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## **Panacea or peril? The implications of Neolocalism as a more intrusive form of tourism**

By Makarand Mody and Kyle Koslowsky

Winter 2019



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The tourism industry is like a mirror: what it offers often reflects the trends that we see in society more broadly. The tourism industry from 30 years ago is very different than the one we see today. In particular, there has been a renaissance of sorts in the accommodations industry with the emergence of a plethora of alternative lodging experiences. Companies like Airbnb and HomeAway have changed the way tourists immerse themselves in destinations and the kinds of experiences they have while there. It is important to reflect on how these new forms of travel impact the destinations they facilitate and the local populace who reside there. These new tourism experiences increasingly leverage a societal trend towards *neolocalism*, defined as “a deliberate seeking out of regional lore and local attachment by residents (new and old) as a delayed reaction to the destruction in modern America of traditional bonds to community and family” (Shortridge, 1996, p. 10). Flack (1997) identifies neolocalism as an attempt to reassert the “distinctively local” in response to a landscape increasingly devoid of the unique. When applied to the tourism industry, neolocalism appears in the form of tourists seeking out more “authentic” experiences that enable a deeper engagement with a destination and its locals, spurred by tourism providers that create specific products to cater to these new kinds of needs. In principle, much neolocal tourism rejects the kinds of tourism pursued by the *mass tourist*,

perhaps best evidenced in Airbnb's "Don't Go There, Live There" campaign, which borders on disdain towards the habits of the mass tourist—the boat tours on the river Seine, “doing” Paris on a Segway, or taking selfies in front of the Eiffel Tower.

With neolocal travel practices becoming increasingly prevalent, consumer behavior in the United States is in a period of transition. Consumers are moving away from traveling like tourists—in a sanitized predictable environment often controlled by travel intermediaries—to wanting to live and experience destinations like locals do. No longer is traveling to Paris to see the Eiffel Tower enough, the consumer now wants to experience the cafés in Paris that only locals know about or learn about the secret spots of the Montmartre area of the city, spots that are “hidden from the usual tourist paths and crowded places. So, you will see the real Montmartre and you will get the feeling of a real Parisian” (Airbnb Experience - “Discover secret spots of Montmartre”). We argue that neolocalism in tourism, while noble in its ambitions and multifaceted in its benefits, potentially proliferates an unhealthy level of separation between the *seer* (the tourist) and the *seen* (the destination and all it has to offer), resulting in a level of intrusiveness that the traditional barriers of mass tourism do well to moderate.

### ***The staged experiences of mass tourism***

A tourist traveling to a new destination often has a checklist to cover—that famous landmark that defines the city, that vista that one has to photograph, that local delicacy one has never tried before. These experiences, although extraordinarily standard to the local, are invaluable to the incoming tourist, who will often pay good money for a peek into what locals take for granted. “Tourists can see the world with fresh eyes, unencumbered with the daily accumulations of local life” (Nagy, 2018). The tourist thus enters a destination with a perspective that is often very different than that of the local. John Urry (1992) describes this lens as *The Tourist Gaze*. This gaze is made up of “unique and distinctive signs that the tourist may collect” on their travels. By its very nature, the tourist experience is one that is intended to be visually spectacular, differentiated from the mundane activities of everyday life. In this gaze, even the most normal act on a new, exciting backdrop creates a memorable experience. Urry describes this ocular phenomenon by saying “many of these gazes are self-consciously organized by professionals,” i.e. the hospitality and tourism industry has acknowledged that the tourist is looking for these specific aspects, and they create experiences to cater to these touristic needs. Enter mass tourism. The professional intermediaries of tourism—moderators of the tourist’s gaze—allow the tourist to experience all that they seek out from the bubble of the tourist resort or the comforts of the tour bus. Such craftsmanship of specific experiences catering to the gaze of the tourist has been alternatively described as “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973).

To cater to the tourist gaze, many tourism destinations established separate all-inclusive locations, creating a staged experience of tourism authenticity while maintaining a barrier between tourists and locals. These areas are often referred to as tourism enclaves, defined as “tourism that promotes all-inclusive facilities and services centred on controlling the cultural and physical environment that tourists experience as part of their stay” (Freitag, 1994). Enclave tourism, a phenomenon dating back to the 1980s, is most prevalent in island destinations. Because of the small geographic size of many of these islands, the need to isolate tourists into a specific locale is essential to the social and economic well-being of the destination’s inhabitants. Tourism enclaves essentially serve as a breakwater to the deleterious effects of rapid tourism growth. This logic applies equally to a small Caribbean island as it does to New Orleans’ French

Quarter. While keeping the annoyances of tourism away from the daily lives of locals, an enclave approach to mass tourism development also presents its own share of problems—lack of local entrepreneurship in tourism, repatriation of tourism dollars to non-local owners and intermediaries, an excessive reliance on tourism in certain destinations, inauthentic intercultural contact, inequitable distribution of resources for tourism over local consumption (for example, locals not being able to access a beach due to a large number of tourists, as in Mallorca), environmental damage due to concentrated tourism activity, among others.



While the staged authenticity of mass and enclave tourism still remains a significant component of the industry, there has been a rapid growth in what Stanley Plog (1974) labeled the allocentric traveler—risk-taking, adventure seeking individuals who like to travel outside the confines of the tourist bubble and experience a destination like someone living there would. The search for the authentic in a world of the staged has made “tourist” a bad word. Instead, one seeks to be a “traveler”, a sexier antithesis to the one who seeks the standardized, cookie-cutter offerings of mass tourism and the tourism enclave. The traveler seeks out the neolocal in tourism.

### ***Neolocalism—an emerging movement***

So, what is neolocalism and why is it important? Neolocalism is perhaps the most recent corollary to a much longer trend of tourists not wanting to be seen as tourists. Instead, individuals want to travel in a manner that allows them to have more immersive, meaningful experiences, to the extent that they blend into the landscape of the destinations they visit. The roots of the neolocal movement in tourism can be traced to the call for more sustainable forms of tourism development in the 1980s, and its more recent manifestation of *responsible tourism*. In addition, a greater mainstreaming of counterculture trends—anti-hyper-consumerism, sharing over ownership, the search for well-being and self-actualization, the need for authentic connection in a hyper-connected world—have embedded the socio-cultural foundations for the neolocalism in tourism. Consequently, the clear and growing self-guilt of being seen as a tourist, an outsider, is best highlighted by MacCannell (1973):



“Touristic shame is not based on being a tourist but on not being tourist enough, on a failure to see things the way that they “ought” to be seen”.

As a response to this rejection of the role of the tourist, travelers are no longer following the path set out for them by travel intermediaries but are instead searching for authentic, locally embedded travel experiences. Enter companies like Airbnb, which have expertly leveraged technology and the power of crowdsourcing to enable access to the neolocal in tourism. Take Airbnb Guidebooks for example. Guidebooks are a collection of all the best places in every city, as told by Airbnb hosts—a way for travelers to “discover a city according to locals”. withlocals is another example of a platform that connects travelers with locals through food and experiences, allowing travelers to get “off-the-beaten track”. In addition, neolocal intermediaries such as KimKim, a company that connects travelers with local travel companies at destinations, are enabling access to a world of experiences that were previously outside the purview of the tourism enclave and typical mass tourism itineraries. In this regard, Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016) found that the unique local experiences in atypical tourist neighborhoods drive tourists who stay at peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodations to explore the destinations more by staying longer. Similarly, Mody et al. (2017) found that in addition to the traditional dimensions of Pine and Gilmore’s concept of the experience economy, Airbnb enabled travelers to experience a greater sense of localness, *communitas*, serendipity, and personalization than in the case of hotel accommodations.



In theory, neolocalism has many benefits, many of which directly counter the perils of mass and enclave tourism, such as: enabling closer cultural interaction and thus a more educational experience for the tourist—mediating globalization through tourism (Brain, 2011), spreading tourism dollars to beyond the tourist zone—providing jobs, increasing community involvement in tourism and local pride (Gotham, 2005; Murray and Kline, 2015), encouraging local

consumption patterns and support for local causes and charities (Graefe et al., 2018), redefining understanding of sense of place and identity construction (Cavaliere & Albano, 2018), and generating support for conservation and environmental stewardship, among others. However, the fact remains: despite its potentialities, research on the effects of neolocalism in tourism is scarce, other than that in the context of craft beer tourism. Instead, anecdotal evidence emphasizes the negative and unintended consequences of neolocalism in tourism, particularly in the context of tourism enabled by P2P intermediaries like Airbnb.

### ***Neolocalism—(NOT) a solution to perils of mass tourism!***

As several destinations are already struggling to cope with the challenges of overtourism, the introduction of neolocal forms of tourism, disseminating crowds of “travelers” away from the safety and security of already established tourist enclaves, often creates challenges that locals, businesses, destinations management organizations (DMOs), governments and policymakers are unable or unprepared to handle. The repercussions of this unpreparedness are multifold.

For destinations, there have been instances of local identity being distorted or lost altogether. For example, a mushrooming of short-term rentals through websites like Airbnb has resulted in tourists in New Orleans staying in neighborhoods across the city—instead of being fenced in to enclaves like the French Quarter, sparking a debate over the nuisance caused to neighbors and resulting threats to the city’s soul (Burdeau, 2016). In Ethiopia and Uganda, the wealthy adventurer’s quest for contact with authentic tribes is causing its own challenges in relation to these tribes’ character. Due to their exposure with Western travelers, some of the tribes look and act much different than a few years ago—dressing differently, asking for money, having drinking problems (“The Rise of Experiential Travel”, 2014). The level of intimate contact enabled by neolocal experiential travel is not always a boon to destinations.

With Airbnb’s rapid growth throughout major cities in Europe and the world, Barcelona is one of many destinations feeling the impacts of a travel industry growing faster than the city’s ability to sustain it. From contributing to overtourism to driving rents up and residents out [see, for example, Wachsmuth and Weisler’s (2018) examination of Airbnb-induced gentrification in culturally desirable and internationally recognizable neighborhoods of New York], Airbnb is cited by Barcelona as responsible for a variety of its tourism problems. Regulators have reactively put in place measures in place to slow the growth of homesharing listings (no new licenses for Airbnb rentals are currently being given out in Barcelona), as well as furthering their ability to monitor and punish those who do not follow regulation (with beefed up enforcement squads). However, enforcement of regulation remains a challenge across cities, with some local councils turning to private companies for enforcement (Leshinsky & Schatz, 2018). Meanwhile, local residents bear the brunt of neolocalism’s impacts, wading through crowds not only at tourism honeypots such as Las Ramblas and La Sagrada Familia, but also through traditionally quiet neighborhoods. Finding one’s once humble café being gentrified to serve tourist-oriented fare, to the *meme-ification* of physical spaces on Instagram, causing sharp increases of phone-wielding tourists hoping to “live local”, neolocalism has long-term consequences for actual locals’ lives (Spinks, 2018). In fact, neolocalism-oriented companies like Airbnb have acknowledged that the pursuit for neolocalism is transforming many neighborhoods around the world, and many before they are fully ready for mass tourism (Peltier, 2018).



Beyond destinations, travelers have often found themselves in challenging situations in their pursuit of the neolocal. For example, several Airbnb guests have received instructions from hosts telling them to conceal their identity as tourists so as to not expose the illegal listing to vigilant neighbors. This creates an uncomfortable environment for guests as it places them in not only an awkward but possibly illegal situation that they were not prepared for. Moreover, it's simply unpleasant to book an Airbnb only to find that residents don't want you there. Travelers have also been at the receiving end of horror stories involving physical harm, hidden cameras in bedrooms, discrimination, scams, and units that just didn't match up to what they promised online. Traveling outside the predictable environmental bubble of mass tourism opens up a whole host of challenges that stakeholders are still grappling with.

***If living like a local isn't the answer, then what is?***

While we are only beginning to wrap our heads around what the neolocal means for tourism, we stand to argue that everything is not all rosy, as the lofty rhetoric of neolocalism often suggests. Neolocalism is not and cannot be a panacea to the world's tourism-related problems and challenges. At the same time, it is unseemly to make companies like Airbnb a scapegoat for often-inherent systemic problems that destinations like Barcelona and Rome face when it comes to their tourism industries. Instead, one must acknowledge that Airbnb is simply an exemplar, a reflection of society's (apparent) need for connection with something deeper than the superficiality of mass tourism's fleetingness. Our hope is simply to stir a debate around the "relatively new lack of separation between touristic and local life" (Spinks, 2018) enabled by neolocal forms of tourism. With international tourist arrivals expected to reach 1.8 billion by 2030, it is imperative that the confluence of mass tourism and neolocal tourism be managed effectively. This requires actors on both the supply and the demand side of neolocal tourism to act responsibly.



On the demand side, it requires sensitivity and thoughtfulness on behalf of the tourist to recognize the potential intrusiveness of their quest for the neolocal. For example, understanding the deleterious effects of using a not-typical tourist destination like Nashville as a “bachelor party” destination can go a long way in mitigating the nuisance that neighbors have to put up with. Moreover, recognizing that most tourism takes place over too short a duration—4 or 5 days, for example—for one to “live like a local” might make tourists more willingly accept their place as an outsider and the associated and often much-needed separation between touristic and local life. As Nagy (2018) stresses: “Pretending to be a local when you are not is inherently inauthentic”. Instead, he states: “to live like a tourist is to travel more deeply, without being concerned with pure harmony and fitting in. Tourists, especially the new wave of thoughtful, educated and self-aware kind, can double down on the moniker to unlock better and more meaningful days on the road and in the world”.

For the tourism industry, understanding the implications of the products they create and how they communicate with travelers is essential. While placing tourists in the heart of the local makes for a great marketing message, companies like Airbnb need to appreciate and take steps towards reconciling the tension between “traveler locals” and actual locals (Spinks, 2018). For example, while Airbnb has a *Responsible Hosting* policy that encourage hosts to think carefully about their responsibilities towards tourists, neighbors and the law, there are no guidelines for tourists on how they should behave when accessing some of most private spaces of a destination’s residents—be it their homes or their local religious affiliate. Moreover, for the industry to recognize its responsibility towards other stakeholders at destinations, and working with these stakeholders to manage the negative and unintended consequences of neolocalism, is essential. For example, Airbnb recently created an office of “healthy tourism”, which aims to promote proper tourism growth management across the world (Peltier, 2018).



Tourism suppliers can also look to leverage the power of the neolocal for more sustainable forms of tourism development. For example, Airbnb’s new innovation lab Samara’s first endeavor is a communal housing project designed to revitalize a small town in Japan. The project is deeply entrenched into the local economy—from using local building materials and craftsmen to training locals to serve as hosts to incoming tourists—and looks to leverage the power of the neolocal to bring a miniature tourism economy to a once moribund place (Kuang, 2016). Finally, it is important for suppliers to modulate their “anti-tourist” rhetoric, which is exclusionary and avoids the reality that most visitors spend their hard-earned money to live like a tourist and that’s not a bad thing (Stiker, 2016). For example, *Tourists* is a 55 acre property in North Adams, Massachusetts that aims to “reclaim and celebrate the beauty of the tourist as someone who removes oneself from the routines of their regular life through travel” (Nagy, 2018). A simple message of welcome to the humble tourist.

In sum, we contend that neolocalism cannot be viewed in isolation of other issues and developments in the tourism industry, such as overtourism. Instead, we argue that, as for the perils of mass tourism, neolocalism’s potential intrusiveness into the lives of locals needs to be carefully managed. As travelers, we must not be ignorant of the results of our choices and our actions. This mentality of conscious travel has been apparent in sustainable and ecotourism for many years, but our considerations today go beyond the natural environment and pertain to the destination’s cultural and social landscape as well. So, as you embark on your next vacation, remember that it’s not a bad thing to be a tourist and not seek out the hyperlocal. After all, as George Bernard Shaw famously said: “I dislike feeling at home when I am abroad”.



Makarand Mody, Ph.D. has a varied industry background. He has worked with Hyatt Hotels Corporation in Mumbai as a Trainer and as a Quality Analyst with India’s erstwhile premier airline, Kingfisher Airlines. His most recent experience has been in the market research industry, where he worked as a qualitative research specialist with India’s leading provider of market research and insights, IMRB International. Makarand’s research is based on different aspects of marketing and consumer behavior within the hospitality and tourism industries. He is published in leading journals in the field, including the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *Tourism Analysis* and the *International Journal of Tourism Anthropology*. His work involves the extensive use of inter and cross-disciplinary perspectives to understand hospitality and tourism phenomena. Makarand also serves as reviewer for several leading journals in the field. In fall 2015, he joined the faculty at the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration (SHA). He received his Ph.D. in Hospitality Management from Purdue University, and also holds a Master’s degree from the University of Strathclyde in Scotland.

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