

## **Authenticity - What do they( tourists) really want?**

*The search for authenticity is a predominant trend driving tourism because travellers are looking for unique experiences that are part of our vibrant and varied world. Quebec is not Venice, the Inuit are not like the Aboriginals of Australia and a sugaring off party bears no resemblance to a traditional raclette party in a Swiss chalet. With the rising interest in sustainable tourism, authenticity is taking centre stage. However, it is also raising a number of issues; the following report was prepared by Michèle Laliberté of the Tourism Intelligence Network of the ESG-UQAM Chair in Tourism (University of Quebec at Montréal).  
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Like eco-tourism, learning tourism and the concept of experience, the notion of authenticity is open to many interpretations, depending on whether one is a tourist or a tour operator developing a marketing strategy.

### The Theory

Authenticity refers to an original experience that is true to reality. Its meaning becomes clearer when one thinks of its opposites: falseness and imitation. In tourism, authenticity refers to:

- Wanting to experience a different way of life
- A manifestation of the identity of a people or a group of people
- Customs and traditions: examples of how a destination differs from one's own; a window onto its culture, heritage, history and identity
- The opposite of globalization and its resulting standardization: today, beaches, palm trees and hotels look pretty much the same the world over
- The discovery of places in a country that remain untouched by modernism and still maintain traditional methods and ways of life
- Travel with added value and quality of experience

In addition, authenticity quite "naturally" fits with the current trend to sustainable tourism. The search for authenticity reflects the needs of urban tourists from industrial countries; when these people travel, they seek something outside their daily lives, something innovative and different, an escape. They want to experience new things and enjoy the sensation of being where things are real and original. They want to be able to say "I was there." For example, even though Japanese travellers can easily find clothing in Tokyo made by a top Parisian couturier, buying the same clothing in Paris where the couturier's shop is located is a completely different experience.

Authenticity can be measured in terms of the tourist's own values. It occurs when travellers return home feeling they have truly experienced a change in scenery, gained a better understanding of the country visited and its development, or connected in some way with the local population.

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#### Sources:

Etienne, Pauchant. "La part de l'authenticité dans le tourisme durable," First Tourism Summit, Chamonix, December 1999.

Hamon, Viviane. "Authenticité, tourisme durable et marketing," *Espaces* 228, July-August 2005, p. 42-56.

### The Practice

The authentic nature of a destination is a tremendous resource. One does not need the pyramids of Egypt; every community has a unique history and culture. It is simply a matter of highlighting these elements for the benefit of tourists. For example:

- Organized tours that include a visit to a sugar bush or some ice fishing
- A simple forest hike becomes something more when led by a Native guide
- An evening of storytellers recounting local tales and legends
- Economuseums showcasing traditional craft trades and expertise
- Aboriginal tourism with its cultural performances, cuisine and crafts
- Fall colours and fine meals prepared with regional produce and products
- Souvenirs created by local artisans who are available to the public
- Observing snow geese in migration, or whale watching
- Travellers stepping off the beaten path to discover a community festival and mingle with locals

### The Grey Areas

Writing in the magazine *Espaces*, Viviane Hamon, a consultant and lecturer at the Institut Universitaire Professionnalisé (IUP) Métiers de la montagne in France, gives the example of the lavender harvest in a Provençal village. Although production is mechanized and propane gas has replaced straw during the distilling of the product, the image tourists have is of people in traditional garb cutting lavender with a sickle. Therefore, during the Fête de la lavande (Lavender Festival), locals dress up and take out an antique copper still and carts to sell their products. The authenticity sought by tourists disregards economic activity and even the natural cycle of the seasons; tourists want to see active distilleries in November, when all the real ones have already ceased production. Can we protest such practices and complain of false representation?

A similar question arises when it comes to souvenirs. The fact is, artisans often adapt their wares to suit the preferences of tourists. Is this a normal process or should this be seen as a threat to product authenticity?

The creation of a tourism product that presents an artificial world or reproduces the attractions of other destinations is the opposite of authenticity. Why, then, are Walt Disney World and Las Vegas so popular? Why are certain destinations, like Dubai, becoming so overstated and excessive? These fabricated worlds are examples of another current trend. Who is legitimately entitled to define the authenticity of a product? Tour operators put together travel products according to demand and this strategy simply echoes the advertising messages that meet the expectations of tourists.

During his speech at the first Tourism Summit in 1999 in Chamonix, Étienne Pauchant, at that time a marketing and development manager at IPK International, succinctly summarized the importance of authenticity in sustainable tourism: "Authenticity is synonymous with tourism that is done well."

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#### Sources:

Etienne, Pauchant. "La part de l'authenticité dans le tourisme durable," First Tourism Summit, Chamonix, December 1999.

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