

# WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE A TOURIST

## Explorations into the Meaningful Experiences of Ordinary Mass Tourists

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Based on ethnographic data gathered through observations made as a tour guide in the Indian Ocean island of La Réunion, I explore “what it feels like to be a tourist”. My aim is to articulate observations of subjective tourist experience with theory about the structural frames of tourism culture and the touristic realms these have brought about. I argue that the individual experience of sites evolves within broadly shared aesthetic cultures, but that the emotions generated by the encounter of such sites are negotiated through highly personalised stories. Tourism attractions in this tropical island indicate the presence of shared aesthetic dispositions and feelings of national belonging among the German tourists observed there, while tourists struggle for words to affirm the individuality, authenticity and magic of their experiences.

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Tourists have learnt to behave like tourists. They know how to follow signs, read maps, take planes, visit sites, interact with hotel staff, order food in restaurants and respond to specific attractions. Tourists are often dressed similarly, ask similar questions, move their bodies in similar ways, and stay in similar places. Because travel practices and touristic norms of behaviour appear to show relatively little variation among specific tourist groups, tourism is often considered a highly standardised mass phenomenon emanating from, and somehow mirroring the structure of, industrialised modern society. However, while being subjected to collectively held norms and values, tourism – like most practices in social life – is experienced in a highly personal way. While the experience of travel may be framed by

powerful narratives and representations about the destinations visited, tourists encounter the realms of their travels and holiday destinations through their own bodies and senses. The aim of this research is to explore the articulation between this individual experience and the structural framework of tourism as a wider social institution. The article builds on Graburn’s (1989) theoretical framework of the “sacred journey”, considering tourism in terms of a ritual transgression of the everyday which leads tourists outside their usual life contexts and circumstances, with the potential to induce a personal transformation at the individual level. It points out the social and societal relevance of individual cases and stories of tourists evolving within the structural framework of tourism – thus articulating Graburn’s

initially structuralist approach alongside work on the more fluid aspects of learning how to be a tourist (Löfgren 2002), forms of performance and experience in tourism (Edensor 1998; Larsen 2001; Coleman & Crang 2002; Franklin 2004) and related processes of transformation (Crossley 2012). The article contributes to different, earlier attempts to study tourists from a phenomenological perspective, to understand how tourism realms are perceived – and thus brought into being – from the subjective perspective of tourists and travellers while on tour or after the tour (Adler 1989; Frey 1999; Cohen 2004b; Bruner 2004; Harrison 2003; Hom-Cary 2004).

Besides this theoretical aspiration, the research also has a polemic goal, which lies in its attempt to re-emancipate the meaningful experience of the ordinary mass tourist, frequently looked down upon by academics and other eclectic folks. Mass tourism, it is often claimed by these cultural elites, is a form of superficial consumption symptomatic of a society emptied of real values. In any case, it does not constitute a meaningful activity, so it is not worth being studied as an ethnographic object. Over the past forty years, the sentimental colonialism of such institutionalised anti-tourism discourses by academics, and the common-sense elevation of peripheral Others as noble savages threatened by the contagions and pollutions of modernity, have become objects of study themselves (Fabian 1983; Clifford 1989). In his still influential book *The Tourist*, MacCannell (1976) suggests that tourism in particular evolves within symbolic structures akin to those of religious pilgrimages observed in other social contexts. He proposes studying tourism in terms of a social institution that allows modern subjects to bring to life and renew the big mythical figures and moral principles of the modern world. Also, the historic analysis of Western tourism practice demonstrates the relative stability of the particular culture from which it emanates, and from which it periodically reinvents itself by adopting new names, categories and sites of attraction (Löfgren 2002; Spode 2011). Tourism thus appears to be a “serious” and important academic topic with the potential to reveal a deeper understanding of the normative processes underlying modern life.

## **Observing Tourists during the Tour and back Home**

To achieve my aim, I use an ethnographic research design based upon the observation of actual tourist practice as it unfolds normally in a quotidian tourist context. As Graburn (2002) stresses, in order to study tourism ethnographically, it makes little sense for the researcher to approach tourists only at one particular moment of the journey, without being able to articulate the observations made during this moment within the wider context of the journey and the tourists’ everyday lives. An ethnographic approach towards tourists hence ideally follows tourists from long before their departure until long after their return home. How to achieve such an objective? Tourism evolves within a transnational ethnoscapes, making it actually rather difficult to follow the subject of investigation throughout tourists’ journeys (Clifford 1997; Appadurai 2003). Also, tourism is usually profoundly personal and intimate; tourists, even if they often appear to be part of a large “crowd”, habitually travel alone or in small groups, as couples or with friends. While ethnographers can get themselves accepted as fellow tourists/participant observers, such an approach remains ethically and socially ambivalent – for example a honeymoon with an ethnographer as a constant companion may no longer be a honeymoon. Finally, tourism generally is a rather expensive type of leisure activity, and it appears difficult to convince any research council to fund a vast number of holiday trips to the Seychelles, Samoa or Bahamas for the sake of ethnographic observations of what tourists do before, during and after being on holiday.

A pragmatic way to respond to these logistic, ethical and financial challenges is to do participant observation by taking on the role of the tour guide. Building on the experience of other researchers who have adopted such an approach (Amirou 1995; Cohen 1985; Bruner 2004), I gained employment as a guide for a tourism agency in La Réunion. Between 1998 and 2000, I guided twenty four-day round trips on the island. These always followed the same itinerary, stopped in the same hotels, passed the same sites and included the same food. Because of the in-

variance of its spatial and temporal structure, this research achieved an almost experimental outlook. The groups were composed mainly of Germans who had booked their trip via a German tour operator. Their numbers varied between three and eight. I stayed with these tourists all day long, sharing meals and drinks, driving the minibus, performing a guide discourse and engaging in informal, often long conversations. I also spent the night at the same hotels, though in a separate room. At the end of the round trip, I left the groups at the airport. However, I stayed in contact through correspondence, and later revisited many of them in their homes in Germany. I also asked them to print and send me the “ten most significant photos” of their holiday in La Réunion, together with comments and text (I offered to cover the cost of the prints and postage). By consciously and voluntarily putting myself within the frame of observation (Tedlock 1991), I became part of the realms of the tourists’ journeys and the memories these generated. At the same time, by performing similar sets of discourses, including humour and ways of connecting to the tourists, I remained, to a large degree, an invariable element of the research setting. This particular research approach allowed me to observe in great detail what actually happens when tourists “do” tourism and what happens when they return back home. The major limitation of this approach lies in the difficulty to study the processes of “coming home” – the journey home and the re-integration into the home environment – which seems to be a moment of crucial importance for the anthropological understanding of tourism.

### **Experience, Sense-Making and Magical Memory**

During the journey the tourists experienced a large number of visual, sensual and mental encounters. I took them to viewpoints, led them into museums and interpretation sites, entered forests and directed them to beaches and riversides. The experience of these sites usually engaged all the senses. The tourists felt the heat of the sun and the coolness of the rain; they watched the land, objects and people that appeared in front of their eyes, they smelled the odour of the streets, mountains and forest; they tasted food

and drink; they immersed themselves in small lakes, rivers and lagoons. While sensually engaging with their exotic surroundings, they listened – more or less attentively – to my explanations about the island and its populations and about myself. In the evenings and during breaks, I recorded and wrote up the sequences of dialogues and conversations that unfolded during the daily journeys and during the stopovers in the hotels. I noticed that these dialogues and conversations seemed to unfold in very personal, individualistic ways, taking into account personal concerns, tastes and preoccupations.

At the same time, I also noticed that the ways they unfolded were very similar, as if the participants were following the same cognitive processes. This involved (usually) several sequential phases. During the first phase, the “Wow-Phase” of the first contact with a specific site or story, the tourists were usually speechless. Arriving at a spectacular viewpoint or facing a large waterfall, the sole visible or audible articulations I could record were “ah” and “oh”, sometimes also “oh my God” (*oh mein Gott*) or “oh shit” (*oh Scheisse*). Often, their eyes were wide open, and sometimes their mouths as well. On rare occasions, tourists became short of breath, sweated, trembled, felt dizzy or said they “needed to sit down” – visibly displaying symptoms of shock or extreme awe (I have elsewhere discussed these extreme cases in terms of a commonly observed travel syndrome [Picard 2012]). In the second phase, the “Amazement-Phase”, the tourists usually verbally articulated the emotions induced by the encounter in absolute terms. They used words like “beautiful” or “amazing!”. Often they shook their heads, looked at their friends, smiled; couples exchanged kisses and held hands. In the third phase, the “It’s Like-Phase”, the tourists typically searched for known analogies, namely by saying, “it’s like...” (“it’s like in Bali”; “it’s like on the moon”; “it’s like Chinese food”; “it’s like nothing I have seen before” etc.). In the fourth, somehow antithetic “But-Phase”, the tourists normally dialecticised the encounter and the analogy they had used, sometimes also introducing a moral judgement (“but in Bali, the site was much bigger”; “but this is so much nicer than

the moon”; “but it tastes much better”; “this space is just incredible” etc.). In the fifth phase, the “Me-Phase”, the antithetic images generated associations with personal memories or preoccupations, which in turn often triggered conversations disconnected from the actual encounter (“We were in Bali with our children last year...”; “I feel like a small grain in the universe, though I am not religious like my parents...”; “there are lots of Chinese restaurants now in Germany...”; “we used to travel a lot when we were young...”). In most cases, the encounters with the exotic Other thus induced emotions and cognitive processes that would eventually let the tourists talk about themselves. People, sites and stories thus worked as triggers to work out personal preoccupations and embed them in narratives, and eventually reconstitute forms of Self. The exotic Other thus worked as a tool to transgress, transform and eventually maintain Self.

While these phases of touristic cognition followed a similar sequence, the speed of this sequence and the means by which it was articulated varied largely from one to the other. Some tourists – especially those with a lot of travel experience – often appeared much less impressed by certain sites or stories than others with less experience. For the first category, the whole process was frequently articulated through the uttering of a single phrase. Fabian,<sup>1</sup> for instance, a tourist who had substantial travel experience, reacted very quickly when facing a large Hindu temple. “Ah!” he said, “a Hindu temple. With all the colours. Looks a bit kitschy.” He took a photo, then explained: “I have seen similar ones in Bali, but there they are even bigger. They have the most beautiful ones I have seen so far.” After less than a minute, Fabian was ready to go back to the bus. He articulated his astonishment (“Ah”), then succinctly defined the encounter and gave it a valuation (“a Hindu temple”; “a bit kitschy”). After taking a photo, he found an analogy from a previous journey (“like in Bali”) and linked the encounter to his personal life (“the most beautiful ones I have seen so far”).

In other cases, this process took much longer: sometimes hours, weeks or even months. In one case, representing the other extreme, a woman, Do-

nata, with whom I continued to exchange letters after the journey, seemed to work out the experience of a volcanic caldera over several weeks. At the actual site, she reacted, typically, with an “ah”, and then said, after a short while: “This is so beautiful.” Later, in the bus, she explained: “This had something artistic; perfect lines and forms. Like on the moon. I had the impression of seeing something prehistoric.” Several weeks after the trip, I received a letter from her in which she described a photo she had taken at the same site. “This allows me to imagine how evolution has taken place. While I am not part of any religious community, when facing this landscape I had the impression to be a small grain in the universe,” she wrote. The outer journey was accompanied by an inner one which was far from over when this tourist returned home. It took months for her to translate and stabilise the experience into a form of memory, possibly leaving her deeply transformed.

What this last case also points to is that the observation of tourism during the tour needs to be extended beyond the actual journey and be articulated with an observation of home contexts. I therefore suggest two further phases as part of the touristic cognition process here observed, which extend into the home environment. Within the frame of this study, I could not observe these phases directly, but had to rely on descriptions by the tourists made during interviews when I visited them in their homes in Germany several months later. In this sense, a sixth phase, the “Coming Home-Phase”, describes the event when tourists come home, integrate their souvenirs into their home environment (by means of incorporating material objects into existing collections, using ingredients in welcome-home dinners or giving them away as gifts), and talk about their journey among themselves and with friends or relatives. This phase also includes home re-appropriation rites, like walking through all the rooms, having a pee, cleaning the house, having a drink and/or going to the supermarket to fill the fridge.

This Coming Home-Phase seemed distinguishable from a later phase, the “Souvenir-Phase”, when, several weeks or months later, the encounters of the journey appear transformed into more or less rigid

souvenirs that have become part of the tourists' everyday normality. When I met the tourists later, most of what had happened during the journey was reduced to a set of key memories and stories. Paradoxically, while the tourists' conversations during the trip were mainly focused on their home concerns (their children, jobs, partnerships, memories etc.), in this post-tourist context, the memories were about the actual trip and sites encountered. I, as the guide, had become part of these objectivisations, and was often confronted with funny anecdotes of the trip that I had long forgotten. In this Souvenir-Phase, material souvenir objects acquired during the trip had frequently become part of existing collections. These included often very anodyne-seeming bits and pieces – stones, shells and small art-and-craft objects – whose value seemed to lie less in their specific form or artistry, but in a metonymic quality perpetuating the material realm of the journey in the home context.

Asked about meanings and usages of such souvenir objects, most of the tourists actually gave explanations that made me think about practices related to religious relics. The objects were usually exhibited in cupboards, on shelves or in set boxes, all of which in many ways seemed to constitute contemporary forms of living-room shrines. Photos were framed and put on walls or in photo albums, as if their visual invocation of the island and their actual physicality perpetuated an “authentic link” (Stewart 1984) between the island and the fragment of the island taken home. The tourists and their cameras had actually been on the island where they had captured the sites – thus creating a sympathetic relation<sup>2</sup> between the spaces of the journey and the images and objects taken home and incorporated into their mundane home environments. What had been captured by the tourist cameras during the journey was a reflection of the realms encountered, as if this process were able to transfer the quality of the visited island onto the photographic memory – similar to Renaissance practices of capturing the sacred aura of a religious shrine via hand mirrors that pilgrims would take to a sacred site, and subsequently back to their homes (Robinson & Picard 2009). Simi-

larly, many tourists/informants explained to me how they had felt their bodies “recharged”, full of energy and sunshine, when they had returned from the journey. Because most tourists considered home and away as evolving in ontologically differentiated realms, once they had returned home these material remnants of the island gained a symbolically and materially heightened quality. In a way, their metonymic qualities only became visible once tourists had returned home. In this context, these souvenirs were subjected to different ceremonial usages, once again reminiscent of different forms of religious practice. They were shown to those selected visitors who were granted access to the living room or shown the holiday photo albums, accompanied with stories about the trip. Moreover, they were “activated” at a very personal level in specific moments – for example when the tourists felt down or stressed because of bad weather, difficult work relations, relationship problems etc. – as a means to invoke the good memories of the journey. Many tourists told me that this evocation had happened to them by actually touching small souvenir objects and even photos, as if such acts were able to bring back memories and the marvellous realm of the journey. Others used consumable objects like spices or soap bought while on the trip to prepare a meal or take a bath, which would make them feel better.

### **Transgressions of Home, Transformations of Travel**

The emotions induced by the experience of the journey led to highly differentiated and personalised reflections about the realms of the journey and on those back home, which brings to the surface different layers of the transformational process induced by travel. Facing a mountainous landscape, for instance, one tourist, Valerio, started to talk about a previous trip to Colorado where the landscape had been equally beautiful, “but with less extension”. He associated “all these tropical landscapes” with a book, *Treasure Island*, which he had read as a child. He remembered being a child, and thus reiterated a fragment of his life story, connecting his present with a past. At the same site, another tourist, Ales-

sia, started to talk about her own daughter and her daughter's travels abroad, and also about the economic difficulties facing young people due to the high unemployment rate. She thus construed quite a different narrative than Valerio, reiterating a story articulating her relationship with her daughter. Another tourist, Sepp, found the water pools and cascades "better than those of the aqua-parks in Germany", and then told us stories about previous experiences. Here again, the site induced a different type of story. I suggest that these stories and the way they mediate the engagement with specific sites can be related to different travel motives and related layers of experience – "recreational", "existential" and "social" – which appear in all forms of tourism, yet which are unequally considered. For some tourists, the break from home represented an opportunity to spend time with friends and relatives, for others to get away from a stressful work environment or to bring some movement into a boring, everyday life. These travel motifs and related layers of experience during the journey thus appear to respond to specific circumstances marking the tourists' home contexts. In most cases, the tourists were seeking a ritual reversal of these circumstances and their temporal or definite transformation. The transgression of home became a premise of the journey, with the aspiration that it would provide what was lacking at home – social proximity, existential order, social flow – and thus reunite Self with otherwise separate provinces of life and meaning. In the following, I will further explore each of these travel aspirations and the transformational processes they are associated with.

### **Recreating Social Life**

Some of the tourists among the sample appeared to have had a stressful working life in their home contexts, which did not allow them to spend a lot of time together. This was the case for Nicolas and Francesca, but also for Valerio and Hisako. The latter were both insurance brokers, and explained to me that they often worked for ten hours a day and therefore did not have much time to maintain their couple's life and the love that had once brought them

together. Nicolas owned a company, and told me he spent most of his time apart from his wife, who would stay at home. Travelling thus seemed a means of escaping these contexts of alienation and spending time together, to "generate shared experiences", as Nicolas explained to me one day.

The desire to transform a deficient social life by means of the journey was usually fulfilled through the way in which these tourists experienced sites and then talked about their experiences. In most situations, they related their encounters to the spaces that marked their everyday life – allowing them to reflect upon, and recreate, the symbolic fabric of their social relations. These couples frequently projected themselves, as couples, into the social spaces of La Réunion and wondered about how it would be to live "here". They then eventually usually talked about their common lives back in Germany, for instance that they actually liked their lives there. Nicolas, for instance, tasting a passion fruit found in a forest inside the island, said, "Wow! This is delicious! It tastes like a multi-vitamin juice, almost artificially. At home, we had these once in a dessert." Francesca, his wife, responded, "Yes, and since recently, you can buy these in the supermarket as well." In a different context, facing my explanations about local religious practices related to a particular saint, Nicolas defended the "real God" who "had said not to admire other symbols". Francesca responded, with an ironic, but sympathetic smile, that "all these saints are part of the Catholic mysticism". She explained that she was a Protestant and wouldn't be "scared by this". In another situation, facing an isolated hamlet in the mountains, she said, "This is so isolated. How can people live here? Is there a school, or a supermarket, or a doctor?" He said, "It looks okay for a holiday house. You can come up here from the coast in less than two hours." She responded, "Never in my life I would want to live here. To go shopping, you will spend an entire day on these mountain roads." I explained to them that with the poverty and competition over land during the colonial time, people tended to go further and further away from the coast to have their own land. He responded, "Okay, if you grow up here, if you are used to the



solitude, you will surely feel fine here. You wouldn't want to live in the city. If these people here arrived in our town in Germany, they would probably not like it very much either." The observations of these three situations show how Nicolas and Francesca almost always systematically negotiated their encounters in terms of their context back home. The passion fruit is associated with previous experiences of passion fruits in this home context and related gender roles (he talked about a dessert, she about the supermarket). The encounter of a local saint challenged them to reflect upon their own beliefs and to reaffirm their distinguished visions of religion, but also an amicable tension between their own religious difference (he is a Catholic, she a Protestant). Facing the isolation of a small hamlet, both imagined living in such a place and finally seemed to agree that "you feel fine where you grow up", the people here in their hamlet, and the two in their town in Germany.

Similar to this case, Valerio and Hisako almost systematically put what they encountered during the journey in parallel with realities that marked their life back in Germany. On top of a mountain, gazing inside one of the island's valleys, Valerio said, "Oh this is magnificent. This depth and these colours. When we were in Colorado, we have been at similar viewpoints, but the land didn't have the same extension. It must be a very different life when you live in a valley like this." Hisako later commented, "Yes, but we are fine where we live. There are all our friends, our parents and the job. Maybe it is sometimes difficult, the bad weather, the stress, but it is our home." Facing this and other landscapes, both frequently talked about "back home" ("we are happy at home", "at home, it is different...") and thus brought this "back home" back into being. The journey seemed to work as a means to transform meaning and relations that marked their everyday life, both that of the couples and that of their broader life worlds. When I revisited Valerio and Hisako, and also Nicolas and Francesca in their respective homes, I found neatly organised households in which the souvenirs of the journey had been integrated in similar ways. Nicolas had hung prints of the volcano in the corridor, and some smaller material objects had been arranged in

a cabinet above the television, together with objects taken home from other journeys. The photos had been put into an album arranged in a living-room cupboard, together with other photo albums. Valerio and Hisako had their photo prints still in the envelope, in a drawer with other envelopes that were awaiting to be put into albums – "maybe during the autumn, when we have time", Hisako told me. The movement away from home, the related transgression of quotidian rhythm and practice, and the socially concentrated and emotionally heightened space of the journey in these cases become means to reassemble fragments of social life, recreate affective links among friends and couples, and embed these in personal narratives. Attractions here primarily work as means to evoke and renew memories of past experiences and, from there, to re-invoke memories through which to think and articulate social life at this small intimate scale.

### **Recreating Existential Order**

Another motif of travel seemed to lie in the hope that the experiences of the touristic journey would allow the tourists to transform their lives at a more existential level. In these cases, life back home frequently seemed to be marked by different degrees of boredom or existential feelings of senselessness. This was, for instance, the case for Lula-Maria who, after divorcing her husband, went through what she called a "psychologically difficult phase" and thus joined the trip, with her best friend, Donata, to "see something else", "without husbands". For Donata, herself in a transitional period of her life, the journey made her engage with ideas of the supernatural and to rethink her relations to a wider cosmos and the religion of her parents. Facing different religious sites, she seemed to engage in a long process of reflection (as mentioned earlier) that went beyond the relationships of her immediate social environment. In her later conversations with me, she questioned a deeper meaning of the world: of evolution, nature and truth in human life.

At a different level, this existential search for meaning also seemed to underpin Arianna and Sepp's travels: an elderly couple, both retired, who,

in their own words, were “bored of life” and “didn’t know what to do all day long in their home”. They told me they saw life like “a film that would soon be over”. During the journey, they hardly engaged at all with what I told them or what they saw, but persistently talked about themselves, their “sad life”, their youth during the Hitler Regime in Germany, their difficult relationships with their children, the problems their daughter had at work and the “black people you see more and more in Germany now”. They explained to me that they had hoped that travelling would allow them to “leave this sad environment” (*die traurige Umgebung verlassen*) for a while, to “see some colours” and “rediscover their optimism” (*ihren Optimismus wiederfinden*). I am not sure the journey allowed them to find this form of transformation.

At a different level, this existential search also marked the journey of tourists who, by travelling, fulfilled what they called “a childhood dream” (*Kindheitstraum*) – a project they had been cherishing over many years. Alessia and Ben, for instance, told me they had always dreamt about travelling together to exotic places. Yet, when they eventually had the means to do so, their parents fell ill, and they had to look after them for many years. Only when their parents had passed away could they “finally” travel, they said. Likewise, Carmen, an elderly woman, explained to me that she had a souvenir photo of her father standing in front of the Victoria Falls in East Africa, and that she had always dreamt about going there, “as a means to find my father”. She told me that she had realised this project the year before, and “a circle had been closed” (*ein Kreis hat sich geschlossen*).

For many of the tourists who had lived in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) (where travel had been strictly regulated), the fact of being on a tropical island was very frequently put into perspective alongside memories of the suppressive regime of the former Socialist country. Many encounters within the island were here directly related to the lack of freedom to travel before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the wider circumstances that had led to German reunification in 1991. A particular

case – that of Sepp<sup>3</sup> and Arianna – was symptomatic. Both related their encounters – be it of graffiti on a wall, poor neighbourhoods or a dinner beside a hotel swimming pool – to memories of social life in the former GDR and the changes brought about by unification. Entering a poor neighbourhood in one of the coastal towns, Sepp said: “Oh, so these are the slums then, aren’t they?” (*Dies sind dann die Slums, oder nicht?*). I explained that many people live in sheet-metal houses, and that I was not sure that he could talk about “slums”. I further explained that life on the island had quickly changed since the 1960s, and that many people had difficulties integrating into the new society on the island. He responded with a long reflection about his own life world, saying: “Me as well, I had big problems to integrate myself in the society that had come from the West. Everything went quite fast after the fall of the wall. Before there was a certain conviviality in our quarters and villages, even at work. But now, everyone fears to lose their jobs.” In other contexts, confronting various sites induced violent emotional reactions. For instance, when we arrived at the volcano, he spontaneously started to cry, cursing the former political leaders of East Germany (the GDR). He murmured: “That I can still see this, all this beauty...” He later added:

I had thought I would never see a volcano in my life. If you live in East Germany you cannot imagine that such beauty exists. While there are lots of difficulties following the opening of the wall, this liberty to travel, to see other countries, compensates them all. No one can take these moments away from us any longer, we should live while being alive. An accident can easily happen or you lose your job. But these souvenirs will remain.<sup>4</sup>

Common to these very different cases was that the encounters and experiences of the journey challenged the tourists’ life worlds in a deeper, existential way. It made them rethink their wider being in the world as humans and as social actors in a specific historical context. Travel made them reflect upon, and recreate, personal life histories by articulating public events that had marked their personal lives, thus



relating their personal belonging to more generic narratives, for example of nation, family and humankind. It eventually allowed them to become new persons, where memories of a violent past, or of a life that no longer existed, were transformed and objectified into stories. The distance from home allowed these tourists to encompass these existential dimensions of social life and rearticulate them with their present context. It allowed them to move on in life.

### Recreating Social Flow

Another travel motif for most tourists seemed to lie in a search for immediate sociability. The act of travelling and creating social flow became in itself the motif for the journey. Especially for those tourists living in relative solitude back home, the space of the journey became a means to generate human contact. For instance, Carmen, an 82-year-old woman living alone in a major German city, had been going on two “big” journeys, in her words, each year throughout the ten years preceding the trip to La Réunion. She joined group tours, often with a travel companion, another elderly lady from another city whom she had met on one of these trips. According to Carmen, the sociability of these journeys was formed around a shared interest in “different cultures and people”. Fabian, who lived alone and, in his words, had no real friends or friendship network in his hometown, was a similar case. Travelling had become his *raison d’être*, he told me, as it allowed him to meet fellow travellers and talk about his shared interest in foreign places and tourist destinations. During the trip, both Carmen and Fabian revealed themselves to be highly knowledgeable about a wide range of tourist destinations around the world. Encounters with sites in La Réunion were systematically related to previous experiences, and triggered stories of “similar” – or “dissimilar” – hotels, places, guides and anecdotes experienced during previous journeys. Both were excellent dinner-table raconteurs, sharing stories about other places, often focusing on tourism infrastructures – certain hotels, travel guides, sites etc. – and consequences of tourism development. A typical dialogue emerged, for example, when we arrived at the volcano and Fabian said:

Oh, this is magnificent, the cleanliness, the intensity of the landscape, the forms, the width of the land. There is no comparison with Mauritius. Such landscapes, one cannot find in Mauritius. What a pity that such sites lose their beauty with tourism development, like it has happened in Spain and even in Bali.

One night over dinner he explained that the hotel we were staying in was “very, very beautiful”, and then told a story about a hotel in which he had previously been staying in Morocco, with showers in the corridors and dogs hanging out in the kitchen. This led him to talk about another hotel, somewhere in Africa, where he had to pump water from a well every morning. “Compared to these hotels,” he said, “this one here is pure luxury.” He then went on to wonder why it only had two stars. In front of a large Hindu temple, I explained that a revalorisation of Hinduism had been happening in La Réunion in recent years, and that many people had started constructing new temples. I told them about the cultural transformations that Hinduism had undergone on the island, and about the use of animal sacrifices. Fabian interrupted me and started to tell a story about a previous travel experience in Bali, when he had taken part in religious ceremonies. He concluded his explanations by saying that this ceremony had been “real”, “not staged for tourists”. Almost any story he told situated him as an expert within a wider tourism world; he rarely or never talked about himself in other terms.

When I later revisited Fabian and Carmen, in their respective homes, I found surprising similarities in the ways they used tourist souvenirs to decorate their home spaces. In principle, this did not differ from most of the other tourists, yet it seemed to take on a different dimension. The ground floor of Fabian’s house was almost entirely filled up with touristic objects from various places he had visited. There was hardly any way to get through the living room, which looked like a touristic curiosity cabinet with souvenirs on the floor, in cupboards and glass cabinets, and hanging on the walls. As he had no friends, he would enjoy these on his own. Similarly, the living room in Carmen’s apartment was deco-

rated with travel objects wherever I looked, though they were smaller and organised in themed collections. She told me that she took home similar sets of objects from each destination – a small art-and-craft sculpture or doll, a stone and a shell – which were integrated into separate collections. Additionally, she had images and image-like craft art hanging on the walls, and a neatly organised collection of photo albums, all in the same format, allowing her to re-collect images and stories from each of her journeys. Both told me, in their respective ways, that the act of travelling induced a form of social flow with fellow travellers that was rare in their home environment.

### German National Romanticism and the “Power of Nature”

The tourists all arrived in La Réunion by plane following an 11-hour flight. I first met them either at the airport or at their hotel the morning after their arrival. At this early stage of the journey, comments made about La Réunion frequently defined the island as a “place out of this world” (*ein Platz ausserhalb der Welt*), or a “place far from everything” (*ein Ort weit von allem*) that constituted a “world on its own” (*eine Welt in sich selbst*). They talked about the island as an “enclosed space” (*ein abgeschlossener Raum*) and a “continent in a micro-format” (*ein Kontinent im Mikroformat*). In the eyes of the tourists, La Réunion thus emerged as a form of enclosed space encompassing a wider world in a miniaturised format: a large garden concentrating and making visible the symbolic elements of time and being (Picard 2011). Among the infinite possibilities of forms that could have been recognised in the space of this journey, the tourists consistently responded to a similar set of sights and, equally, remained consistently unperceptive of other possible encounters. Despite their social differences, they shared very similar feelings of seduction and awe induced by specific sites, in particular those bringing about what they usually referred to as the “power of tropical nature” (*die Gewalt der tropischen Natur*), which materialised in various forms, for example the “play of colours” (*das Farbenspiel*), the “contrasts in light” (*die Lichtkontraste*), the “intensity of the sun-

shine” (*die Intensität der Sonne*), the “abundance of water” (*das viele Wasser überall*) or the “uncanny atmosphere of fog” (*die unheimliche Atmosphäre des Nebels*). Specific areas of the island were thus transformed into meaningful landscapes conceived of in terms of a powerful, often uncanny and sometimes bizarrely magnified nature. Nature appeared as a realm imbued with divine grace and power, a transfiguration of transcendental forces into the materiality of the land, transforming land into enchanted natural landscapes.

In the weeks following the trip, I asked the tourists to send me what they considered to be the “ten most significant photos” of their journey, and to comment on each of them briefly. Seven tourists responded to this request, and sent me between eight and twelve photos respectively. By far the largest proportion of photos (more than eight on average)<sup>5</sup> represented panoramic shots of landscapes. One quarter of all photos were snapshots of the volcano, and one third of the island’s mountains. Surveying the comments and captions the tourists attached to each photo, I then explored common themes, which I regrouped into three semantic fields: “power of nature”, “lush nature” and “local life”. The semantic field of the “power of nature” regrouped, once again, more than eight photographs on average, which variously depicted clouds and fog moving in and out, light and shadow games, water crashing on rocky sea shores and in waterfalls, and small villages inside huge landscapes. Photos regrouped in the field of “lush nature” mainly included close-up pictures of flowers, plants and fruits; “local life” pictures included shots of the town centre, markets, museums and religious sites. The last step of the image analysis was to explore the density of experience articulated through photos taken. To do so, I compared the distribution of photographed sites with the actual time spent at these sites during the journey. The entire journey included approximately 52 hours of “conscious time”, if a sleeping period from 22:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. was deducted. Approximately 30 hours (58%) of this total time was spent in hotel and service spaces (hotel rooms and lobbies, restaurants and airport lounges), whereas only 3% of the images

represent such spaces. On the other hand, while only 3 hours (6%) were spent on the volcano, 25% of all photos were taken there. In this sense, the volcano generated almost 60 times more photos than the hotel and service environment.

What these observations seem to indicate is that the individual tourist experiences were framed by “aesthetic dispositions” (Roger 1997) largely shared by the tourists. Irrespective of their individuality, the subjects of the study seem to have learnt to experience the Other in more or less the same conventional way. This observation is paradoxical in that these tourists came from different social contexts and geographical origins with apparently no other link to each other than “being German”. “Being German” thus seems to relate here to more than a merely subjective feeling of belonging to an “imagined community” of nation (Anderson 1991), but makes manifest elements of a historically formed, shared mindset and culturally specific cognitive processes. This observation induces an epistemic dilemma, as it seems to imply that nationality – that is “being German” – could be considered a pertinent analytical category to study individual mentality and behaviour. As many anthropologists do, I struggle here with a historical explanation for the processes that may have led to the hegemony of specific aesthetic forms of the sublime embedded within a national romanticism among people growing up in Germany. While I do not want to – and cannot – within the context of this article explore the historic formation of a hypothetically common “German” – or else “Western”, “European” or perhaps class-related – romantic tourist culture, it would be interesting to follow up on this observation, for example by repeating the study with other national tourist populations.

The “miracle of consensus” (MacCannell 1976), observed here among German subjects, may usefully be explained by a historic approach (Jackson 1998). Following MacCannell, it can be understood in terms of a twofold process of sight sacralisation, met with a corresponding ritual attitude on the part of the tourists. In this sense, a “sacralisation” of specific sights embodying the idea of “power of nature” may have taken place in Germany. Spode (2011) claims

that romantic ideas and images of nature were here systematically institutionalised through the humanistic bourgeois education within the realms of the emerging German nationalisms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and resurface in modern tourism culture. Similarly, Löfgren (2002) observes that the specific cultural forms of nature observed here had already been developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, following institutionalisation processes of the idea of “terrible beauty” and the quest for the sublime, found, for example, in the form of waterfalls. What seems to have shifted from this faraway historical context is that the sublime art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were transformed into popular media, such as literature. And so we have *Treasure Island* to which one tourist referred to make sense of a specific locale.

It may also be interesting to further explore these and other means by which the tourists of this study have been socialised to this romantic aesthetic. It seems fruitful to focus on one specific form of landscape (e.g. on the volcano, or on the mountains etc.) and deconstruct the processes by means of which each landscape has been historically formed and mediated as an attraction. In another research, which follows the one described in this article, I have focused on the aesthetic constitution of coral reefs, and started to show how a specific idea of nature cultivated in modernist thinking was projected onto the specific geographical realms of coastal environments (Picard 2011). The defining element of this idea resided in an aesthetic of “perfection in nature”, with perfection being defined by theological principles of divine symmetry and wholeness. From this point of view, “nature” appeared to be inhabited by a divine force generating such symmetries, while their adoration and study allowed modern subjects to approach, capture or eventually subdue this divine (Lanfant 2009). This observation confirms the analysis of comments made by tourists in this study, associating the perceived “power of nature” with an underlying divine force.

Beyond the prism of a cultural anthropology of German or otherwise national romantic tourist aesthetics, it is important to point out the strong sense of

belonging to a German national narrative among the subjects, which seems to have evolved at a different, more fluid level of subjectivity. For instance, I usually told the tourists a popular legend of a slave who escaped from the plantations and found freedom in the mountains, thus evoking a common plot of romantic hero stories. I used this story to talk about wider issues emerging from debates in La Réunion on how to deal with the heritage of slavery. While the heritage of slavery was in most cases not a story of particular interest to the tourists, many spontaneously made an analogy with debates then dominating the German public media sphere on how to deal with the heritage of the Holocaust. Similar to a fable that uses animal characters as metaphors to talk about politics and human relations, the story of dealing with slavery worked as a metaphor to evoke events that for the tourists seemed in their structure similar. I observed on a different occasion that French tourists would react in different ways, often using stories of slavery as metaphors to talk about the perceived confines brought about by modernity and globalisation; topics that were then dominating the French public media sphere.

### Conclusion

Many theories of tourism have focused on the structural frames of tourist experiences, and the political dimension of disciplining individuals to submit to specific concepts of time and nature encountered through the journey. Over the past fifty years, touristic travel has variably been theorised as a form of ritualised escape (Enzensberger 1958; Dumeziedier 1967; Nash 1989), a quest for an authentic realm whose form itself was said to be embedded in the ideology of modernity (MacCannell 1976), a form of modern pilgrimage in its structure analogous to historical forms of religious pilgrimage (Turner & Turner 1978; Graburn 1989; Cohen 2004a) and as a form of modern festivity allowing the modern subject to recreate the social and moral fabric of modern social life (Graburn 1989; Hennig 1997). Through its focus on the social and societal relevance of individual stories, this study shows how these broader frames and cultures of tourism are ar-

ticulated at the level of personal tourist experience.

So what does it feel like to be a tourist? While we can never “fully” access the inner worlds of tourists (or anyone else for that matter), the study demonstrates that the journey makes tourists feel perplexed, even speechless when experiencing certain sites – always searching for the right words. Tourism is emotionally intense and mentally challenging. Tourists, while on the tour, are challenged to make the unfamiliar familiar, to impose aesthetic forms upon the realities encountered. They are often emotionally moved without being able to explain why. They are confronted with the moral boundaries of social life, gender, the body and death, and are challenged to engage with these boundaries and what they hold to be normal and natural. Many encounters have a highly metaphorical value, representing analogies with issues that preoccupy the tourists in their home contexts. For example, encounters with children or stories of crisis lead them to reflect on their own children or crises back in Germany. The encounter with the Other thus becomes a tool to engage and transform these issues from home. This works equally at the scale of the national public sphere – for instance, where events in La Réunion are used to reflect on events preoccupying the public media sphere in Germany, such as how to deal with the memory of the past: slavery in La Réunion and the Holocaust in Germany. Confronting and engaging with the story about debates on how to deal with slavery thus eventually reaffirms a strong sense of belonging to a German national narrative. The encounter with the Other thus enables individuals, couples and friends to rethink and reaffirm, but also to readjust, the emotional and affective foundations of what makes them individuals, couples and friends and, at a more existential level, human beings participating in the wider history and nature of the world. The journey away, which constitutes a transgression of the continuity of the home context, thus enables tourists to transform the circumstances of home – either temporarily, where tourists feel that they can “recharge their batteries” and recreate social links and flow, or permanently, where they return as transformed persons, able to “move on in their lives”.

At the same time, regardless of their individual experience, the tourists observed all learnt to experience the Other in highly similar, conventional ways. The study shows the presence of widely shared aesthetic dispositions, articulated in particular through the dominant trope of the “power of nature”, variably perceived in dramatic landscapes, sea shores, waterfalls, light contrasts and fast-moving clouds. The collective nature of these individual aesthetic dispositions seems related to historical institutionalisation processes through which the art of the sublime of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries flowed into the foundations of national romanticism in Germany – and elsewhere in Europe – and in its settler colonies. These appear to be resurfacing today in popular art forms such as literature, television, museums and mass-reproduced visual art, mediating ideal forms of approaching and experiencing the exotic in a given social context. Yet, in whatever collective ways aesthetic cultures and norms articulate experience, this experience is always made by an individual person. Tourism is, in a way, always frustrating because the best words that tourists find to articulate their experiences are often those used in public representations of sites, including those used in tourism marketing; tourists usually fail to convince others about the authenticity of their experiences when all they say is all that has always been said about a specific site in a tourism advertisement: “It was truly magical!”

## Notes

- 1 All the names of the tourists are pseudonyms.
- 2 Originally developed by anthropologist James Frazer, the notion of sympathetic relations relates to the power objects or entities that had once been in contact with each other and are believed to continue to exert influence upon each other (e.g. a relic of a saint perpetuating the realm of the saint), or the ability of a metaphor or a copy with similar traits to an original to affect the original (e.g. an image of the divine) (Greenwood 2009).
- 3 Sepp appears under the pseudonym of Eberhard in two other texts of mine (Picard 2011, 2012).
- 4 For a more elaborate treatment of travel syndromes using Sepp’s (also known as Eberhard’s) case, see Picard (2012).

- 5 The visual content of these photos could broadly be grouped into four content-related, thematic categories: panoramic shots of landscapes; hotel and service spaces; local populations and cultural sites. The statistic analysis of the photos in terms of these categories revealed a standard variation (a measure of how spread out data values are around the mean, defined as the square root of the variance) lower than 15%. This means that, among this very small sample, the different tourists sent me sets of photos that were more or less similar in content; the different samples varied only by one photo on average. This significant homogeneity allowed me to analyse this sample based on the average distribution of visual contents.

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