
How to Present a Marginal Destination? Comparative Studies on Tour-Guiding Methodology in Under-Tourism Areas

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Tomasz Duda¹

Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to show the role of the guide (interpreter) in the new tourism reality. Particularly important seem to be the challenges that await the tourist guide in marginal regions.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The paper uses social research methods based on expert interviews and surveys among users of the narrative process in the Western Baltic Sea Region. Thanks to this combination of methods, a complete picture of the challenges faced by contemporary tourism and the interpretation of tourist destinations was obtained.

Findings: The research showed relationships between the interpretation tools used and the level of understanding of the destination by its users. Particularly valuable are the results of studies indicating such relationships.

Practical Implications: Research has a very strong translation into practical application. With such indications, further interpretive activities can be planned, especially in places that need additional attention, are less well known and face the problem of undertourism.

Originality/Value: The article presents the results of own desk research. The issue presented has not previously been addressed in discussions published internationally.

Keywords: Guiding, interpretation in tourism, marginal areas, undertourism.

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¹Assistant Prof., Institute of Spatial Management and Socio-Economic Geography,
University of Szczecin, Poland, ORCID 0000-0003-2116-4584,
e-mail: tomasz.duda@usz.edu.pl;

1. Introduction

The ubiquity and global reach of modern tourism means that the space of tourist activity is increasingly seen as a place of encounter and intermingling of many cultures, traditions, lifestyles and social behaviors. As a result of the frequent entering of tourists into a new, hitherto unknown (or poorly known) space, numerous challenges arise for tourism organizers, site owners, interpreters and - above all - local communities, who are the main depositories of local traditions, heritage, and behavior.

These include the ability to communicate effectively and promote one's own heritage and space in a sustainable way, widely exploited by a rapidly globalizing tourism market. The development of mass tourism and the progressive unification of tourism services have therefore necessitated the introduction of a professional interpretation of the destination's cultural code, as well as the formalization of the services of a person (tourist guide, interpreter, leader, etc.), prepared and trained to act as an intermediary in the intercultural dialogue between the destination and its consumer (tourist, visitor).

However, it is easier to introduce appropriate interpretive tools and to carry out a guiding narrative in places that are widely accessible, well known and described many times in numerous promotional materials, guidebooks or other tourist books.

Places located in marginal areas, far from the frequented routes of tourist activity, in such cases require special attention and a little more creativity in constructing an appropriate narrative, especially in cases of lack of significant assets or material attractions. Areas affected by *undertourism*, strongly influencing the development of the local or regional tourism space, seem to be of particular interest here.

2. The Tourist Guide in the Face of Contemporary Changes in the Perception of Tourism and the Tourist Space – Literature Review

A tourist guide, or somewhat more broadly, an interpreter of the tourist space, is seen as an intermediary between the place visited and the visitor (tourist). It not only provides reliable information on the history, geography, and cultural traditions of a place, but also helps the visitor to understand its meaning and function in the modern world (Banaszkiewicz 2011; Leclerc and Martin 2004; Mikos von Rohrscheidt 2012).

It also helps to experience the extraordinary and intangible atmosphere of a place, its *genius loci*, together with the positive and negative factors that shape it and give it its original and unique character. A proper tourist guide contributes more to the experience of a destination than the mere assimilation of a message of information, even if it is conducted in the most professional manner (Al Jahwari *et al.*, 2016).

Contemporary tourism is one of the fastest growing and permanently changing social, spatial and economic phenomena in the world. On the one hand, it is based on man's eternal and constant need for rest and leisure. On the other, however, it is subject to constant fluctuations and influences depending on geographical, political, religious or health conditions (e.g. changes in tourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic).

Still, its primary message is its original leisure and cognitive functions. The greatest metamorphosis has taken place in this cognitive part, which until now were realized through information, both oral and multimedia (through various audiovisual tools, information boards, but also mobile applications or virtual issues).

The expectations of tourists are now more focused on individual experiences, experiencing the uniqueness of a place, co-creating tourism products, and participating in the cognitive process, through discussions of equal importance, storytelling, educational games and narrative tours (Beck and Cable 1998; Crosier *et al.*, 2002; Duda, 2020).

In this new and rapidly changing reality, professional interpreters, mainly tourist guides, play an important role. What they present and the way they do it has a direct impact on tourists' perception of the destination. They are the representatives of the destination and a kind of 'ambassadors' of the destination in the eyes of visitors. Erik Cohen (1985) - a pioneer of scientific research on tourist guiding, wrote:

„... the role of profesional guides consists of two components – social mediation and cultural brokerage. In the first case it is all about the mediator's role being in direct contact both with tourists and the local community, whereas in the second the mediation in comprehending different cultures is in question (...)" (after: Rabotić, 2010).

Tour guides are the destination's frontline representatives. They are responsible for achieving a higher level of guest satisfaction and turn a trip into the most enjoyable and memorable tourism experience. It is through such performance that destination guides and interpreters are sometimes referred to as the 'Cinderellas of tourism' (Iriguler and Guler, 2016).

Due to the permanent changes taking place in the tourism space, as well as in social behavior and in the perception of the attractiveness of destinations by tourists themselves, the need for personalized access to information, at any time, from any place using any interpretive tools, has emerged. Responding to such a demand are changes in the narrative modes of tourist guides, the frequent use of multimedia tools and the engaging interaction of tourist activity audiences.

However, the tools used do not replace the narrative or the presence of the interpreter himself, but rather complement his message and enhance the

attractiveness of the narrative. This makes it easier for audiences to remember the message, assimilate the information and thus better understand the value and uniqueness of the space visited. Of course, there is a consensus that digital or virtual technologies are an easy, cheap, and very useful educational tool, increasingly used in the work of a tourist guide.

According to Crosier *et al.* (2002), they include not only the visualization and presentation of unseen or inaccessible spaces (objects), but also many factors used increasingly in the implementation of a guided tour or interpretation of a tourist destination. Moreover, they can be used by a large number of tourists at the same time, without any social, cultural or linguistic barriers (Zhang and Chow 2004; Duda, 2020).

3. Attractiveness of Destinations off the Beaten Track: Problems, Barriers, and Opportunities

The tourist attractiveness of a destination is influenced by many factors, the most important of which include the presence of tangible or intangible cultural or natural assets, tourist and communication accessibility, developed accompanying infrastructure, as well as appropriately prepared and managed promotion and information. Many tourist destinations already have a brand and have developed recognition over the years as a well-designed tourist attraction or even much more - a tourism product.

Top attractions, which are often undisputed icons of the tourist space and destination, are seen as generators of tourist activity and often do not need additional narrative reinforcement to encourage tourists to visit or explore them. Paris, Barcelona, London, or Rome are not just cities but, above all, perfectly functioning tourist spaces where promotion today no longer requires high financial resources or individual interpretive commitment to prove their value and importance for global tourism (Banaszkiewicz, 2011).

But what is the interpretation of places that are located at a considerable distance from the main tourist streams and/or that do not have an iconic attraction and often not even a clearly developed cultural or historical value? Are places of this type doomed to a lack of tourism and a growing phenomenon of *undertourism*?

As numerous observations of tourism activity in so-called marginal areas show, appropriate modifications to the interpretative process can contribute to changes in the perception of this type of destination and transform it into a developing tourism space. Weak tourist traffic and a lack of mass appeal can, besides, further strengthen the attractiveness of a place.

Given the contemporary trend towards the individualization of travel and the search for places with a preserved atmosphere and a still intact *genius loci*, it is these types

of destinations that are increasingly the object of visitors' desire. It is in such places that they find the space to experience a place slowly, to understand it more deeply and to get to know it, rather than to visit it quickly and without a wider context.

An extremely important issue in the process of tourist interpretation of the marginal areas region is the correct identification of the barriers and problems that limit the narrative and the proper understanding of the value, meaning and message of the place visited.

According to that, a social research study based on expert interviews was conducted with a sample of 50 respondents - interpreters (tourist guides) escorting groups in the Western Baltic Sea Region (NW Poland, NE Germany, S Sweden) between 2022 and 2023. This region is not one of Europe's most recognizable tourist reception areas, and in many cases suffers from *undertourism* (Duda 2023). The responses of expert professional interpreters identified a number of problems and barriers they face in their work (Table 1).

Table 1. *Problems and barriers limiting the process of interpreting heritage and assessing the tourist attractiveness of places*

Problems and barriers limiting the process of interpreting heritage and assessing the tourist attractiveness of places, identified by responders
- strongly marked seasonality in tourist activity, limiting activities to a few months of the year.
- limited accessibility, both in terms of transport and tourism, of many sites with a high tourist, cultural and/or natural potential.
- a lack of numerous preserved historical sites which, due to political, cultural and religious changes in their history, have been destroyed or have changed their functions.
- lack of cultural continuity and identification of local communities with the heritage of the place; cultural, religious, and national changes as a result of wars and changes of nationality (the Thirty Years' War, the Northern Wars and the First and Second World Wars).
- considerable differences in the perception of shared heritage between communities divided by national borders after World War II (example of the Pomerania region, now shared by Germany and Poland).
- differences in tourism development, deficiencies or differences in infrastructure and tourist information.
- problems of intercultural, inter-religious and geopolitical communication.
- language barriers between areas with a predominance of Slavic and Germanic languages.

Source: *Own elaboration after survey research.*

Such numerous identified and isolated barriers, appearing in the process of interpreting an area described as marginal, seem to be a significant limitation of an appropriate and, more importantly, attractive interpretation of the destination for a contemporary tourists.

However, they do not prevent the cognitive process, challenging guides and professional interpreters in creating their own ways to attract visitors. By becoming more involved in the cognitive process, as well as by interacting with the place visited, tourists overcome the barriers mentioned above, to which professional interpreters certainly make a major contribution.

They are the ones who, in many cases, see the constraints as opportunities to create a new narrative, using a whole range of modern interpretive tools and appropriate storytelling.

Such opportunities therefore include:

- the possibility of creating a modern interpretation based on an elaborated compromise related to cross-border intercultural dialogue,
- opportunities to individualize interpretation in view of the still small amount of visitors (tourists),
- opportunities to establish a more personal relationship between visitors and the place visited, a broader and more in-depth understanding of the destination's specificity and *genius loci*,
- greater personalization of the message, linked to the weak massification of tourism,
- construction of new, often cross-border cultural and/or natural heritage tourism products, e.g., thematic tourist routes.

4. How to Show the Unknown? Methods for the Contemporary Interpretation of Places, Taking the Baltic Sea Region as an Example

Contemporary interpretation of tourist destinations includes both popular, widely known places located in recognizable tourist reception centers and regions, as well as places that have so far been overlooked, little known, unrecognizable, and located far from the main routes and streams of tourism.

However, while in the case of iconic or at least strongly attractive places with high popularity and recognition in space, interpretation is already based on proven models and includes mostly basic tools, in the case of less attractive or less well-known places, it should be based on more sophisticated ideas and use a variety of methods and tools.

The interpretation of unknown or little-known places carries the danger of using narrative standards, which have so far worked well for well-known and commonly

visited places. The task of the interpreter is therefore to skillfully combine standard measures with an individual approach that is "tailor-made" and explains in an accessible way the uniqueness and significance of the place being interpreted.

The primary objective of the guide in this case is to help understand the destination and explain its significance for the cultural or natural landscape of the region. The ability to tell the story is therefore crucial, as through an appropriate narrative and by engaging the viewer in a dialogue, a message of direct experience of the destination is created. And this is what constitutes the basic function of interpretation, as Freeman Tilden (1957), a pioneer of heritage interpretation, already wrote about.

For the purpose of this analysis, a study was carried out, which included 25 destinations in the western Baltic Sea Region (Poland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden), rather perceived as areas of lower tourist interest and affected by strong seasonality (marginal areas).

Table 2 below shows examples of the interpretive tools used in this type of destination. Each of the examples below is further supplemented by satisfaction surveys – the percentage of tourists who understood a destination previously unknown to them through the media used (Table 2).

Table 2. *Interpretive tools used different type of destination*

No.	Destination with a brief description	Methods and tools for site interpretation	Have the tools used changed perceptions of place?
1	Szczecin – a city in NW Poland, former capital of the Duchy of Pomerania and former seat of the Dukes of the Griffin dynasty. A port city with a multinational history, it is a symbol of the border changes between Poland and Germany after World War II.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - narration guided tours using thematic routes, f. ex: the Gryffins' Route - narration guided tours using historical costumes - thematic guided tours with narration using cultural values - old brewing, old wine traditions, gothic architecture, military heritage, etc. - virtual city walks - cross-border city walks with appropriate narration addressed to Poles and Germans 	<p>YES 78% NO 16% DON'T KNOW 6%</p>
2	Ystad - a small harbour city in southern Sweden (Skåne) with very interesting architecture, with the largest number of half-timbered buildings in Sweden.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - thematic guided tour on the trail of the literary character Commissioner Wallander - guided urban game - Ystad on the trail of half-timbered architecture - interpretation of the city as a center for film tourism - narrated tour; film studios combined with a visit to Copenhagen on the sets of 'The Olsen Gang' - a visit to the city combined with nature walks in the surrounding nature reserves and national parks, the so-called 'Geowalks' 	<p>YES 83% NO 9% DON'T KNOW 8%</p>
3	Bornholm - a Danish island in the Baltic Sea, close to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - exploration of the island by bicycle, making use of the network of excellent 	<p>YES 69% NO 17%</p>

	the coast of southern Sweden, with rich natural and cultural heritage, but due to its distance from Denmark, more often visited by Swedes, Germans and Poles than by Danish residents.	cycle paths - geotourist narrative, linked to the interesting geological history of this part and the Baltic Sea and the presence of an important geological boundary of the European continent - gastronomic tourism and a narrative linked to the island's unique culinary traditions	DON'T KNOW 14%
4	Wolin - a small town in NW Poland, which in the 10th century was one of the most important settlement centres in the southern part of the Baltic Sea. It was the only, or one of the few from this part of Europe to be immortalized in the Old Norse sagas, described as Jomsborg. It is also the legendary settlement of King Harald the Bluetooth.	- narrative guided tours related to the stories of the legendary Slavic and Viking warriors who inhabited the settlement - experiential tourism, participation in historical workshops and historical narration of the former Slavic and Viking settlement - use of thematic routes for tourist narration, f. ex.: the Viking Route, the Cistercian Route and the Route of the Christian Mission of Otto of Bamberg - narrative guiding using period costumes and educational and interpretive tools, reference to Harald Bluetooth and Bluetooth technology.	YES 85% NO 8% DON'T KNOW 7%

Source: Own elaboration after survey research.

5. Summary

The phenomenon of *undertourism*, like the well-known phenomenon of *overtourism* worldwide, strongly influences the unfavorable perception of tourism itself, not only by local residents, but also by its users. A shortage of tourists, underdeveloped infrastructure facilities and inadequate promotion, together with a destination's high tourism potential, contribute to the development of resentment or even hostility towards tourism phenomena.

Its main cause, however, lies in the lack of understanding of the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the space, sufficient information on it, as well as on its heritage, history, and geography. An appropriate source for improving such a situation is a properly prepared and conducted interpretation of the place, which is successfully carried out by local tourist guides.

As research carried out among both experts (tourist guides) and users of the tourist space, who are an integral part of the interpretive process, shows, the way in which messages are conveyed and the use of innovative tools contribute to a better understanding of little-known spaces, a deeper understanding of places located in so-called marginal areas and the acceptance of cultural, religious, or social diversity.

Contemporary tourism and visitor expectations placing a premium on personalized service, individual messages and tourist information, present interpreters with new challenges and greater creativity in the creation of guiding narratives.

Modern technologies, unique educational and interpretive tools, as well as individual and 'tailor-made' messages, are increasingly becoming standard in guiding services. This is particularly evident in places, hitherto overlooked by the mainstream tourist streams, which are becoming new spaces of tourist exploration thanks to their unique storytelling.

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