

Advance by 'Retreat'. Furthering Understanding of the Spiritual Dimension of Wellness within Tourism.

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Abstract

Traditional tourism discourse commonly portrays tourism as an escape from the 'ordinary mundane', an opportunity to transcend the banal reality of everyday life and embark upon a 'quest' for the authentic elsewhere. However, within today's increasingly impersonal and self-isolating society where 'escalating civilisation' is having detrimental consequences on health, wellbeing and family life, the notion of touristic escape is gaining an entirely different focus. Indeed, rather than searching for authenticity within hedonistic pursuits or 'purer' 'simpler' cultures, the quest for the authentic is increasingly turning 'inwards', toward an existential search for a healthy balance in life.

Meeting the ensuing demand for products able to both proactively address issues of work/life balance and transport meaning and solutions for self identity, are new 'holistic' forms of tourism dedicated to enhancing health and reducing existential feelings of isolation, depression, and stress. Combining 'alternative' and 'complementary' therapies, practices, and teachings with simpler, more natural environments, these new products aim to encourage 'inner' reflection and development whilst relieving stress and promoting good health. It is here that the 'retreat' is positioned.

Whilst seemingly well established within many countries around the world, the 'retreat' has yet to receive much attention as a topic of academic research. Indeed, despite its apparent significance within contemporary Western society, to date the retreat represents an almost unknown phenomenon, alternately overlooked or misunderstood by both consumers and industry alike. Thus, the purpose of this research was to offer an insight into the role and function of the retreat whilst also examining its involvement with tourism and the contemporary concept of wellness. Toward this goal, New Zealand was chosen as the context for investigation

Following an overview of the literature surrounding the concept of wellness, wellness tourism, and the recently identified 'holistic tourism' sector, the findings from a series of 11 exploratory in-depth interviews with New Zealand retreat operators and 12 retreat clientele were presented. From these experiential accounts, it was concluded that the role and function of the retreat could be conceptualised as a form of coping or acceptance mechanism against the stresses of living within contemporary society. Furthermore, the application of the wellness concept within the New Zealand retreat setting was found to represent a recent development, and one indicative of an evolving 'holistic health retreat' industry replete with three contrasting segments: Body Mind Spirit' retreats, 'Wellness' retreats, and 'Retreat Centres'. The emerging nature of the holistic retreat industry was also reflected by New Zealand's tourism industry which had yet to adequately identify the retreat despite its clear involvement with international and domestic tourism.