

“Don’t Just Visit. Live It!”. A Descriptive Study of Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme Participants’ Experiences in Miyazaki Prefecture.

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Abstract

Conventional tourism discourse commonly adheres to the premise that tourist acts are the antithesis of work. Tourism is frequently portrayed as a diversion from quotidian activities of daily life, offering individuals the opportunity to experience existence beyond their everyday reality. However, contemporary tourist behaviour involves a variety of opportunities that merge employment with adventure and a chance to explore the world. The business of tourism is evolving to include many travel-and-work experiences, yet this fascinating area of study remains a neglected area of research. It is the intention of this study to address this gap in an attempt to broaden the scope and knowledge of tourist studies.

To accomplish this objective this study aimed to describe participants’ experiences in one of the world’s largest international exchange programmes - the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET). An interpretive and constructionist qualitative approach was used to address two broad research areas concerning the JET experience; (1) to explore the reasons for voluntarily choosing to live and work in Japan for an extended period of time and, (2) to investigate the social dynamics of such experiences and the meanings attached to these relationships. Information was gathered from nine JET participants, who at the time of the study, were living and working in Miyazaki Prefecture. Semi- structured in-depth interviews were used as the primary method of data collection, with continuous e-mail correspondence and informal observation providing supplementary information. The information was recorded, transcribed, and analysed for emergent themes and their meanings.

Focusing on the emic perspectives of JET participants, the research explored aspects of tourism often overlooked in tourist studies, including; the relationship between overseas employment and tourism, the reasons for combining work with a tourist disposition, the social dynamics of such experiences, and the meanings attached to these unique categories of temporary mobility. Specifically, it was found that the JET experience was described as being a coalescence of social psychological and tourist-oriented factors, including; personal independence, a ‘job’ that facilitated and funded further travel, emancipation from the contrived tourist experience, and an opportunity to become culturally and linguistically immersed in a foreign culture. Concerning the social experience of JET, the study revealed a dynamic interplay between participating in the culture and society of their Japanese hosts and with maintaining their own cultural identity through social engagement with their JET colleagues (Berry 2001). Although participants clearly described their interactions with their host community as significant and sincere (Taylor 2001), it was evident that participants gave additional meaning to their relationships with their ‘JET community’. These relationships were identified as being characteristic of Turner’s (1969) anthropological theory of ‘communitas’. The findings of this study conclude that the underlying meanings attached to these guest/host relationships, as well as the desire to become embedded in a foreign culture, often has more to do with the society from which they left than the culture they temporarily chose to dwell. It

allowed participants to explore the meaning of 'home' and potential alternatives without becoming completely displaced.