
BOOK REVIEW

Norman, Alex. 2013. *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society*. London: Bloomsbury, x + 239pp. ISBN 978 1 4725 1461 5. Pbk. £19.79.

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The area of material culture is only now opening up in the study of religion. Although sacred sites have featured in textbooks for several decades, and scholars such as Ninian Smart identified the “material dimension” as an important aspect of religion, the idea of understanding how sacred spaces, locations and objects are treated by members of religious communities, spiritual seekers, and tourists has only recently been recognized as having an important bearing on our understanding of religion and spirituality.

Alex Norman's *Spiritual Tourism* focuses on two well-known pilgrimage places: Rishikesh in North India, and the Camino of Santiago de Compostela. These two venues were selected because both places accommodated spiritual tourists in a concentrated area, and because their contrasting features enabled the identification of differences between East and West. The book identifies the various motives of those who made the pilgrimage, and maps out differences between tourists, spiritual tourists, and religious tourists. Norman's research methods involved fieldwork observation, combined with semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. The author's sample of informants was found on location, and consisted somewhat randomly of those who were willing to talk to him. His fieldwork involved personally following the pilgrimage route from Le Puy en Velay, in France, to Santiago the Compostela on foot – a journey of over 1500 kilometres, taking over two months.

After a general introduction to spiritual tourism, the book is divided into three sections. Part I introduces the two spiritual tourist sites; Part II addresses issues relating to the history of travel, leisure travel, and contemporary forms of religious life; Part III returns to the two locations, discussing how these are understood in the spiritual tourist's mind. As well as eliciting the motives of the spiritual tourists, *Spiritual Tourism* includes a fascinating chapter of the history of travel, travel writing, and tourism, and a further chapter on the history of spiritual tourism in India.

The informants suggested a diversity of reasons for their journey. Some wanted to find the geographical origins of spiritual practices, while others felt that the atmosphere of the venues enabled an intensity of concentration, not interrupted by one's work and regular social environment. Some felt that Rishikesh offered a range of spiritual activities that enabled spiritual choice, while walking the Camino provided time for inner reflection. Others regarded the visits as enabling them to find answers to existential questions, or to experience personal healing.

As the author acknowledges, the boundaries between pilgrimage, religious and spiritual tourism, and leisure tourism are blurred. Pilgrimage need not be exclusively religious, he contends, citing Graceland and Gallipoli as examples of secular pilgrimage places, and it is also possible to go on a pilgrimage for non-religious reasons. While pilgrims or religious tourists are typically bound by their own religious traditions, spiritual tourism is not necessarily governed in this way, and can be open-ended: at Rishikesh, only around 90 per cent are not part of any religious tradition. Important characteristics of spiritual tourism involve a rejection of conventional Western values: a typical leisure tourist uses convenient forms of travel, in contrast to the hardship of walking the Camino on foot. Also, as Norman points out, spiritual tourists feel able to engage in discussion of spiritual matters among themselves – often a socially unacceptable topic back home.

An appendix speculates briefly about the future of the spiritual tourism, mentioning the recent Australian practice of walking the Kakoda Track in Papua New Guinea, in the footsteps of Second World War soldiers, and – more speculatively – finding opportunities for spiritual reflection in space tourism. As far as the study of spiritual tourism and sacred locations is concerned, however, Norman has researched the topic from the point of view of tourists themselves. Interestingly, none of Norman's informants mentioned the role of Rishikesh in Hindu mythology, being the place of Lord Vishnu's appearance, as recounted in the *Skanda Purana*, and the site where Lord Rama reportedly killed the demon king, although the role of St James's relics at Santiago de Compostela is mentioned as having significance. Perhaps one ought to conclude that a sense of tradition and history has a greater bearing on pilgrimage than on spiritual tourism.

Norman has provided the service of combining sources on anthropology, leisure and tourism in pursuit of an area in the study of religion that has hitherto received insufficient attention. *Spiritual Tourism* will undoubtedly be of interest to scholars who wish to pursue the themes of travel and material culture in religion, as well as students who are studying research methods.