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Why We Still Go on Pilgrimages?

Yaniv Belhassen^{1*}, Joseph M. Cheer² and Joanna Kujawa³

¹Department of Hotel & Tourism Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

²Faculty of Arts, School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics, Monash University, Australia

³Kaplan Business School, Melbourne, Australia

As Christmas holidays are approaching, millions of people are planning to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. About 2 million will crowd the streets of the city of Jerusalem during that time. But pilgrimage is not only a Christian idea. The Hajj or the pilgrimage to Mecca in the Islamic tradition is an obligation of a good Muslim, and over 3 million visit Mecca each year. There are many examples of other religious pilgrimages such as Hajj [1], Kumano Kodo [2], Kumbh Mela, The Way of St James etc. that consistently grow in popular appeal [3].

Indeed, these journeys are not limited only to traditional religions as many people who have removed themselves from institutionalised religious tradition travel to alternative places of worship. Indeed, pilgrimage has become a big business nowadays with at least 240 million people going on a pilgrimage each year.

The question we need to ask: What is the strange appeal of pilgrimage to a modern person?

The answer might be found in Joseph Campbell's classic, *The Hero with Thousand Faces*, where he suggested that a pull towards a journey of transformation is the universal motif for all human beings [4]. Thus, modern pilgrims who might even identify themselves as atheists or 'spiritual but not religious' hit the road in the search personal and spiritual development along with more hedonistic and material desires such as wealth, security and power.

Indeed, the 'spiritual but not religious' [5] is a new emerging category of pilgrims who seek personal fulfilment and connection with "something greater" than themselves but are not interested in association with the existing institutionalised religions. They consciously seek new definitions and encounters of spiritual experiences removed from what organised religions offer and sometime connected to indigenous cultures in the visited destinations (e.g., ayahuasca in Brazil, peyote in Mexico) [6,7]. They are also actively engaged in creating new rituals which subjectively and collectively represent their search for an authentic experience of the personal quest for meaning in life (e.g., neo-Shamanism workshops) [8].

Contemporary philosopher Alain de Botton captures the essence of why we travel proclaiming [9]:

If our lives are dominated by a search for happiness, then perhaps few activities reveal as much about the dynamics of this quest – in all its ardour and paradoxes – than our travels. They express, however inarticulately, an understanding of what life might be about, outside the constraints of work and the struggle for survival.

The popularisation of traveling as a cultural practice that contributes to personal growth developed in the 17th century. In Europe, the Grand Tour [10] is the best-known example of how the more privileged classes travelled abroad to gain invaluable life experience as part of the transition to adulthood. A contemporary equivalent of the Grand Tour is the gap year between high school and college, during which budding adults travel for much the same reasons as their European predecessors, questing for a meaning in life. Travel, as Pico Iyer [11] says is a 'quest not just for the unknown but for the unknowing...in search of an innocent eye that can return to a more innocent self'.

People travel nowadays not only because it is more accessible economically and technologically, but also, and no less importantly, because of the positive connotations associated with leisure traveling. These connotations are usually related to traveling as a sign for happiness and/or of well-being of both the travellers and the societies in which they live. In this context, the recent emergence of the spiritual tourism market of yoga, meditation and self-development retreats can be seen as natural development [12].

American writer Jack Kerouac epitomises this quest for meanings through traveling in his book "On the Road," where travel is undertaken with seemingly reckless abandon in the desperate hope of finding something worth holding on to [13]. As Kerouac proved traveling may also provide the detached mental space to reflect not only about one's own life, but also the meaning of life in general. In short, travel allows us to re-examine our lives and experiment with alternative lifestyles [14]. In other words, regardless of the purpose of the trip traveling inspires us to think deeply about issues that are usually taken for granted or overlooked in our daily routine. Travel can be therefore seen as a powerful tool for meaning-seeking and meaning-making engagements [15].

Campbell concluded his research on the archetypal hero with the observation that modernity made each one of us a potential hero who aspires for self-actualization. Inspired by the life stories of mythic heroes, we should look for our own personal journey of adventure and transformation. It seems that tourism is the mechanism through which Campbell's prediction about the hero today can come true in each one of us. In Joseph Campbell and *The Power of Myth* Campbell opined: "My general formula for my students is 'Follow your bliss.' Find where it is, and don't be afraid to follow it [16]."

This could as well be a motto for the new pilgrims, 'Find your bliss through travel'.

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*Corresponding author: Yaniv Belhassen, Department of Hotel & Tourism Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, Tel: +972-50-5511631; E-mail: yanivbel@bgu.ac.il

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