged tourism as its focus is not on the exchange value in the tourism system (Wearing et al. 2005). This paper explores whether the act of fundraising as an act of volunteering, conducted prior to participating in an adventure tour enabled participants to experience the decommodified frame of gift economy that has been heralded as the hallmark of volunteer tourism (Wearing, 2001) or whether this separation undermines this process. This paper presents a case study of one of these innovative programs developed and operated by Oxfam Community Aid Abroad Australia – Oxfam Challenge program.

This paper draws on the marketing materials of Oxfam and presents findings from an analysis of diaries and web-blogs of 25 individuals who participated in fundraising/cycling adventures with Oxfam Australia– Oxfam Challenge program. The adventure fundraising tour conducted by Oxfam Australia is marketed as an adventure experience with a difference. OXFAM Australia recruits participants willing to raise \$5000 which in-part covers the cost of a two week cycling tour through remote villages in China, Vietnam or Cambodia where they visit environmental and humanitarian

projects and where the funds they raised are being used. While participants are recruited through Oxfam Australia, the adventure tour component of the program is outsourced to a commercial travel service provider who provides a fully packaged program including airfares, meals, a bicycle, and a guide. This component of the experience is almost identical to any packaged adventure-based tour conducted by a wide range of operators globally.

There are four main themes that emerged that form the findings of this study. The first suggests that while the tourist gaze narrative dominated many of the blogs analysed in this study, a significant component of these narratives emphasised the altruistic experiences associated with volunteering, giving back and helping others through fundraising. The sense of giving was further enhanced when participants visited communities where the monies they had raised were being used. The second finding suggests that the market edge and the positioning of the fundraising adventure challenge as a unique product by OxFam re-establishes volunteer tourism as a commodified product within the rubric of de-commodification. The third finding suggests that the separation of the act of adventure from the act of giving appeared to have little impact upon the participants. This paper suggests that the motives and satisfactions of participants in this new form of volunteer tourism appears very similar to more traditional forms. However, the strong emphasises upon more hedonic pleasures associated with the physical challenges of cycle touring suggests that altruism remained in the background while on tour and only emerged when participants visited the communities where the money they raised was used. This relates to the fourth finding of this study that the physicality of adventure is closely associated with appeasement and a metaphorical approach to volunteer tourism.

This paper discusses the findings by considering the commodified/decommodified distinctions that have been made about volunteer tourism and alternative tourism more broadly and considers whether the new innovations presented in the case study in the paper are better viewed as a continuum of commodification. The paper concludes by discussing whether the separation of volunteering from touring heralds the 'beginning to the end' of volunteer tourism as an alternative project of self discovery and theorises that the commodifying characteristics of mass tourism have begun to coopt volunteer tourism. Implications for NGO's management and policy development is considered and further research directions are recommend.

References

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