

The Search for 'Self' for Lifestyle Travellers

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Abstract

This thesis examines the search for self in the context of lifestyle travellers. It has been suggested that maintaining a coherent sense of self has become problematic in late modernity as the socially constructed notion of a 'true self' has come to be regarded as concrete, whilst choice has increasingly replaced obligation or tradition as a basis in defining selves. Issues of self have been noted as especially important in the context of adopted lifestyles, as lifestyle can be a means through which individuals seek coherence in their lives. Furthermore, travelling to 'find one's self' has a lengthy tradition in popular literature that has also been reflected in tourism studies where research has been conducted into backpacker and traveller identities.

Lifestyle travel is a post-traditional way of life wherein individuals are voluntarily exposed to an array of cultural praxes. Thus, the literatures on self, lifestyle and tourism point to lifestyle travel as a context where issues of self may be particularly relevant. Whilst there is a significant and growing body of research within tourism studies on backpackers, there is a dearth of information on individuals that travel as a lifestyle. Therefore, this thesis contributes to academic knowledge not only through its investigation into the search for self, but also by its conceptualisation of and empirical research into lifestyle travellers.

With criteria for defining lifestyle travellers based on of a fluid combination of self-definition of travel as one's lifestyle and multiple trips of approximately six months or more, twenty-five semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out by the researcher with lifestyle travellers in northern Indian and southern Thailand from July through September 2007. In keeping with the paradigmatic ideals of interpretivism, emergent themes were identified from within the qualitative material including meanings that the lifestyle travellers attached to the search for self, surrounding issues of avoidance and seeking that influenced why they travelled as a lifestyle and their future travel intentions.

Although there were multiple perspectives on how the search for self was conceived and approached, searching for self was voiced as a critical motivating factor for the majority of the lifestyle travellers. With a common view among most of the respondents of self as an internal object to be developed, many lifestyle travellers had been or were still on a Romantic modern quest of searching for their true self. Escapism, freedom and learning through challenge were identified as important themes surrounding the search for self, as lifestyle travellers described varying degrees of success in escaping their home societies and finding increased free space and time to learn about and challenge their ideas of self. Paradoxically, most of the lifestyle travellers sought to experience an inner self that dominant sociological views posit does not exist. The tension of searching for a unified sense of self in a world of relational selves is highlighted as not only problematic for the interviewees, but also for previous tourism studies that have premised their contributions on the existence of an inner self.