

NEW PARADIGM OF SPIRITUAL TOURISM: ADDING AN IMPORTANT LAYER TO SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism has been on the rise for many years. This paper argues for a connection between sustainable tourism and spiritual tourism, and moreover explains the similarities and differences between traditional spiritual tourism and new spiritual tourism by means of various case studies. The main goal of the paper is, however, to illustrate the potential of new forms of spiritual tourism for an expanded understanding of sustainability. Until now, sustainable tourism has been focussing on balancing environmental, social and economic issues in the external material world. To these important goals, tourism should add the goal of a sustainable trip in the sense of long-term benefits towards subjective wellbeing beyond the trip itself. This is because ultimately, we will only achieve balance in the outer world through balance in our inner world. By adding spiritual tourism to the concept of sustainable tourism, we will be able to integrate the spiritual dimension of human existence into an even more fulfilling travel experience.

Keywords: spiritual tourism, sustainable tourism, classification, case studies, potential.

1 INTRODUCTION

What is spiritual tourism? First of all, it needs to be said, there is no universally valid definition of “spiritual tourism”. Each person experiences life, spirituality, and travel differently. The reason for this is that each of us has a diverse background and personality, shaped by our family, education, profession, culture, and nation from which we come.

This being said, there exist various definitions through previous studies. In this paper, firstly, the author would like to build on this and point out two fundamental trends in spiritual tourism. Secondly, we will explain the basic perspective and relevance of this work.

1.1 Definition of terms

“Spiritual tourism” stands for self-discovery and wellbeing maintenance as well as seeking healing for the soul [1]. It embodies a holistic approach that combines and, at best, harmonises the external physical journey with an inner journey to explore ourselves.

Smith and Kelly [2] use “holistic tourism” as an umbrella term, to which they assign spiritual and other forms of tourism. They not only define spiritual and religious tourism, but also classify wellness tourism and alternative healing practices (such as spa treatments, herbal medicine, yoga, massage, acupuncture, etc.) as holistic tourism [2].

Liutikas [3], analysing the underlying values of pilgrims, uses “value-based tourism” as a generic term and presents definitions of various subtypes, including “spiritual tourism” and “pilgrimage tourism” [3].

Each of these definitions has its justification. However, at the same time it becomes clear that a variety of terms and interpretations are used. For this reason, it is natural for every author to use and clarify his own terminology.

In this paper we will use the terms “traditional spiritual tourism” and “new spiritual tourism”.



“Traditional spiritual tourism” refers to pilgrimage tourism and religious tourism – approaching and visiting famous religious spots, such as churches, monasteries, shrines, temples or mosques. Its focus is on cultivating prayer and faith community, and on facilitating collective worship for followers of a certain religion. Traditional spiritual tourism in the form of journeys and pilgrimages to celebrated places of faith is a centuries-old tradition which continues throughout the world [4].

“New spiritual tourism” is based on recent trends in spirituality, promoting practices such as mindfulness and a personal path that seeks happiness within. It takes place at unique destinations in beautiful landscapes, including “power spots”, and often includes exercises for spiritual development, such as yoga, qi-gong, meditation, and breathwork retreats [5].

These definitions serve as a point of reference. A clear separation is not always possible, because there are also overlaps, and people of various backgrounds and personalities as well as trips cannot always be divided into two groups of “traditional” and “new”. Still, both terms have in common that visitors who join spiritual tourism activities are motivated to connect to a “higher source”.

1.2 Objectives

Through spiritual tourism, is it possible to provide a travel experience that touches the hearts of travellers beyond the journey itself? What unites and differentiates traditional and new spiritual tourism? A sustainable trip in the sense of long-term benefits should have a positive impact on travellers’ emotional state and wellbeing, even after returning to everyday life. The central argument of this paper is that we should look at concepts that combine both external happiness and internal happiness.

1.2.1 External happiness

Modern travel, such as classical sightseeing or beach tourism, mainly focusses on external happiness. In other words, it’s primarily about satisfying elementary physical and emotional needs through providing various distractions, events, and amenities. There is nothing wrong with this. Maslow already points out that all people want to have their basic physical and emotional needs met [6]. However, we also know that these consumption-oriented forms of travel often lead to serious problems in the environmental and social spheres [7], [8].

In addition, it can be assumed that tours focussing on external features will not always bring continued fulfilment and satisfaction. In daily life, modern people spend a lot of time watching news and advertisements, reading messages and shopping online using media such as the Internet, SNS, and smartphones, and this behaviour or lifestyle naturally continues on the journey. As convenient as our smartphones may be, they also constantly distract us from essential things. As a consequence, often, we don’t find time to connect with ourselves and others at heart level [9]. That is why this paper discusses more conscious travel experiences.

1.2.2 Internal happiness

What we feel inside our heart is key. No matter how perfectly planned a visit to a tourist destination might be, whether it really turns out to be a meaningful and memorable experience one ultimately depends on how one experiences it in one’s own heart.

The current idea of tourism, as a service industry, is to make people happy during the trip, by providing amenities and comfort to the greatest extent possible for those who can spend money. It is a hospitality culture, especially in Japan. Of course, it’s also a way to make people happy, through having a good time, but all of this is superficial. And it is no exaggeration to say that such a mindset directs modern society as a whole.



However, people are beginning to look more and more at their inner happiness. Since the mid-20th century, in large part through the influence of Asian spiritual leader such as Suzuki, Eastern thought has become increasingly popular in the West, and has been especially influential upon New Age culture [10]. In the last few years, we have observed a global trend of “mindfulness” towards more internal happiness through practices such as meditation, yoga, and qigong. Picking up on such trends and considering their future potential in spiritual tourism is one goal of this paper.

1.3 The connection between sustainable tourism and spiritual tourism

Recently, the author outlined the evolution of “sustainable tourism” or “green tourism” [11]. In this paper, he would like to emphasise that both sustainable tourism and spiritual tourism – despite differences – also have a common value base, for both are concerned with safeguarding the world and creating a brighter future.

For sustainable tourism, the focus is on using natural and cultural resources in better ways, in order to protect and harmonize the environment, local enterprises, and culture in the long run.

For spiritual tourism, the focus is on using one’s inner resources for a more sophisticated and peaceful existence. If we manage to create more harmony and peace in our inner being, we will be able to use this power for the benefit of our fellow men and the environment in the outer world.

We are not just a body made of flesh, bones, and blood. Human existence combines physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects. The latter is often neglected, both in daily life and in conventional tourism.

The late Austrian physician and psychiatrist Professor Dr Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) founded logotherapy and existential analysis, which is often referred to as the “Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy”. In decades of research into human fulfilment and the meaning of life, he emphasizes the spiritual aspect of human beings the most. Frankl sees human existence basically on three levels: (1) body (physiological functions), (2) mind (emotion and thought), and (3) spirit (higher meaning, our calling, service to the world) [12]. His explanatory model of human reality, simple at first glance but profound in its implications, may also help to understand the role and potential of spiritual tourism. Only when we connect with our spiritual core, can we lead a truly fulfilled life and serve the world as the best version of ourselves. And spiritual tourism can help us with achieving that goal.

Therefore, our task is not only to meet external needs (of nature and the environment, tourists, enterprises, and local people) by sustainable tourism but also internal needs (inner peace and harmony). By adding spiritual tourism to the concept of sustainable tourism, we will be able to integrate the spiritual dimension of human existence into an even more fulfilling travel experience.

1.4 Methodology

This paper is based on literature studies, site visits, qualitative interviews, and email enquiries.

In the introduction, reference was made to some common definitions of spiritual tourism, and basic views and approaches to the topic were presented in a condensed form.

Based on this, the first part of this paper builds on previous studies by the author about “traditional spiritual tourism”. To create his own picture through field research, the author has dealt with famous pilgrimage sites in Austria and Japan, where he conducted in-depth



interviews with leaders of the respective places of worship, about their identity, and about how they deal with tourists in these sacred places.

The second part of this paper deals with the phenomenon of “new spiritual tourism”. Two case studies illustrate that this form of spiritual tourism has different objectives and is implemented differently. Due to the travel restrictions of the corona pandemic, field research has been difficult to conduct. However, knowledge gaps were filled by online research and email enquiries as much as possible.

The structure and method of this work is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Methodology overview.

Step	Content and structure	Sources of evidence (data type)
1	Introduction to the topic and definitions of terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing studies concerning spiritual tourism and its search for meaning in life (secondary data)
2	Traditional spiritual tourism: Interviews about values and tourist positioning of the Catholic monastery Benediktinerstift Göttweig (WH) in the Wachau county, Austria, and Grand Shrine of Nachi (WH), Kumano Sanzan area, Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-depth interviews with key persons of both destinations Site inspections by the author (primary data)
3	New spiritual tourism: Online research and enquiries about two case studies – The “Meditation House” of Hotel “Das Kranzbach” in Germany and the Aura-Soma Centre “Dev Aura” with its accompanied “Shire Farm” that offer corresponding programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online research and email enquiries Site inspection by the author of one of the sites (secondary and primary data)

2 RESULTS

2.1 Traditional spiritual tourism – pilgrimage to religious spots

In the following we would like to summarise the results of previous studies about “traditional spiritual tourism” [11], [13]. The original aim of these studies was to reflect on the essential importance of religious spots and to draw conclusions for quality heritage tourism. However, they also reveal insights in comparison to new forms of spiritual tourism.

In Austria, investigations of the impressive World Heritage and Catholic Monastery “Benediktinerstift Göttweig” on the top of a hill next to the River Danube showed that through open devotions, especially midday prayer, visitors can directly experience the spirituality of the monastery (Fig. 1). There are both day visitors for sightseeing and those who stay overnight, some of whom are guests at the monastery and take part in services with the monks. This means that the visitor is free to decide for himself how far he wants to engage with the monastery.

Keeping with the ancient tradition of the Benedictine Order, Stift Göttweig has its own inn and restaurant, which is able to impress its visitors with fresh regional ingredients and





Figure 1: Benedictine Abbey Stift Göttweig in an outstanding rural setting near the River Danube. © Stift Göttweig/OEBH.

sustainable management. In addition, Stift Göttweig is connected to pilgrimage routes via the Austrian Way of St. James and other long-distance hiking trails that lead all the way to the world-famous Spanish Camino de Santiago.

Next, in Japan, the “Grand Shrine of Nachi” (*Kumano Nachi Taisha*) is part of the Kumano Sanzan pilgrimage network in Wakayama Prefecture. Being also a World Heritage Site, it represents a unique spot of ancient syncretic faith (of Shintōism and Buddhism) combined with an old mountain worship called *Shugendō*. Surrounded by breath-taking natural landscape, with its sacred Nachi Waterfall, which is the highest drop in Japan, this outstanding religious site attracts visitors from all over the world (Figs 2 and 3).

The shrine and its sacred waterfall attract three groups of visitors. The first group come only as tourists, on account of the waterfall and the World Heritage status. The second group are believers who worship the twelve gods of Kumano. The third group are those who worship the sacred Nachi waterfall itself. Sometimes, it also often happens that visitors spontaneously develop a feeling or special relationship with this place. At first, they come just to see the waterfall, but then they are completely moved by what they feel at the waterfall and become believers. Or they observe other visitors praying and thus open themselves to the gods (*kami*) of this place.

The Great Shrine of Nachi is part of an extensive pilgrimage network that runs through the lush Kii Mountains and includes pilgrimage trails connecting Kumano Sanzan with the world-famous Buddhist temple complex “Koyasan” and with the Shintō “Grand Shrine of Ise”.

The Kumano Sanzan pilgrimage routes in Japan and Santiago de Compostela in Spain, both World Heritage Sites, also have close cooperation as partner networks.



Figure 2: The Daimonzaka Nakahechi pilgrimage trail, leading to the Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine and Nachi Falls.



Figure 3: The sacred Nachi Falls of Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine.

Such destinations, which have grown over centuries, possess their own special aura and attraction. By preserving their beliefs and authenticity, they also meet the strict criteria of a world heritage site. These are good examples of places that have a strong connection to traditional spiritual tourism. They keep their long tradition, but also open up to new visitors from abroad. The long history, the beauty of the place, the clear positioning in terms of content and religion, and the legal protection status of such sites – all such aspects together make this outstanding sense of place possible.

2.2 New spiritual tourism – beauty and tranquillity inside and out

Traditional spiritual tourism has been taking place for centuries. The previous examples have briefly shown that it is the context of historical significance, natural setting, and a living faith and pilgrimage tradition that creates the splendour and unique attraction of such places.

With new spiritual tourism, things look a little different. In most cases, travel destinations do not have the same level of historical, cultural, and natural resources. Of course, for new spiritual tourism, the location and quality of place also play an important role, but most of the time the level of World Heritage is not reached. However, it is not essential to keep up with traditional World Heritage. The decisive factor is rather to combine the quality of the given place and environment (outer quality) with the quality of the respective course or activity offers for inner growth (inner quality) in the best possible way.

In the following, two examples are presented that offer new forms of spiritual tourism – beyond religion and denomination.

The first example is the “Meditation House” of the wellness hotel “Das Kranzbach”, Bavaria, Germany. The second example is the Aura-Soma Centre “Dev Aura” and its “Shire Farm” in Lincolnshire, England, United Kingdom. Both places offer contemplation, tranquillity, relaxation and introspection, in charming rural surroundings.

2.2.1 Case study 1: “Das Kranzbach Meditation House”, Bavaria, Germany

“Wir wollten für unsere Gäste immer einen besonderen Ruheort schaffen”.

[We always wanted to create a special resting place for our guests.]

Dr. Jakob Edinger (owner of the Hotel Das Kranzbach)

The Hotel “Das Kranzbach” is one of the leading high-end wellness hotels in Germany. It is located in the Bavarian Alps near the Austrian border, surrounded by appealing natural phenomena such as alpine meadows, pristine mountain peaks, and deep forests (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Hotel “Das Kranzbach”, Bavaria, Germany, in a stunning alpine landscape setting. © Das Kranzbach.

The object of this study is the “Meditation House”, which was designed by the Japanese star architect Kengo Kuma and built in 2018 [14]. The meditation house is separated from the hotel building complex on purpose – one has to walk a footpath up the forested hill to enter it.

In 2016, Kengo Kuma received the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture [15]. High environmental standards are very important to him. Correspondingly, the construction of the “Meditation House” followed strict environmental standards and – to a certain degree – Japanese design. For instance, only as many trees as necessary were cleared and the trunks were pulled out of the forest individually by horse to protect the soil against compaction. In addition, for the posts and beams, the architect used regional wood from native fir trees (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: The Meditation House, designed by the Japanese star architect Kengo Kuma, inside to outside view – “to feel one with nature”. © Das Kranzbach.

As the name suggests, the “Meditation House” is a resource for retreat and relaxation. It has three major purposes:

1. A space of silence in the forest
2. To feel one with nature and find peace of mind
3. To offer classes for meditation, yoga, and qi-gong

Further, the hotel owner emphasises the following features of the meditation house: this is not a fashion but a long-term project. It creates a unique sales point. The demand among guests for “inner relaxation” is becoming more important for an increasing number of guests year after year. This includes the desire for nature, peace and silence, and for a retreat during which to ground oneself again. Before the start of the Corona pandemic, the hotel “Das Kranzbach” had an annual average of about 200 guests per day in the hotel, about 15% of whom took part in daily yoga and meditation courses. This trend is increasing. The yoga and meditation offers are decisive in encouraging these guests to book. Taster guests make up another 5%. Following an easing of the pandemic, this positive trend is expected to strengthen further [16].

The retreat concept is successful for two reasons. First, in our challenging times, many people need effective tools for relaxation and introspection, and second, its unique setting in nature provides the best opportunities for a retreat.

2.2.2 Case study 2: “Dev Aura” and “Shire Farm” of Aura-Soma Ltd. in Lincolnshire, England

“Der größere Lehrer ist in dir selbst. Was wir anbieten, sind nur Anhaltspunkte”.

[The greater teacher is within yourself. What we have to offer are only clues.]

Vicky Wall (founder of Aura-Soma) [17]

Aura-Soma is a natural, holistic colour therapy from England, which aims to bring people back into inner balance [18].

“The Aura-Soma® Colour Care System is a non-intrusive, self-selective colour system of great beauty which offers you the opportunity for awareness and transformation.”

The Aura-Soma Academy

The core of Aura-Soma is made up of around 120 “Equilibrium Bottles”. They are combinations of natural plant oils, high-quality essential oils, healing herbs, and crystal energies. Each bottle consists of 50% plant oil and 50% ultrapure water, each with its own colour, and is blended into an emulsion that is applied to the body on the skin.

The main idea of Aura-Soma is that each person intuitively chooses colour combinations based on their personality, which best support them in their personal spiritual development. The colours chosen are also related to the colours of the Indian chakra system or energy centres of the body, and are believed to be capable of balancing and revitalizing them. Further therapeutic Aura-Soma products called “Pomander” and “Quintessence” have an even more subtle effect on the human energy system.

“The products have an energetic vibration that goes beyond words”.

The Aura-Soma Academy

“You are the colours you choose”.

Vicky Wall

For the training in Aura-Soma colour therapy, Aura-Soma Ltd. has its own seminar house with guest rooms and a special garden, called “Dev Aura” and managed by “The Academy” (Fig. 6). This beautiful training centre has developed continuously over the past 30 years. Meanwhile, visitors arrive from all over the world, on average about 400–500 annually. Only COVID-19 recently interrupted the influx [19].



Figure 6: Lecture room of the Aura-Soma Academy at “Dev Aura” surrounded by an extraordinary garden. © Aura-Soma Products Limited.



Aura-Soma Ltd. also has its own fields, the “Shire-Farm”. Here, most of the medicinal herbs needed for their products are grown. The cultivation is biodynamic – in harmony with nature and natural rhythms – and therefore absolutely sustainable. The author had the opportunity to visit both the seminar house “Dev Aura” and the “Shire Farm” years ago and was very positively impressed.

Both the seminar house of the Aura-Soma Academy “Dev Aura” and the organic “Shire-Farm” offer a platform for mainly three purposes:

1. Courses about the Aura-Soma colour therapy and exercises in the seminar house, such as silent meditations indoors, for spiritual introspection
2. Meditative walks through the fields, gardens, and woods of Shire-Farm, to get into deeper contact with Mother Earth
3. Special excursions to “sacred landscapes” (power spots), for instance, to the mythical spot of Glastonbury, called the “Sacred Tour – Glastonbury Experience”.

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

3.1 Achievements and limitations

This paper looked at tourism in the context not only of material sustainability (related to environmental, economic, and social aspects) but also immaterial sustainability (related to a lasting sense of wellbeing and personal development). Spiritual tourism aims at a happiness that we can discover and feel deep within us – and that goes beyond common physical comforts, pleasures, and luxuries.

The case studies about traditional spiritual tourism of the monastery in Austria and Shinto shrine in Japan have shown that visitors to such World Heritage destinations vary from mere sightseeing to spontaneous participation in prayers or ceremonies to deep devotion.

They are first attracted by the fame of the place and its unique scenic location. In the case of the Monastery Stift Göttweig, it is the impressive building complex and its setting on the mountain overlooking the River Danube and the vineyards of the Wachau. In the case of the Great Shrine of Nachi, it is the sacred Nachi waterfall in stunning nature, together with the shrine and temple complex and its pilgrimage network in a remote mountainous area.

At the same time, their attraction also relates to the invisible, unprovable and yet tangible uniqueness of these places, its connection to a higher, divine source.

The case studies about new spiritual tourism, with the meditation house in Germany and Aura-Soma centre in England, reflect new trends towards relaxation and introspection – in the face of a modern performance society increasingly plagued by haste and stress. Here, too, places are visited in the midst of rural beauty. However, the focus is not on prayers at a spot of glorious history or with World Heritage status. Rather, the primary aim is to immerse oneself in meditative silence and explore oneself in an undisturbed place under guidance.

I should hereby observe that this study is not about judging which form of spiritual tourism is better. It is rather about broadening understanding and pointing out new possibilities.

The case studies illustrated in this paper provide some initial insights into spiritual tourism, its core characteristics, and its multifaceted offerings.

What is missing, however, is data on the number and quality of ongoing services and the elaboration of success criteria. What is a truly authentic offer of high quality? For the traveller and seeker, various course offerings and destinations make it difficult to choose. Whether yoga, qi gong, naturopathic therapies combined with wellness and self-awareness – everyone claims to have the best offer. The present work is therefore merely an introduction to the subject and a stimulus to look at the meaning and purpose of travel with new eyes.



Unlike in classical tourism, where benefits and service offers can be defined more easily, there are no guaranteed results with spiritual course offers. However, there are no guaranteed results when you visit the medical doctor, either. Therefore, no false expectations should be created, but offers should always be communicated openly and fairly.

3.2 Implications for further research

So far, the author has only interviewed the supplier side. The survey of travellers and course visitors in the field of new spiritual tourism is still pending. Another way could be to examine online feedback, such as blogs and comments from corresponding participants.

A further aspect meriting future research is the development of quality criteria in spiritual tourism.

3.3 Implications for practice

For new spiritual tourism, a crucial point is to create offers that enable the visitor to experience and feel the inner self beyond the boundaries of religious denominations. It is all about allowing people to break out of a restless everyday life and come back to true contemplation. This is because deep down we are searching for meaning, which is becoming more and more difficult to find in today's times of permanent media exposure and the expectation of being approachable and available at all times.

An important question for all of us is, what is our main goal, distraction or deepening our sense of life? For those who are interested in deepening themselves, we should offer new travel opportunities that dig deeper into our own hearts. However, such offers can only be developed by or with those who have already walked this path inwards. Finding truly competent spiritual guides who are primarily concerned with the matter at hand and less with fame or business remains an ongoing task.

In practical terms, to initiate an inner change that has a positive effect beyond the duration of the trip, it is recommended to combine lessons learned on-site with corresponding online products (apps) to support the continuation of learned meditation practice or physical exercises at home.

After all, sustainable is only that which we can successfully incorporate into our everyday lives and deepen step by step. If we succeed in this, the outer journey also becomes an inner journey. The aim of this essay was to provide some first hints for such a journey.

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