

Co-creating and Transforming the future of travel and the world: An ethnographic journey

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Objectives | To speak today about the future of tourism the most immediate starting point has to be the current disquieting state of the world system. It is becoming increasingly obvious that our current world practices are not sustainable, nor healthy, nor just. As Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2011, p. 3) clearly capture, “we live in sharply transitional times which may well prove to be one of generational economic and social change during which people, communities and places will need to find alternative ways of living and working”. In this context, a growing number of academic and industry-based research points to an encouraging trend of socially and environmentally conscious hosts and travellers, who employ tourism as a transformative medium to promote sustainable practices and more conscious living on our planet. In other words, increasingly, transformative travellers use their trips to reinvent themselves and the world they live in. Yet, this emerging debate is still empirically under researched and seriously fragmented by different terminologies used in the academic as well as popular discourse. Hence, this paper has three key aims: (i) to reveal different concepts and terminologies that point in the same direction of tourism’s transformative potential; (ii) to provide an insight into the innovative types of tourism experiences and places that facilitate processes of individual and collective transformation; (iii) to present our recent empirical investigation of one transformational travel ‘Journey’ programme set up at Embercombe Center in Devon, the south-western part of the UK (<http://embercombe.org/>).

Methodology | This paper is based on our longitudinal Trans-tourism research project that explores the transformative potential of tourism over the period of four years and by employing a whole variety of multiple methods with a range of different stakeholders. Part of the research design included on-site visits for in-depth face-to-face interviews with the transformative travel providers in 4 case countries of the UK, Germany, Hungary and Croatia and the ethnographic approach of on-site participant observation and informal conversations with travellers. In the course of our research we have identified a new form of *transtourism operations* - so-called *transformative education and leadership centers and retreats*, which provide a holistic approach of adult education and personal growth opportunities, enjoyment of nature, wellness of body, mind and spirit that ultimately facilitate transformative inner journey processes. One

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of those centers in England that particularly stood out in our research was Embercombe Center, based in a natural valley on the edge of the Haldon Forest, in Devon. In the range of possibilities for our participant observations, we have chosen the 5-day residential programme called Journey which *“draws together people from all walks of life. Journey participants are people of all ages, social groups and experience. Wealthy, impoverished, the frantically busy and those with plenty of time. The common ground they share is a deep desire to make a powerful contribution to the world – one that is aligned with their gifts, passion and experience. The Journey will connect you with the source of your power and strength. You will be encouraged to take a step towards a more fulfilling, meaningful and authentic life. To discover that you can uniquely contribute in this time of huge environmental, social and economic change. The Journey is a call to action. You will be both challenged and encouraged, while guided to explore the ‘Twin Trail’. Two paths of leadership – the inner path of self-development, and the outer path of action”* (Embercombe web site: Explore Our Programmes/Personal Development/ The Journey n.d.)

The participant observation by one of the researchers has provided us with the opportunity to gain an in-depth insight into one of the transformational Journey programs that are specifically designed to provide meaningful stays in nature and in doing so to facilitate the process of transformation and inspire people to take courageous action for a just, peaceful and sustainable world. The paper will give the account of what has been gained from ‘being there’ - observing, writing, interacting and conversing with participants, supported by auto-ethnographic accounts, in order to provide the ‘thick descriptions’ of situations, which Geertz (1973) refers to.

Main Results and Contributions | The discussion is organized around three key of the Embercombe Transformational Journey: (i) the point of arrival: in the pain for oneself and for the world (ii) the point of immersion: in the safe space of community; (iii) the point of departure: thrilled, enthusiastic yet apprehensive.

From our discussion a few key findings can be highlighted:

The confidential circle of personal story sharing that happened three times a day during the programme revealed that the feeling of restlessness and lost direction in life has deep roots in the awareness that the world keeps rising in its alienation, pointless consuming and career ladder climbing and above all continuous destruction of all life forms (species, forests, seas, soils, etc.). From news reports and life around us, we are bombarded with signals of distress – of job layoffs and homeless families, of nearby toxic wastes and distant famines, of arms sales and wars or preparations for wars. It is in this context of increasing awareness for the pain of the world what propels people to search for transformative experiences that assist them to reconnect with themselves as well as the world. Thus, a programme like The Journey has the aim and a power to move participants from the paralyzing state of hopelessness into the field of courage, confidence, dreams and possibilities - for themselves and for the world around them. The participants also stressed the fact how their growing confidence during the programme was primarily supported by the sense of safe, nurturing community within the Embercombe valley, hence being apprehensive of stepping back into the outside world. Yet, our research shows how they find the way to stay connected in order to continue inspiring each other and organize various events and circles of support in their area; advertise jobs and various entrepreneurial opportunities – so to stay committed to their aspirations of being a change-maker for a better world.

The results of our study make significant contribution to the latest debates on transformative power

of travel and tourism by providing an in-depth insight into the processes of transformative aspirations through specific travel programmes designed around the needs for personal development. While on the basis of our findings we obviously cannot fully claim that tourism transforms people, we can argue that places, which intentionally design transformative experiences, can assist our processes of individual and collective transition in these critical times of change. To paraphrase renowned speaker and philosopher Charles Eisenstein who claims that we live today at a moment of transition between worlds, a transition that internally, is nothing less than a transformation in the experience of being alive. Externally, it is nothing less than a transformation of humanity's role on planet Earth. At a certain moment it will become necessary for us to go on a journey... to find ourselves outside of whomever our conditioning trained us to be. We must put ourselves in a situation where... who we were becomes inoperative; then, who you will be can emerge.

Conclusions | While on the basis of our findings we cannot fully claim that travel and tourism transforms people, we can conclude the following:

1. Leisure and travel time seem to be increasingly used for individual reflections and meaningful purpose of 'holidays'. While travel does not always necessarily trigger the key event of someone's shift in life, it appears to be an important and continuous conduit that facilitates often a very demanding and difficult path of individual transformation.
2. The old paradigm worldview and its material formations overtly and dominantly prevail to such an extent that they appear to be fully 'normalised'. Thus, despite some limited evidence of structural changes at the collective level, the process of individual transformation appears to be very challenging. Thus, as profound transformative experiences and events (in everyday life or travel experiences) provide triggers and aspirations to 'change oneself and the world', the re-integration back to society under new values and principles still remains for most people the main test of their commitment to meaningful life and outer action.
3. The network of change-makers is closely knitted and it appears to be well connected - via social media, various events, trainings, gatherings, tools and techniques - designed to facilitate and nurture the initiations that lead to commitment for transforming one's own life.

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