

Cultural Tourism in the Age of Social Media

Cases of Roman Heritage in Spain

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Introduction

Social media strongly influences all sectors of tourism nowadays, as the relative applications have evolved into data - providers on human preferences, habits and geospatial movement. On the other hand, these applications can help tourists choose and locate attractions and sites "worth" visiting (according to public opinion). Networks where all tourists can enter and write their opinion, rate a place and recommend it prove to be moderators of visitors' preferences. The main purpose of this research is to examine how these applications can advertise a cultural attraction, influencing the movements of future tourists of a place. This examination is done through the analysis of two cultural attractions located in Spain.

The Concept of Cultural Tourism

There seems to be a unanimous acceptance by the global tourism industry that it is particularly difficult to give a formal and specific definition that fully defines the meaning of the term "cultural tourism".¹ In most cases, the various organizations involved in tourism seem to agree that cultural tourism is a kind of alternative form of tourism, related to the exploration of different cultures, whether it means modern culture, or history and old customs. Here are two attempts to concretize the concept of "cultural tourism" by important organizations in the tourism industry.

Firstly, ICOMOS - International Council on Monuments and Sites, in collaboration with other international organizations, drafted the Cultural Tourism Charter in 1976, which defines Cultural Tourism as "*the alternative form of tourism, which is intended not only for the discovery of sites, monuments and ensembles, but also for their preservation and protection*".² However, some years later, in 1999, the same organization changed the original definition of cultural tourism to "*any activity that allows visitors to discover other people's lifestyles, allowing them to learn about customs,*

¹Sharareh, A. Badaruddin, M. (2013). Local Perception of Tourism Development: A Conceptual Framework for the Sustainable Cultural Tourism. *Journal of Management and Sustainability*, 3 (2). p. 32. DOI: 10.5539/jms.v3n2p31

² Agriantoni, M. (2016). *Cultural Tourism: Museums and Archaeological Places in Athens*. National Technical University of Athens, Athens. p.49.

traditions, natural environment and ideas and have access to sites of architectural, historical and archaeological interest or other cultural value".³

Secondly, the General Assembly of the UNWTO - World Tourism Organization, in 2017, at its 22nd session, defined Cultural Tourism as "a kind of tourism activity where the main motivation of the visitor is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions and products in a tourist destination. These attractions and products are associated with a set of distinctive materials and emotional characteristics of a society that includes arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, gastronomy, creative industries and living cultures with their way of life, their values, beliefs and traditions".

In conclusion, the above, as well as many other definitions describe Cultural Tourism as a special form of tourism in which browsing and interaction takes place in a new place, in order for the visitor to explore the culture of the people of this place.

The Use of Social Media in Cultural Tourism

In recent years the technology is evolving rapidly and almost all travellers have modern mobile phones, which have new applications and social networks in which travellers voluntarily give information about their movements through photos, videos, texts, reviews, etc. This has made these networks one of the leading sources of human commuting data.

On this kind of networking, thousands of geo-tags are voluntarily uploaded on a daily basis and travel patterns can be exported particularly well in a spatio-temporal relationship through these real-time geographical references. The main advantage is that spatial coordinates, hashtags and text information can be added along with the photos and all this can be reproduced through messages, re-tweets / re-posts and notifications. Furthermore, many tourism studies use this new data source to estimate the number of incoming tourists and to measure tourism activities at specific attractions. In addition, through this information, traveller models and profiles can be created, which provide statistics on the relationship that a traveller's personal interests may have with the attractions he or she visits etc.⁴

In addition to information and data that can be used in tourism research or by travel agencies and other organizations active in tourism, these forms of media can also help the travelers by providing them with important information about the cultural attractions they want to visit. For example, *Tripadvisor*, which is currently considered the world's largest interactive travel platform can provide travelers with links to the official destinations websites, opening hours, addresses, photos, suggested length of visit, top ways to get to know the place (full or private tour, etc.), nearby attractions, frequently asked questions and their answers and also detailed reviews from other travelers.

Examples of the Use of Social Media on Cultural Tourism

Two examples of cultural tourism located in Extremadura, Spain will be mentioned in this paper: the Roman theatre in Merida and "Aqua Libera" in Aljucen. These attractions appear on social and tourist

³ Stogiantsi, E. (2016). The emergence of archaeological sites in Greece and their connection with Cultural Tourism. Technological Educational Institute of Western Greece, Pyrgos. p.11.

⁴ Kalvet, T. Olesk, M. Tiits, M. Raun, J. (2020). Innovative Tools for Tourism and Cultural Tourism Impact Assessment. IMDI, Sustainability 2020, 12(18). p. 7470. DOI: 10.3390/su12187470

networks, either as standalone pages (e.g. instagram, facebook) or as geographical sites (e.g. tripadvisor, google). From these reference points, visitors can get the latest information regarding these destinations or they can even report news, information, photos, ratings etc. themselves. Similarly, organizations that want to promote these destinations can advertise them on these platforms or present through them the latest news and upcoming events.

“Teatro Romano de Merida”

The Roman theatre of Merida was built in the second decade BC, was selected as one of the 12 archaeological gems of Spain and is considered one of the most famous and visited attractions in Spain. This ancient theatre has been hosting the annual Merida Classical Theatre Festival every July and August for almost a century.



Fig. 1. Roman Theatre “Teatro Romano” in Merida, Spain (@cascalheira).

This attraction has a facebook page called "Teatro Romano de Merida" with 11,400 followers and the festival has a separate page on the same platform called "Festival de Teatro Clasico de Merida", which has 30,650 followers and 4.7 / 5 stars an average of the reviews. Through these pages the future performances and events become known to the public. In addition, on the tripadvisor page this attraction has received 1,733 reviews, with an average rating of 4.5 / 5, while on google it has received 29,000 reviews, with an average rating of 4.8 / 5. Furthermore, on the instagram platform this Roman theatre also appears as a location.

“Aqua Libera” in Aljucen

Another wonderful place with an ancient Roman atmosphere is “Aqua Libera”, in Aljucen, very close to Merida. Aqua Libera is located inside a large building which represents the traditional Roman home of a wealthy family of antiquity. This wonderful place provides guests with wellness and relaxation services in its indoor and outdoor pools, as well as hospitality and catering services.

Aqua Libera has a facebook page with more than 5,000 followers with an average rating of 4.9 / 5 and frequent posts sharing activity. On the instagram platform Aqua Libera has its own page and it also appears separately as a location. Furthermore, it appears as a hotel unit on google and tripadvisor, with ratings of 4.8 / 5 and 5/5 respectively.



Fig. 2. The outer courtyard of Aqua Libera in Aljucen (@TermasAquaLibera)

Through the Instagram and Facebook platforms, the administrators of the pages inform their followers about the news related to this place through images and texts, on a monthly basis. They show the small additions, the changes in the space, the renovations, the events that take place there and by doing so they keep their followers in touch and this can be seen from the large percentages of involvement in their Social Media pages.

Conclusions

The main way a cultural attraction can be advertised through social networks is to have an open account on these platforms and to have the public rating feature enabled on that page. Being an active admin (manager) of these accounts can have a positive effect as followers interact with each new post in a way that reaches new audiences. In addition, beyond views and interaction, it is very helpful for the place itself to get feedback from the audience's evaluations in order to improve. Overall, social media is designed in such a way that, if used correctly, the more we help technology, the more technology will be able to help us.

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