

Hostel Travel and Cross-Cultural Understanding

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Key words: hostel travel, cross-cultural understanding

Topical area: travel and tourism

Presentation format preference: formal presentation only

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Introduction

Tourism is continually touted as an agent of peace and a key to greater cross-cultural understanding. International organizations, international trade agreements and individual nations espouse tourism for its association with global harmony and intercultural exchange. The first principle of the World Tourism Organization's (2004) Global Code of Ethics is specific to "tourism's contribution to mutual understanding and respect between peoples and societies." The United Nations recognized this code and encouraged national governments and other tourism stakeholders to introduce and support the associated recommendations.

While there is a general acceptance of the appreciation for diversity that can be derived from tourism experiences, to date, investigation regarding the specific contribution to global understanding made by tourists and tourism has been limited. D'Amore (1988) began the academic discussion of tourism's vital role in the promotion of peace and intercultural communication. Studies which followed clarified that tourism must be properly designed for positive cultural outcomes to occur (Reisinger, 1994; Tomljenovic & Faulkner, 2000; Var & Ap, 1998).

The nature of a traveler's accommodations can encourage or discourage cross-cultural interactions. Hostel stays in particular allow for unique travel opportunities, as the structure of the hostel accommodation promotes social interaction among travelers and facilitates contact between travelers and the local community. Hostel travelers approach the experience with a range of expectations and come away with a variety of outcomes, including increased cross-cultural and global understanding gained through interpersonal interactions and shared travel experiences.

Hostel travel may contribute to world peace. As pointed out in a 2002 call to action from Dr. Harish Saxena, President of International Youth Hostel Federation, "Youth hostels feel that they, too, must find a response to the dramatic, violent conflicts that tear cultures and nations apart. Our responsibility is to make our own contribution to intercultural dialogue, and to education for peace." In the Hostelling International – USA (HI-USA) context, the mission directly applies to the support of cross-cultural understanding, "To help all, especially the young, gain a greater understanding of the world and its people through hostelling."

Recognizing the potential for travel as an avenue for fostering international understanding, the purpose of this project was to determine the experiential links between hostel travel, cross-cultural awareness and the promotion of world peace. Specific research questions included:

Research Question 1: In what ways do hostel experiences contribute to an increase in cross-cultural understanding?

Research Question 2: What are the perceived experiential impacts of hostel stays on travelers?

Research Question 3: Do hostel travelers actively associate their experiences with the cross-cultural awareness and world peace?

Methods

During the summer of 2003, 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with hostel travelers staying at 5 HI – USA network hostels: 1) Washington, DC; 2) New York City, NY; 3) Harpers Ferry, WV; 4) Boston, MA; and 5) Eastham, MA. Hostel location selections were made based on HI – USA management recommendations. Open-ended questions allowed hostel travelers to reveal, in their own words, the ways in which hostel travel promotes cultural awareness, how hostelling contributes to intercultural dialogue and the ways in which hostelling instills a sense of international citizenship in tourists.

Individual participants were selected through a combination of convenience, purposive and snowball sampling. The interviewing process ceased when conceptual saturation was reached in that the interviews were no longer revealing new ideas. The majority of participants were international visitors experiencing leisure travel.

Comparative pattern analysis was conducted on the verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, which is appropriate for informal narratives (e.g., Daniels, Rodgers & Wiggins, 2005). Informal narratives are accounts of circumstances that do not adhere to the any structural components found in formal storytelling (Shank, 2002). Comparative pattern analysis allows the researcher to find recurring regularities in narrative data and then sort those regularities into meaningful categories or themes (Baxter, 1991).

Results

Four themes emerged that gave shed light on the research questions and reflected the influence of hostel stays on cross-cultural understanding: 1) the structure of the hostelling space; 2) the missing local element; 3) personal growth; and 4) world perspective.

The Structure of the Hostelling Space

The manipulation of internal spaces facilitates social interaction agendas (Bowen & Daniels, 2006). The purposive common areas found in hostelling accommodations were found to actively contribute to cross-cultural communication. Overwhelmingly, the respondents said that their hostel experiences allowed them to meet other people from many different countries in the common areas, shared bedrooms and shared kitchen. Further, many took part in the group outings and activities organized by the hostel management. Additionally, there was a strong sentiment that a hostel is not as isolating as a hotel.

The Missing Local Element

While the hostel experience encouraged interactions between hostellers, it was less effective at integrating the travelers into the local community. The few who commented that the hostel experience encouraged community connections were those who sought and followed recommendations by hostelling staff about where to go and what to see in the local areas. Group activities were amongst hostellers rather than with local community members. As there were

generally no locals staying in the hostel, the travelers reinforced the importance of the time they spent meeting people from other cultures in hostel common areas more so than the conversations they had with area residents.

Personal Growth

Hostel travelers internalized the hostelling experience by reflecting on how it contributed to personal growth. While commentary that was specific to an increased knowledge of other cultures was the most frequently suggested impact of the hostel stay, other impacts reflected personal growth issues such as: 1) assistance with future job decisions; 2) ideas for and about home life or where to live; 3) feelings of independence, confidence and maturity; 4) a broadened mindset, including having stereotypes brought on by the media dispelled or alleviated; and 5) relaxation benefits and a desire to travel more frequently.

World Perspective

Rather than discussing their stay in terms of world peace, the hostel travelers expressed consistent sentiments in terms of a world perspective that was gained from meeting people from other cultures, learning about differences and realizing that there were many similarities in what hostel travelers think, feel and desire out of life. While many specifically used the term “peace,” those who were not so definite saw the situation as more complex. They saw travel as an individual activity, whereas world peace was described as a government act over which the individual has little control. Many also expressed that governments would need to see an economic benefit in the connection between travel and world peace for there to actually be a concerted movement in this direction. Additionally, they pointed out that it depends on the manner in which people travel, as well as creating the means and opportunity for more individuals to travel if there is going to be a true impact.

Discussion

Reflecting back on the research questions, hostel travel experiences contribute to an increase in cross-cultural understanding through the manipulation of internal spaces and the nature of organized outings. Hostel managers should encourage opportunities for interactions with area residents to increase the sense of integration within the local community. While the experiential impacts were clearly cultural in nature, hostellers also derived a number of personal growth benefits from their stay. Finally, hostellers appreciate the world perspective that is gained through a hostel stay, but do not always equate the experience directly with world peace.

The findings of this research will benefit hostel managers as well as international tourism stakeholders. Cross-cultural understanding and peace initiatives are central to the rhetoric contained in political statements resulting from international meetings. However, the specific ways in which the peace process can be implemented are seldom addressed. Hostel stays create an environment that allows for intercultural dialogue and greater cross-cultural understanding to occur in a setting that is natural and spontaneous rather than forced and contrived. Future research should assess other experiential links to cross-cultural awareness. In a world confronted with social unrest, international tourism plays an important role in promoting cross-cultural understanding and peace and can ultimately lead to positive community and economic outcomes for countries and cultures around the globe.