Do we Understand Urban Tourism?

GJ Ashworth*
Department of Planning, University of Groningen, Netherlands

There is no denying the existence of a mountain of books, articles, academic papers and official reports produced in the past few decades on many aspects of tourism in cities. There have been numerous case studies of tourism in specific cities, written either in hope of anticipated future benefits or as warning of future feared costs. Many stress the roles of tourism as an instrument of urban economic development [1-3] or tourism as a component or catalyst for local urban revitalization and regeneration. Terms such as ‘recreational business district’ [4], ‘tourist-historic city’ [5] or ‘urban tourism precincts’ [6], reflect longstanding attempts at relating tourism to cities.

However have these efforts created an agreed and coherent structure for furthering the academic study of urban tourism? There remain fundamental stubborn contradictions, which may amount to paradoxes, uncomfortable in positivist science, which need to be confronted.

Cities world-wide provide an important, arguably the most important, arena within which the activity tourism occurs. Yet the attentions of scholars of either tourism or of the city, have largely failed to link theoretical ideas about either topic. As a consequence urban tourism, despite its significance, remains imprecisely defined and vaguely demarcated with little development of a systematic structure of understanding of either the role of tourism in cities or of cities in tourism.

Tourists visit cities for many purposes either as primary attractions or as providers of supportive facilities, especially transport and accommodation. The cities that accommodate most tourists are large multifunctional entities offering a diversity of functions and spaces into which tourists can be effortlessly absorbed so that they become economically, socially and physically invisible to an extent that is not so in many other tourism spaces, such as beaches, spas or winter sports resorts.

Tourists use almost all urban facilities and services to some extent, some intensively others more rarely, but almost none of these have been created or are managed specifically or exclusively for tourists. There are not two cities, that of the tourist and that of the resident, in any sense useful to the management of either user group.

Thus it is clear that ultimately, and from a number of approaches, there is a critical asymmetry in the relationship between tourism and the city. The tourism industry needs the varied, flexible and accessible tourism resources that cities provide but it is by no means so clear that cities need tourism. The very diversity of cities, so important to tourism, also means that very few cities are dependent on it. Tourism can contribute substantial economic benefits to cities but it is the cities with a large and varied economic, social and cultural base that benefit the most from tourism but are also the least dependent upon it. The cities that are the most economically reliant upon tourism are likely to benefit the least from it, as this very reliance betrays the narrowness of their functional base. It is this asymmetry that is central to the interwoven political, social and economic issues surrounding the topic, and which is fundamental to urban policy-making and management.

Prefixing the adjective urban to the noun tourism gives the activity a spatial context but does not in itself define or explain that activity. As Edwards et al. [7] state, tourism is ‘one among many social and economic forces in the urban environment… Even so, whilst tourism occurs in cities, as in other environments, this in itself does little to elucidate the possible relationships and interactions between tourism and that multifaceted entity, the city’.

Trying to link changes in tourism activity with changes in the city raise the fundamental issue (as discussed by Wall and Mathieson) of how much urban change can be attributed specifically to tourism rather than non-tourism activity [8]. Cities are in constant change, with or without changes in their tourism. Thus studies of the impacts of tourism on the city do not help to focus the discussion on the urban nature of urban tourism and how it is inherently different from other geographically demarcated tourism. The question that needs to be posed is whether there is a quality of urbanicity that can be contrasted with its antonyms, such as rurality, which gives definition and connotation to a category of tourism and tourist? If this is the case, then what are the distinguishing urban characteristics that shape a distinctive urban tourism [9]? Unlike many other adjectival tourism, urban tourism accumulates additional descriptive adjectives, including ‘cultural’, (encompassing ‘festival’ or ‘art’) ‘heritage’ and even ‘congress’, ‘sport’, ‘gastronomic’, ‘night-life’, ‘shopping’, ‘health’ and many more, as different clusters of urban features and services are utilized to satisfy an array of tourism markets. Although it is precisely this diversity that lies at the core of the relationship between the city and the tourist, this accounts for only one facet of the interaction. If tourists make use of almost all urban features, they make an exclusive use of almost none. Therefore understanding urban tourism is dependent upon an awareness and appreciation of the urban context in which tourism is inextricably embedded.

There are four basic questions that have been posed in various forms since the topic first attracted academic attention. These are why tourists are attracted to cities, who are the urban tourist, how do tourists use cities and what are the impacts of tourists upon cities? The answers cannot be found by isolating and analyzing the phenomenon, tourism, divorced from its spatial context but by returning to the fundamental core distinctive features of ‘urbanism as a way of life’ namely size, heterogeneity and density [10]. Understanding what is happening to urban tourism depends upon a prior understanding of what is happening to cities. The emergence of the phenomenon, ‘world city’ [11], the re-globalisation of urban networks and resulting complex interaction between the local and the global [12], the rise of the city as centre of cultural production and consumption, the commodification of cities as competitive marketable brands [13], and many more.

*Corresponding author: GJ Ashworth, Department of Planning, University of Groningen, Netherlands. E-mail: g.j.ashworth@rug.nl

Received August 17, 2012; Accepted August 17, 2012; Published August 25, 2012


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identifiable trends, are the basis of the explanation of the current state of urban tourism and determinant of the trajectories along which it will develop [14].

Simply it is all but impossible to analyse the urban tourism industry or the urban tourist other than in the wider context of the functioning and management of cities as a whole. They both therefore become inevitably studies of urban change and its reactive planning and management in general and thus become focused upon the application of policy in the urban setting as much as upon the tourism activity [15,16]. Only then can we begin to redress the imbalance in attention [17,18], reconcile the seeming paradoxes and unravel the complex inter-relationships between the city and its tourists.

References