

Exploring Experiences of Authenticity at Heritage Tourism Sites in New Zealand.

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Abstract

According to Tourism New Zealand, one of the main reasons tourists come to New Zealand is to experience “authenticity” (Hickton, CEO Tourism New Zealand 2003). This statement confirms that the notion of authenticity is still alive and well in the tourism industry as well as in tourism academia (e.g. Meethan 2001, Tucker 2003; Wang 2000). At the same time, it immediately begs the question of what this experience of “authenticity” in New Zealand would consist of. This thesis is framed around a postmodern view of authenticity and the tourist experience in relation to two industrial heritage sites, Shantytown and Ross Goldfields, in New Zealand’s South Island. The study sites appear to sit at opposite ends of Cohen’s (1995) continuum between ‘natural’ and ‘contrived’ sites. Seventy-four, in-depth interviews were conducted with visitors at the study sites. The interviews and research address such questions as: How are tourists’ experiences of industrial heritage sites constructed?; Do tourists ‘care’ about the origins of the attraction?; Is Cohen’s continuum an appropriate model for such sites, and if so where can the two sites researched be placed on the continuum?; and do contrived sites deflect or encourage the need for visiting the ‘natural’ ones? The interviews were conducted over a period of four months at Ross Goldfields and Shantytown. Using grounded theory and comparative analysis, the results revealed that tourists preferred contrived sites such as Shantytown and that the perception of authenticity is more important than historical reality. Moreover, the study provides support that tourists are willing to accept what is less accurate for what is perceived to more likely match their own expectations. The study also found that contrived sites deflect rather than encourage demand for the ‘real’ or natural. Moreover, the study also provides support for the theory of the post-tourist (Feifer, 1985; Ryan, 1997; Tomlin, 1999) and existential authenticity (Wang, 1999, 2000).