

Educational Travel – where does it lead?

D H Bodger, P M Bodger, H Frost – School of Continuing Education, University of Nottingham.

"Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience. He that travelleth into a country before he hath some entrance into the language, goeth to school and not to travel" – Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

The traveller, as opposed perhaps to the tourist, has always "suffered" improvement through the experiences that are an essential part of travelling. Travel for the sake of education has a long history. The development of the "Grand Tour" was important because it provided an opportunity for the movers and shakers in society to develop a knowledge and understanding of other key cultures in the world and to learn one or more other languages. This was important in their cultural development – the dictionary defines culture as "improvement by (mental or physical training); intellectual development". It made them more effective as politicians and administrators as they developed an understanding of the peoples and cultures that they needed to work with across their worlds. As such it perhaps provided the first right of passage to improve oneself through international travel. The development of cheap and easy international travel in the second half of the Twentieth Century not only provided mass opportunity to enjoy holidays that promised endless sunshine and cheap beer but also made it possible to offer variations on the Grand Tour to a wide section of the population.

Today the term educational travel could be taken to mean any of a spectrum of travel opportunities: from the school child going on a study holiday to a Mediterranean Cruise with a guest lecturer, or a language student studying abroad to an adult course of study involving travel to a specific site or sites that are related to the subject. This presentation confines itself largely to the last of these. It is concerned with what we call educational study tours, travel packages for adults where education is a major or the prime objective.

Such study tours have an emphasis on learning; participants are exposed to situations that encourage them to learn and understand with the aid of skilled leaders who provide a background of information, lectures, and activities which add to their experiences. Such programmes are both cultural in their impact and involve a direct cultural element, either through contact with modern cultures, or through the enhanced understanding of those of the past. These programmes can also encourage cultural diversity, bringing together people with different backgrounds and aspirations but with a common purpose – the course of study – and bringing them into close contact with people in the host location. Some are designed to provide an opportunity to gain university credits for work done on the study tour, credits which can be put towards an award, and as such these holidays can provide a route back into learning for potential mature students. They also have an impact upon the traveller that goes beyond the overt. Group learning and group travel have social impacts and they provide opportunities for the development of transferable skills, from the development of scepticism and criticality to confidence in unusual situations.

The other key feature of an educational travel programme is that it is a travel experience where the destination is determined by the educational and learning requirements. The destination and the itinerary will be planned to meet the perceived learning needs for that programme and thus it should provide a learning experience second to none.

Educational travel of this sort really developed from the 1960s onwards. Initially it was a function of educational institutions, for example: university extra-mural departments which added a field trip to a class that had run through the winter months so that students could see for themselves the objects of their study. Educational organisations

like the FSC (Field Studies Council) were set up with the object of educating people by taking them into the field to learn. From beginnings such as these programmes that were designed to be self contained were developed and marketed to those who were already engaged in adult education activities.

Britain was not alone in this, other developed Commonwealth countries did much the same. In America there was no traditional educational programme from which it could develop but none the less educational travel became established. The formation of Elderhostel in New Hampshire in 1975 set a pattern which has had a major influence on Educational travel ever since. Elderhostel was set up by two visionaries – Marty Knowlton and David Bianco. Knowlton, a traveller, former educator and free-thinker who had seen the role that extra-mural departments, folk schools and community education programmes played in Europe, combined that concept – unknown in the USA at that time – with the value for money accommodation provided by youth hostels, and saw an opportunity to provide educational opportunities for retired Americans. Bianco was the director of residential life at the University of New Hampshire and saw the potential for universities to provide basic accommodation and tuition. Together they conceived a learning programme for people aged 55 and over that provided stimulating learning programmes with comfortable, inexpensive lodgings.

In 1975 Elderhostel offered its first programmes to 220 participants across 5 campuses in New Hampshire. In 1980 more than 20,000 participants took part in programmes in all 50 states and most Canadian provinces. They offered their first international programmes in Mexico, Britain and Scandinavia in 1981. Today Elderhostel is the world's largest education and travel organisation for adults 55 and over with nearly 10,000 programmes offered in about 100 countries.

Elderhostel was important not just because of its impact in the US but because it led to a number of partner operations being set up in other countries – for example Elderhostel Canada and the Australian College for Seniors. Initially these provided programmes for incoming Americans but then moved on to offer programmes both within their own country and abroad for their own countrymen.

The development pattern in the UK was different. A number of universities did set up programmes on their own campuses – as we did here in Nottingham. Some began to work together marketing their summer schools under the banner "Summer Academy". These differed significantly from Elderhostel in not applying a minimum age restriction – though the majority of participants were over 50. Also, whilst Elderhostel has always shunned offering credit, many of the university providers have offered credit to students who complete work set as a part of the course.

A feature of the 1990s was the series of international symposia under the Global Classroom banner. These brought together educational providers and the travel industry to discuss common issues, share best practice in educational travel and to forge links, many of which have continued to the present day.

Many UK universities now fund part of the running costs of their student accommodation through hosting conferences in vacations and such accommodation ceased to be inexpensive and took the programmes into a higher price bracket. There was also a market shift with the development of cheap air travel in Europe when the cost of a study tour to a European destination became little more than the cost of a programme based on a university campus back home. Demand fell for campus based programmes and today we have no summer school here in Nottingham and Summer Academy closed down its operation last September.

This withdrawal by educational institutions went further and most of the universities in the UK that had an education travel operation have withdrawn them in recent years or

returned to providing an add on travel component to a weekly class based course. In part this has been due to competition from the changing values of existing holiday providers, many of whom are now catering for the conscientious traveller, in part through the increasing requirements of UK and EU travel regulations and, possibly most importantly, an increasing need to focus on the core requirements of full time undergraduate teaching and research demands as UK universities have seen their funding cut year by year.

To an extent there has been a similar pattern of change in other Commonwealth countries with HE and FE institutions that worked with Elderhostel in the 80s and 90s withdrawing from the field. However this does not imply that educational travel is on the wane. Quite the contrary: whilst we cannot see the same pattern as that shown in the growth of Elderhostel throughout the period what we do see developing is a greater diversity of provider.

There are some traditional educational players still in the field. We have our own study tour operation here in the University of Nottingham which provides a wide range of programmes from weekends across the UK to study tours around the world. The FSC and ACE (Association for Cultural Exchange) have also grown and now offer large and respected study tour programmes. Some of the early players have moved out of educational institutions and set up travel companies that offer educational travel – this is the case in Australia and Canada for example. Some of these have retained a link to an educational partner and use this to enhance their programmes. There are also examples of travel companies that were established to provide educational travel from the outset – Andante Travels in the UK is one such – and these have gone from strength to strength.

Elderhostel has its competitors in the USA too, both from commercial organisations and from institutions offering educational travel. A particularly interesting example from the USA is the growth of Earthwatch. Earthwatch offers programmes (to all nationalities) where the traveller joins a research project led by an expert team somewhere in the world. Participants get involved doing valuable work on programmes such as archaeological digs and biological research in locations around the world. The success of these research programmes is totally dependent upon the Earthwatch volunteers who between them provide the staffing and at least part of the funding for the project. The cost to them for their holiday is high as they are funding the programme as well as paying for the privilege of aiding key research, but pay they do for the satisfaction that they get from participating. Overall then the picture is one of a developing market with a variety of products that shows no sign of decreasing.

If we drill down a little then we can see a change in the nature of the product. Early developments, like the establishment of Elderhostel, often concentrated on relatively low budget offerings with basic facilities – the use of field stations with multiple occupancy rooms for example. This has changed; educational travellers today expect en suite – unless the location presents an unavoidable reason why this is not available – and many of the programmes offer quality accommodation and facilities as well as quality education. Even Elderhostel has lost much of its focus on university style accommodation on its overseas programmes and uses hotels in many places. Whilst some of this change may be due to a reduction in the relative cost of quality facilities, much of it is market driven. Travellers have come to expect a certain level of accommodation, reliable travel arrangements, etc. and are prepared to pay more than the average package traveller to get these as part of their experiences. The greater cost of an educational package is the value added offered by the learning experience and many people are clearly prepared to pay for this as they value the learning.

The travel market in the UK has also shown a wider shift in buying patterns to reflect value added in travel packages. Adventure and eco-tourism are key areas in this shift. Neither of these are mutually exclusive, nor do they exclude educational travel. Indeed educational travel is often linked to eco-tourism in the broad sense, encompassing as it

does the understanding and conservation of natural environments and human cultures and artefacts. There has been a growth in companies that claim to be ethically motivated and a growing realisation of the importance of sustainable tourism.

"AITO has long been in the lead as far as environmental initiatives are concerned. Many AITO members' holidays are, by their very nature, 'green' in aspect - gites in rural France, for example, and their stable mates in rural Italy and rural Spain, where holidaymakers meet the local people, live as part of the community and where their money benefits local businesses. Equally, the adventure travel companies claim to place up to 60p from every £1 spent into local purses, while in general a sense of the importance of responsible tourism permeates the operations of the great majority of AITO members." [Association of Independent Tour Operators]

It seems fair to assume that many, if not all, of the travellers who choose to book with such tour operators do so in some measure because of the value added that they perceive coming from this element of their packages.

Just what is the value added in the educational travel context? As stated earlier the defining feature of educational travel is travelling to study things in their context and environment. To someone with a love of Renaissance art and architecture a visit to key places in Italy together with an expert tutor is a far more effective learning experience than just looking at books, photographs, web pages or whatever. We do not have to be educationalists to understand that experiential learning is the most effective form of learning. Going and doing can never be replaced nor matched by lectures or books. Combine this with an appealing destination and value for money package and you have a winning combination for the person who wants to expand their horizons and exercise their mind.

A further feature of educational travel is that the majority of the domestic programmes can be classed as short breaks. Short break penetration in the domestic holiday market is increasing according to research by Key Note, as is the second holiday. They also find that short breaks have a higher penetration among adults who are staying single – and a common feature of the educational travel programme is the high number of single travellers.

It is arguable that there is a wider reason in here. As people travel more the superficial approach loses its value. As Horne (1992) observes "We can never 'do' a country, or a city, or even a street, and to believe that we have done a monument by standing briefly in its presence and ticking it off on an itinerary is foolish and petty." He goes on to reflect that "Sightseeing can become a pilgrimage in which certain secular objects are given properties similar to holy relics. What the tourist-pilgrims seek is physical, mental or cultural regeneration." His view that the intelligent traveller is seeking more than just being able to tick things off but actually trying to see the objects in a new way gives a powerful reason for such travellers to seek the sort of support that an educational travel programme can provide.

One must also question the traveller's choice of a package rather than a personal exploration. Clearly a key feature will be the presence of the expert who can add much to the experience by sharing their enthusiasm and knowledge. Travelling with a group of like minded people is also important to many - the intense nature of learning in a group that is totally immersed in an experience has an effect upon the group members. It teaches awareness, it affects behaviour and can literally change people's lives. The effect of the experience on the travellers can also have an effect upon the impact of the experience. It can provide them with a unique insight into the destination and its culture and help to ensure better international understanding. The value of a form of tourism that develops understanding of, and celebrates the environment versus the placeless resorts and manicured destinations is such that it will provide gains to a destination, to

its culture and to how it is perceived by the outside world. Those who do experience such travel tend to return for more and repeat business is an accepted norm in educational travel (60% to 70% repeat business is the norm – unpublished: Global Classroom Symposium 1990). Clearly it is therefore providing satisfaction to these travellers and learners.

Despite all the advantages which we can see for the educational traveller, the current market segment is a very small one if we confine ourselves to packages that are truly education dependent. Is this a true reflection of the potential market? We know that once bitten educational travellers tend to become hooked. Maybe we have yet to find the best route to capture our travellers in the first place.

Many practitioners in the field will argue that Elderhostel's continuing success is in no small part due to its focus on the 55 plus age group. Does this offer a useful guide to us in the UK? If we look at the UK population and tease out some of the trends from recent years we find a number of interesting facts. As with most other developed nations, the UK population is witnessing a decrease in the proportion of children under 16 and a rise in the number of elderly citizens, such that by 2007 the proportion of the population of state-pensionable age will outnumber those aged 16 years or under. There is a corresponding decrease in the number of people of working age and this effect will continue to impact on population structure for decades to come. The Government's autumn 2003 population predictions show an increase in the 45 and over age group between 2001 and 2011, and two thirds of that growth is in the 45 – 64 age group (National Statistics Online 2003).

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of people who have taken early retirement, often in order to travel and develop further interests that they could not satisfy whilst in employment. Personal wealth, at least in terms of disposable income has, on average, risen together with an increasing willingness to spend some of this money on oneself. Research is showing that maintaining an active mind, continuing to stretch it with learning and other activity, is important in warding off senility. Health in later life is, on average, better and people are remaining physically active longer. Should we, therefore, be concentrating our marketing on the older traveller? In making any decision on this we must not lose sight of two things – first that the disposable income has increased markedly for some younger sectors of the population and second that current predictions show a possible decrease in disposable income for pensioners in the future.

"This will impact ... in the worker-pensioner ratios and so the fiscal burden of the government and tax burden on the population. In turn this will affect disposable income and so consumption levels such that the current generation of senior citizens may well be one of the last that can enjoy early retirement with a relatively high level of income."
[Mintel]

At the same time we can see a change occurring in the way in which the UK traveller approaches their holiday booking. There has been a rapid growth in media exposure of holiday opportunities. The number of programmes devoted to travel opportunities on television and similarly the increase in holiday magazines has raised the profile of holidays with "added value" so changing people's aspirations away from basic packages. The media are also encouraging people to learn by offering further information about the subjects of educational programmes, usually in the form of links to internet sites.

Research by Key Note has shown that independent leisure travel is becoming ever simpler to organise, notably through the internet with the opportunities this provides to cut out the intermediaries. Thus a proportion of travellers now search out their travel arrangements via the internet knowing that they can often build their own package for less than they would have to pay on the High Street. This has become particularly

significant in the UK domestic market. However it has impacted less significantly on package travel booking habits as yet. Here the trend has been more to using the internet to cut out the travel agent and book direct with the tour operator.

"Despite widespread use of the internet to research holidays, significant numbers of British travellers still book their holidays through travel agents and tour operators. Indeed, according to an ABTA survey, the numbers using travel agents to book holidays have declined steadily from 78% in 1990 to around 60% in 2002, while those booking directly with a tour operator have risen conversely from 19% to 36% in the same period." [Mintel]

Exploring the Key Note research further we see that there is evidence that the UK travel industry has shown that it is capable of adapting to the market's changing needs. This it is doing by opening up new destinations, offering value added services and new products such as adventure and activity holidays. Many of these, just as educational holidays, offer a value added which cannot be obtained except by travelling in an organised group.

All of this indicates that there is a potentially growing market which could be ripe for targeting by the educational travel providers. Summarising the issues we find that:

1. Educational travel has:
 - an established history and role in travel provision;
 - shown steady growth and expanded its horizons;
 - shown that association with a respected institution is a valuable selling point;
2. Current demographic trends show:
 - an ageing population;
 - improved health in seniors;
 - early retirement patterns;
 - increased leisure spend;
3. Current market trends include
 - moves towards providing value added, often of the type offered by educational travel;
 - a growth in popularity of short breaks – this fits well with the nature of most educational travel programmes;
 - cost alone is not an over-riding factor in holiday selection;
 - a move away from beach holidays to a demand for a holiday that includes some self improvement;
 - a growing number of tour operators introducing sustainable and eco-tourism strands into their programmes;
 - increasing public perception of environmental issues.
4. Logic tells us that sustainable tourism has to be the way forward, for without there is no future for tourism.

So where does educational travel lead? It is not likely that the demand for sun and sand holidays will go away completely. However there is a growing number of potential travellers which could be tapped. Many of these people have time and money together with a desire to widen their minds and experiences and follow up interests and hobbies. Whilst there are tour operators who offer an element of education in their programmes there is a gap between them and those providing a true educational travel programme. In addition the providers who do offer true educational travel are very thin on the ground.

We consider that there is a market niche here which could be exploited. In the current climate it is unlikely that educational institutions will rush to fill this gap alone. However there is a role for them in working with an appropriate tour operator. The tour operator would provide a comfortable and safe learning environment. The educational institution would provide the quality learning experience. This would then combine the unique skills of each and provide a credible value added with which the tour operator could attract

new business. It is worth noting here that this could apply equally well to incoming tourism as it could to outbound packages.

There is a further point. Today there is an increasing demand from consumers and society to recognise the importance of a sustainable approach to our demands and the potential negative impacts of geographical consumerism. Sustainable tourism can only be achieved by education of the traveller. Consumers will then come to want and expect tour operators to be responsible. By its very nature educational tourism is sustainable. It is successful because it recognises the unique value of the destinations, it teaches the value of those destinations and provides a cultural understanding that can only benefit such destinations. Is there then a natural link here? We are probably going too far if we suggest that since educational travel is sustainable tourism and teaches the value of sustainability therefore all travel should be educational travel! However, if by expanding the opportunities for educational travel we can encourage more people to understand the value and importance of culture and cultural diversity throughout the world, we can engage their public support to help ensure its survival.

"Travel is addictive ... Globe trotting destroys ethnocentricity and encourages the understanding and appreciation of various cultures. Travel changes people, and we like the results. Many travellers assimilate the best points of different cultures into their own character." Rick Steves in *Asia Through the Backdoor*

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