Are you a tourist or a traveller?

By Anthony Peregrine

As another holiday season approaches, it’s time to defend tourists. They need it. Scarcely anyone has a good word for them. They overrun places, ruining them, and among the cultured classes, no one admits to being a tourist. They are all travellers. As if we weren’t all tourists most of the time.

So, well, the case for the defence:

Exploitation

Tourists are renowned for spoiling places. However, travellers are the people that got there first. If they didn’t wander off to unexplored spots, writing and talking about them on their return, the rest of us would be in ignorance. Later, at some stage – generally around the opening of the first Holiday Inn franchise – volume turns travellers into tourists. Then travellers get very upset – hear them complaining about the crowds at Machu Picchu. But why would, or should, travellers deny such obviously enriching experiences to others? There is no evidence – merely the arrogance of travellers – to suggest
that the quality of appreciation is any the less because tourists **turn up** in large groups.

**Economics**

No surprise that the locals worldwide have embraced tourism – going to work in the new hotel, opening guest rooms of their own, and running pleasure trips in their fishing boats. Obviously, they lost something in the process, but they were going to lose it anyway. They gained financial security – their families doubtless have health insurance and flat-screen TVs, just like you and me. It is easy to romanticize shepherds and fishermen when you’re only **passing through**. Then you go home, and they’re still selling single goats and bringing fresh water from five miles away. By wishing to leave the world untouched, travellers do nothing for economic development. By contrast, tourists – with all their varying needs – bring cash in buckets.

**Fun**

A short time ago, I saw a documentary following a group travelling around Mongolia. They were eating yak. This looked to me like the worst holiday ever. They maintained, though, that they were having a wonderful time. I was thrilled for them – until one started **going on about** how this was a real experience, far better than the second-hand superficiality of the tourist holiday. Now, as far as I’m aware, there’s no moral or qualitative hierarchy of holiday pleasures. Flying to Alicante is in no way inferior to flying to Ulan Bator. It’s just a different departure gate. If people wish to go riding in Mongolia, that’s fine, and a matter of personal taste. Just don’t let them look down on my holiday activities, for example, playing midnight crazy golf in Benidorm. We all enjoyed ourselves; none of us was a better person for it, just happier – and that’s all there is to say.
Conviviality

Tourists like one another. Travellers apparently don’t like anybody, unless they are natives. The presence of other visitors at the temple, mountaintop, or jungle clearing compromises the authenticity. And they get especially irritated if the other visitors are fellow Britons. I’m generally delighted to run into other Britons, especially in places where I don’t master the language (in other words, almost everywhere). They represent the possibility of conversation, a considerable relief from pointing at stuff and smiling stupidly.

And, while travellers are busy standing off from humanity, tourists are having a great time together. The purest expression of the tourist experience is, perhaps, the package holiday – reviled by all, except anyone who has ever been on one. I have had the best of times on coach trips throughout Europe. There’s no room here to detail the benefits, except one – and that’s built-in good company. I’ve lost count of the occasions I’ve been in a hotel bar after a fine day, sharing most convivial moments with fellow passengers. Across the bar, lone-travelling couples have looked on, as jealous as hell. We coach-trippers have been moved by the Alhambra or Delphi, we’re doing our bit for the hotel trade, quite a lot for the bar trade, and generally we are an economic good.

The tourist is me. I feel no shame.

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