

## **There and Back Again – A Tale of Film Location Tourists’ On-Site Behaviour and Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

Over the last decade, film location tourism has been established as a niche segment in the tourism industry. While this niche has attracted attention from both researchers and marketers alike, not much knowledge has been accumulated about the tourist encounter itself. It is the main purpose of this thesis to research on-site behavioural and experiential aspects of the film location encounter.

For the overall research design, an inductive, comparative case-study approach was implemented. Three cases were selected for this research: The Lord of the Rings locations in New Zealand, The Sound of Music locations in Austria and Star Wars locations in Tunisia. The applied methods are participant observation, image-based data and semi-structured interviews. The data collection was conducted while participating in organised film location tours in order to secure access to the informants.

The first fundamental outcome of this research is that there is no ‘film location tourist’ as such. People who travel to film locations come from different socio-economic backgrounds, all age groups and possess varying degrees of fandom. The majority of film location tourists, however, have one thing in common, regardless of the underlying movie genre: the longing to connect with the imaginary world of the film by visiting the physical and thus ‘real’ location places. These places are consumed in two ways: as places of spectacle and as sacred places.

The nature of the location consumption is dependent on a number of factors, including the degree of fandom of the consumers, the attractiveness of the encountered locations, the consistency of the interpretive community, the amount and nature of external distortions and, if applicable, the structure of the location tour. Means of consumption of film locations as spectacle are formal posing, sight recordings and shot re-creations. When experiencing film locations as sacred places, shot re-creations, mental simulations and filmic re-enactments occur. The latter form of consumption can result in a symbiosis between the imaginary and the real place component: the gazing subject becomes the previously (photographed) object.

Regardless of the degree of experiential satisfaction, film location tourists want to bring some of the magic back home. This is achieved not only via mental pictures and physical photographs, but also through souvenirs. These can be off- or on-site. Regarding the latter, these souvenirs are almost holy relics, brought home from a successful pilgrimage and subsequently framed and displayed in an altar-like fashion. The benefits from this are not only self-pride and satisfaction, but also the distinction to other movie fans who have not been able to do the journey themselves. Thus, the person in possession of such a relic gains privileged status amongst peers which in turn raises the satisfaction with the location encounter.

The film location experience cycle comes to a full closure by re-watching the movie. This procedure involves a renewed connection to both the imaginary filmic places as well as the real locations

visited. The filmic gaze is extended, as the movie scenes are now seen as part of a real place which extends beyond the filmic sight.

### Profile

After completing my PhD in early 2007, I took on a position as a market research project manager and marketing consultant for a German-based research institute. My tasks include the conduction of qualitative and quantitative market research, value added analysis, workshop moderation, regional development strategies and tourism marketing.

Projects I am currently working on include the implementation of a German-Czech regional development strategy, the development of a tourism master plan for a Bavarian tourist destination and a value added analysis project for the University of Passau. In addition, I am the responsible market research project manager for several Bavarian cities which involves the organisation, supervision and analysis of longitudinal visitor surveys whose purpose is to permanently improve the quality of tourism products in these cities.

For my PhD thesis, I accompanied film-induced tourists to various film locations, including locations from The Lord of the Rings, Star Wars and The Sound of Music, in order to examine their on-site experiences. Since 2006, I've used this expertise to consult the tourism and the film industries on how to utilise film for destination marketing which allows me to travel to interesting places and to meet creative people from around the world. I have also written a book on this topic entitled The Experiences of Film Location Tourists which will be released by Channel View in early 2010.