Somewhat empty meeting grounds: Travelers in South India

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ABSTRACT

Making 'genuine' contacts with local people has been defined as one of the 'pillars' of the ideology of independent travel. In a groundbreaking time-space budgeting survey among travelers in Kerala, India, a contradictory reality was discovered. Western travelers interacted mainly with local service providers, in an instrumental manner. Spontaneous contacts occurred mostly during their travel days when situations such as sharing a train compartment 'forced' the interaction. Interestingly, the 'genuine' contacts with locals were least common on leisure days when there was maximum freedom to look for them. The interest for difference was apparently satisfied in less demanding engagements. An analysis of the spatiotemporalities of the traveler everyday challenged and gave measure to several assumed features of travel culture.

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Introduction

In backpacker studies, today's independent travel studies, meeting the locals in the spirit of adventurous cosmopolitanism has been thought to be an inherent part of the travel culture, even a 'pillar' of traveler ideology (e.g. Elsrud, 2001; Enoch & Grossman, 2010; Loker, 1993; Lozanski, 2010; Riley, 1988; Scheyvens, 2002; Welk, 2004, p. 80). Conversely, significant gaps between the ideological narrative and the practice of travel have recently been exposed. Studies on the empirical reality 'on the road' have for example established that avoidance of the locals and preference for fellow foreigners may be even more characteristic for the phenomenon (e.g. Cohen, 1973, 2004; Hottola, 2004, 2005; Maoz, 2006; Murphy, 2001; Sørensen, 2003). Much like in mass tourism, independent travelers are known to intensively socialize with other travelers of similar cultural background.

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These conclusions point to a degree of similarity between independent travel and more conventional tourism, with its tendencies for organized middle class activities and superficial visitor-host interaction (e.g. Boorstin, 1961; Caprioglio O'Reilly, 2006; MacCannell, 1992; Munt, 1997). Since early studies in the field, package tourists have been defined by their disposition to stay in enclaves and within sightseeing vehicles, with little spontaneous exchange with the locals, who tend to be the people of the service sector (e.g. Weightman, 1987). Today's independent travel is also predominantly about enclaves and moving between them (Cohen, 2004; Hottola, 2005; Maoz, 2006; Westerhausen, 2002, pp. 40–41; Wilson & Richards, 2008).

Qualitative research has already provided a relatively comprehensive picture of the independent travel phenomenon in Asia. A number of studies, such as the ones cited in this text, have been published on the interaction between the travelers and the locals, or the lack of it. A major explanation for the enclave nature of the travel scene lies in the difficulty of intercultural communication: culture confusion and the consequent need to manage exposure and stress by spatiotemporal measures, as defined in the culture confusion approach to intercultural adaptation (e.g. Hottola, 2004, 2005, 2012a). As a result of these studies, we already know why travelers look for the company of other travelers (in-group cohesion with rewarding 'domesticated' difference), tend to avoid their hosts in India (major cultural distance, conflicting agendas) and frequently withdraw themselves in relative or absolute isolation (need to manage intercultural stress).

There are, however, questions which remain unanswered: Preference for in-group engagements may be one of the defining characteristics of independent travel, and tourism in general (Hottola, 2007, 2012a), but is it the full picture? Why would, for example, people who are not that social at home change their habits when abroad? To which degree do travelers actually socialize together, or cooperate 'on the road'? How do they organize their timetables in regard to these meetings, either with fellow travelers or the locals? Are there differences in behavior between the days of transit and stationary days? What is the relative measure of exposure and reversal in the everyday of travel?

Furthermore, could also travelers be interacting mainly with middlemen and women who look for their money (e.g. Lea, 1988; van den Berghe, 1994), or are majority of the contacts free of such agendas? Is the cherished interaction with 'genuine hosts' in fact a feature of traveler everyday, an occasional event, or even an illusion? What about the agendas of the travelers themselves? Do they prefer the instrumental 'front stage' encounters or more authentic ones (cf. Goffman, 1963; Hottola, 2007, 2012a; MacCannell, 1976, 1992; Robinson, 1999)? According to the prevalent traveler ethos, they should prefer the latter.

Time-geographical analysis (e.g. Dietvorst & Ashworth, 1995; Hägerstrand, 1970, 1975; Pearce, 1988) is one possible way of investigating the empirical reality of travel, and obtaining quantitative data to contribute to the developing synthesis. The present study is the first published 24-hour time-space budgeting survey among independent travelers, a much overdue answer to the late Martin Oppermann's (1993) request for them. It attempts to deepen the understanding of the independent travel scene in South Asia by spatiotemporal analysis. The main focus will be on the travelers' social engagement with other travelers and local people, as revealed by the survey. The time-space budgeting method may have been used in tourism and other social studies for four decades, but it has never before been applied in this context, or with the social interaction component.

Research location

Munnar, a hill station and traveler enclave in Kerala, southwestern India, was selected as the research location for four reasons: The town is a popular stop-over for independent travelers with a good variety of nationalities during the winter season traveler migration to the south on the Indian subcontinent (Hottola, 2005). All the main metaspatial categories of the culture confusion theory—private space, semiprivate space, public space and nature—are easily available for time-use choice within a reasonable spatial radius, also by walking if preferred. The metaspatialities thereby provide maximum freedom to choose interaction with other people or to avoid it. The small town is ideal for interviews in public space, with manageable interferences. It is not possible to say which mixture of travelers is representative of the scene in India, but at least Munnar was not overwhelmingly dominated by any traveler subculture.

The town lies in a hub of road connections with frequent bus services within Kerala and to the neighboring states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Munnar, with its approximately 70,000 inhabitants, has a commercial center at the bottom of a valley with services, shops and busy streets. There are forests with hiking routes on the surrounding hills, even though most of the slopes are occupied by Tata Tea Company plantations. There is a wide variety of accommodation available, from dorm beds to guesthouses to hotels and villas, an assortment open for selection either close to services and people, or next to nature. Tourist attractions include chocolate, tea and spice markets, cooking courses, massage therapy, boat trips, Tata Tea Museum, tea estates, dairy farm, and natural wonders such as viewpoints, waterfalls and several national parks and nature reserves, among other things.

As a consequence of a methodological formulation—a two day time-space budgeting survey—also the city of Kochi is portrayed in the research material. The second largest and the most densely populated urban centre in Kerala is about ten times larger than Munnar and has several historical layers of interest for tourism. Kochi is also a major gateway to the region, with its international airport and public transportation services to hill destinations such as Munnar. The close-by Kerala Backwaters and its boat cruises also attract many international visitors. Additionally, several travelers stayed at more serene coastal locations before their arrival in Munnar, by the sandy beaches of the Arabian Sea.

Methods

The main research method was a time-space budgeting survey among a sample of thirty Western travelers visiting Munnar. In this case, a Westerner is defined as a representative of European cultural heritage in a variety of nations in Europe, Middle East, the Americas and Oceania. The sample was constituted by people from eleven nations: Australia (eight), Austria (two), Colombia (two), the Czech Republic (two), Finland (three), France (three), Israel (two), the Netherlands (two), Sweden (three), Switzerland (one) and the United States (two). They were mostly in their 20s (37%) or 30s (40%), with a few in their 40s (10%) or 50s (13%). The composition of travelers in India has recently diversified as a consequence of political developments in Eastern Europe and South America.

The travelers were interviewed with a two-page 24-hour time-space budgeting form, with features designed for the case, such as fifteen minute accuracy and the human interaction dimension (cf. Pearce, 1988). The higher than average accuracy was adopted to make sure that also the short engagements on the road would become part of the material. The paper was completed together, according to the information provided by the interviewees. In other words, the travelers were requested to tell where they had been, what they had done and with whom they had interacted during each fifteen minute slot of a day, starting and ending at midnight. Engagements lasting five to ten minutes were recorded separately and added to total interaction numbers in the end, in units of fifteen minutes. Two such surveys were made with each respondent: one in regard to a 'travel day' involving transportation between traveler enclaves in India, and the other in regard to a 'leisure day', with local accommodation-based movements. The respondents were free to choose the days to be recorded.

In practice, the majority (57%) chose the two days prior to the interview, on the way to and based in Munnar, to be better able to memorize everything in detail. In seven cases (23%), the leisure day was based in Kochi, with a travel day to Munnar. In six cases (20%), other days and locations were selected, when supporting information on time-use were available. Memory problems being a significant source of inaccuracy in time-space budgeting surveys (e.g. Pearce, 1988), a specific effort was made to check the actual duration of each activity, locality and human interaction. The desired accuracy could partly be reached with the help of various time-records, such as transportation timetables, photography file records and digital or written day plans and diaries. A surprising number of such records were discovered, in the light of earlier analyses underlining the un-planned nature of independent travel (e.g. Hyde & Lawson, 2003). Some travelers had habitually written time-accurate plans for each forthcoming day to manage the complexity of travel in India (see also Hottola, 2005).

The travelers were interviewed at four locations, at Zina Cottages, perhaps the most iconic hillside guesthouse in Munnar, at Serene Family Inn, slightly lower down the hill, at Royal Retreat restaurant (popular among both travelers and tourists), and along the main street between the office of Tourist Information and the Royal Retreat, at a park-side stretch north of the restaurant, where discussions

could be had in peace, sitting together on tree trunks. Flashpackers (Jarvis & Peel, 2010), the top end of independent travelers in terms of spending, may have been under-presented in the study as a consequence of this arrangement. They appeared to stay out of town, in the more expensive hill accommodations.

The travelers were approached and asked for a permission to anonymously interview them. Only four of them declined, either because of time restrictions or, in one case, because of suspicion in regard to researcher's agenda. The majority of the people did, however, react in a positive way and were well motivated to provide as accurate information as possible. For triangulation purposes, the travelers were also systematically observed on daily basis. Topical discussions on the themes of the study contributed to research material in a number of situations. The findings of the observations and discussions were collected in a research diary for analysis. They also proved to be valuable for the survey work, enabling comprehensive understanding of the details brought out in the interviews. All in all, the qualitative materials added reflexivity to the somewhat mechanistic time-geographical analysis (cf. Hall, 2012; Shoval, 2012).

Results

The survey produced information on a total of 5,760 fifteen minute time slots (1,440 h) of traveler time-use, half of them on a 24-hour travel day and the other half on a 24-hour leisure day. The results on interaction are, however, best discussed in relation to active hours (AH), which exclude hours in sleep, leaving 929 hours for activities. After the exclusion of the sleeping hours, on average 15 h 25 min per day were left for other activities. The travelers spent on average of eight hours and 35 minutes in sleep per day, 28 minutes more on a leisure day. They woke up on average at 7.45 AM on travel days and at 8 AM on leisure days, respectively. They went to sleep on average at 10.15 PM on travel days and at 10.45 PM on leisure days. The individual people had rather regular wake up times on each day but 17% of them chose to stay up later on leisure days.

The numbers challenge some of the early characterizations of independent travelers being countercultural hippies who party late and wake up late (cf. Cohen, 1973; Riley, 1988). In the sample, only the two Israeli travelers confirmed the stereotype and were responsible of the far ends (noon and 11.30 PM) of variation in waking up and sleeping times (see also Maoz, 2004). The Scandinavians (Finns and Swedes) were the early birds in the mornings and also went to bed earlier than the others.

Unless otherwise indicated, each percentage share in the following discussion refers to the share of time travelers had interacted or not interacted with a category of people at a given period of time. In other words, if ten travelers out of the thirty interacted with other travelers between 8 and 8.15 AM, the share of this interaction was 33% of the total time under scrutiny. The travelers in the paper have not been gendered because no significant gender differences in interaction behavior could be found in the research material.

The categorization of the others, understood along the lines of Lea's (1988, pp. 62–64) groundbreaking analysis of touristic encounters in developing destinations, is as follows: 1) other foreign visitors, 2) local service providers and 3) 'genuine locals'. The difference between engagements with the service providers and the 'genuine locals' lies in the predominantly instrumental, role-guided and business-related qualities of the former, in contrast with the spontaneous and less agenda-driven nature of the latter. The term 'genuine local' was adopted from the travelers themselves, who habitually used these words to describe the categorization from their point of view. Similar terminology has earlier been established in other studies focusing on guest-host interaction in South Asia, and on the imbedded mistrust (e.g. Crick, 1992; Enoch & Grossman, 2010; Hottola, 2004, 2005; Welk, 2004; cf. Krebs & Denton, 1997). On the road in Asia, it is essential for the travelers to first find out if the person approaching them does it for the sake of money, or otherwise.

The combined numbers may add to more than hundred percent because it is possible for travelers to simultaneously spend time with more than one category of people. For example, visitors attending an Ayurveda therapy course in Munnar interacted both with their local instructor (service provider) and with other travelers in the same session.

Withdrawal

The terms interaction, engagement and extension indicate rapport in this text: meeting somebody and the consequent mutual exchange of information by speech and gestures. Conversely, withdrawal and reversal indicate the opposite. Merely observing other people visually is not considered interaction, however active that may have been.

Even though earlier disregarded in independent travel studies, inactivity is an important feature of travel and mobility in general (Bissell, 2007). Out of their total AH, the travelers spent 48% without any contact to other people except their spouse or partner, if he/she existed (Fig. 1). Individual variation was quite extensive, between two and 16 hours of solitude per day. There was a slight difference between travel and leisure days indicating more (4%) reversal on the former.

The bulk of the reversal was spent in accommodations and in nature, but the retreats also included semiprivate and public spaces, the solitude being created by behavioral choices (Hottola, 2005, 2007). It is quite possible to walk the busy streets of India without being engaged in any conversation even though the experience is likely to alert all the human senses. Oftentimes, a temporary metaspatial bubble is created by teaming up with other travelers and by drawing a territorial line between Us and the Others, the locals. This may be done by vocal and body language, for example.

Respectively, long bus rides do not oftentimes include any contact with other passengers, local or foreign, partly because of high noise levels (engine, chassis, radio blasting Bollywood hits) and the constant twists and turns on mountain roads. Travelers may feel crowded (e.g. Hall, 1966; Rodaway, 1994) and establish territories to deter interaction (Johnson, 2010). The focus tends to be on a solitary experience of being transported. Moving on a time-restricted agenda on South Asian streets, on the other hand, requires a partial closing of oneself to outside human interferences, especially touts and conmen with their self-serving agendas (e.g. Crick, 1992; Hottola 2002, 2004, 2005).

The psychological stress of intercultural adaptation and the physical stress of travel combined can periodically be heavy in India for Western travelers (Hottola, 2004, 2005). On travel days, for example, people sometimes needed to wake up by sunrise to catch the first bus, especially if planning to arrive in a far away destination before sunset, which appeared to be a common preference. The transportation took the whole day and could be rough and crowded, and therefore exhausting. They consequently required a period of rest afterwards, which was best available in accommodations of traveler safe havens such as Munnar (cf. Cohen, 2004; Westerhausen, 2002, pp. 40–41; Wilson & Richards, 2008).

In regard to the temporality of hours spent in isolation, the following patterns were discovered in the data: During the active hours of a travel day, withdrawal was relatively dominant (37–87%) throughout the day, with three peaks in connection with morning routines, mid-afternoon occupation
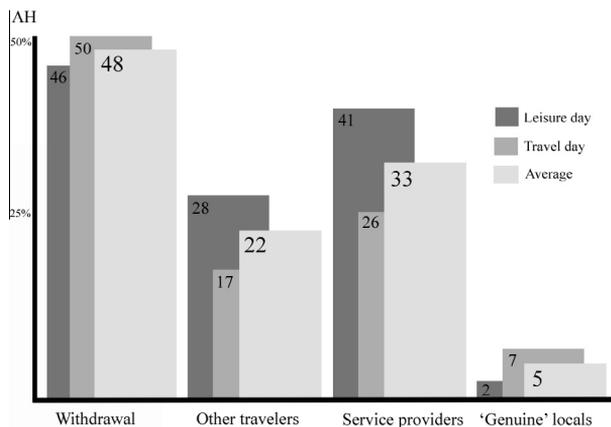

Fig. 1. Percentage shares of active hours (AH) time spent in withdrawal or with other travelers, service providers and 'genuine' locals' on leisure and travel days.

of public transportation (70%) and late afternoon arrivals in accommodations at transit destinations. Securing accommodation was the first priority on arrival and was followed by a period of rest, a dinner in a close-by location and early withdrawal to bed.

The temporality of leisure days followed a somewhat different pattern: Between morning and mid-afternoon, till 3.30 PM, people spent only 27 to 40% of the time without interaction. This was a busy period of shopping, service booking, planning, Internet surfing, phone calling, excursions, and eating activities. In the late afternoon, the situation changed. Tired after the intensive human interaction, physical activity and a proper meal of lunch, half of travelers withdrew themselves into accommodations, had the embodied action of rest (Bissell, 2007), and solitary activities such as reading, and often-times did stress-balancing outdoors excursions such as forest walks or birdwatching after the rest (cf. Haldrup, 2004).

Thereafter, the travelers were again ready to expose themselves to human India by using services such as Internet or massage, doing excursions with more cultural content such as sightseeing in town, shopping and having dinner. Between 5.45 and 8 PM, one third of travelers preferred solitude whereas two thirds had many contacts with local service providers and, increasingly, fellow travelers. After dinner at sunset, the interaction decreased fast.

If the solitude of sleep was included, the until now neglected voluntary isolation constituted two thirds of the total time-use in the survey, both days included. On travel days, this was partly a matter of situational context. During the more relaxed leisure days, the travelers had, however, freedom to choose whether to keep distance to other people or to meet them, and nevertheless chose the former approximately as often as the latter. This may have been caused by intercultural stress. It is, after all, the people who carry the culture and its potentially conflicting norms with them (Hottola, 2005). On the other hand, it is important to notice that 80% of the interviewees were travelling with their spouse or a steady partner, and therefore always had the familiar company at hand. The interaction of this study is about having rapport with people encountered after arrival in India.

Other foreign visitors

In regard to fellow foreigners, the traveler community, 22% of the total AH was spent with them (Fig. 1). Again, individual and daily variation produced wide-ranging results between zero and twenty hours. Interestingly, 17% of the travelers did not interact at all with fellow foreigners during the survey. Almost an equal number, 20%, spent less than four hours with them on the two survey days. At the other end of the scale, 63% spent more than four hours of the 48 hours in company with other independent travelers. In conclusion, more than half of the people expressed significant in-group cohesion and the rest did not.

There was a major difference between the travel and stationary days. On the former ones, travelers spent on average 17% of their AH with fellow globetrotters. On the latter ones, they did it almost twice as long with on average 28% time share. All in all, 44% of the travelers had teamed up with other travelers during their transitions, for periods ranging from half-an-hour to most of the day. Even though teaming up for travel from point A to B is practical because it offers company, decreases the individual burden of problem solving and increases the ability to reduce potentially harmful outside interferences (Hottola, 2007, p. 29), the search for in-group support and company was even more pronounced on leisure days, with 83% attending. The result adds to the earlier qualitative analysis (e.g. Cohen, 2004; Murphy, 2001) and contributes one measure to it.

In regard to the temporality of traveler to traveler exchange, two different patterns were discovered in the survey material. On travel days, only one tenth of the people teamed up with other travelers in the morning. Later on, the teaming up started to gradually increase, first at bus and railway stations, then on board of transportation or at transit junctions on the road, and especially at destinations after arrival. The travelers worked together in their search for vacant rooms for the right price, places to have dinner and shops for late shopping of snacks and drinks. Consequently, engagement levels peaked around 25% in the late afternoon. Afterwards, only a minor share of time was spent time in company of travelers—dining, drinking and socializing—as a consequence of the above-mentioned busy schedule and early travel day rest.

On leisure days, on the other hand, other travelers were frequently and steadily met throughout the day on an average 25% level. This interaction occurred in connection with shared services (massage therapy, yoga and meditation sessions) and excursions (e.g. tea plantation walks), self-made walks in nature or sightseeing by a rented car, sunbathing, smoking ganja (two cases), shopping and dining together, and general chatting and socializing at accommodations. As a rule, the groupings were mixed in regard to nationality, with the exception of the two Israelis, who had alternative timetables and interests and preferred the company of their fellow citizens (see also Cohen, 2004, p. 56; Maoz, 2004).

After 5 PM, there was an increase to on average level of 38%. Even though a majority of serenity-seekers preferred otherwise, in-group cohesion played a significant role in the evenings, after the 'work' of the day was finished. The high period of traveler to traveler exchange was explained by a willingness to actively socialize with other travelers. The shared activities included: swimming, admiring the sunset, watching television, attending a Kerala cuisine cooking course, dining together, smoking ganja (again, two cases) and general socializing over snacks and drinks. The majority went to bed by 10.45 PM on average and only a small minority stayed awake afterwards, with activities similar to the preceding period.

Overall, there was a clear demarcation between the days. On a travel day, in-group interaction was brief and mostly instrumental in solving the practical problems of transits. On a leisure day, it was more about fun and interpersonal relationships among an international but nevertheless familiar community of fellow travelers. On neither day, socializing with other travelers defined the travel culture as the dominant form of time-use.

The local service providers

What about the hosts, the most interesting group of people the travelers interacted with on their meeting grounds in India? All in all, the respondents spent 38% of their total AH in contact with local people. Out of this, a lion's share of 88% (33% of AH) was spent with local service providers (Fig. 1), mostly men, who invariably spoke English fluently and were specifically motivated to meet the visitors. Guesthouse and restaurant managers and staff, shopkeepers and their helpers, rickshaw and taxi drivers, ticket salespersons, tourism officials and touts, Internet café operators, an Ayurveda therapist, a yoga instructor, a cooking course teacher and masseuses were there to serve the foreigners and to financially benefit from these actions.

All in all, each traveler in the survey interacted with Indian service people, formal and informal sector, on a daily basis, the variation being between one and a half to nine hours per day. At first, the result appears to agree with the early views (e.g. Elsrud, 2001; Loker, 1993; Riley, 1988; Scheyvens, 2002) of intensive visitor-host interaction being especially characteristic of independent travel. A more detailed analysis does, however, complicate the issue.

Interestingly, tourism information officials, with their four percent share in this category, were not among the most favored service providers. This is probably explained by the nature of the sector in India. There are both governmental and private information services, oftentimes rather similar in appearance. Furthermore, there sometimes is only a fine line between a trustworthy agent and a cunning tout. In both cases, the people may be looking for their cut in the deal they deliver, sometimes inflating the price of accommodation or transportation up to hundred percent, as some well-trusted 'friends of the travelers' did also in Munnar. There are honest ventures but also the rotten apples in the scene, so the travelers are rightfully cautious about the information services and place their trust more on the grapevine and guidebooks (e.g. Crick, 1992; Richards & Wilson, 2004).

On the other hand, the Westerners spent plenty of time (52%) with taxi and motor-rickshaw drivers, who habitually also acted as self-made sightseeing guides, accommodating the local histories to the needs of the travelers (Sarmento, 2010). The visitors preferred taxis for the local travels on leisure days, instead of buses which were only used to transit longer distances. Long hours were spent travelling around the local sights. During such trips, a driver may follow his customers to each site, to shops and also to restaurants to share a meal with them. The interaction during these journeys was highly variable, depending on the rapport between the driver and his customers. Some people had chatted all the time, some had been less talkative, but exchange of information had in each case occurred.

Shopkeepers were another important group for the travelers, with a 17% share of the visitor-service engagement. This category included all sales from tropical fruits to pharmacy products and Internet time. In Munnar, locally made chocolate was one favorite. According to research material, individual contacts tended to be short, with focus on product selection and price negotiations. Occasionally, chats over unrelated topics developed. The rapport was more diverse in the next category, accommodation managers and staff, with whom travelers interacted almost as frequently (12%). The travelers spent plenty of time in and around their accommodations, with the managers, their families and staff, and the evolving discussions with them were open for a variety of topics after the initial exchange of money and services. Many discussions, such as in connection with breakfasts, travel information enquiries and room services, did, however, remain instrumental.

In the lower frequency range of service encounters were restaurant managers and waiters (9%), including street food stall operators, and, on the other hand, various specialists in the Indian wellness sector (6%): masseurs and masseuses, and yoga, Ayurveda and Indian cooking instructors. In the first case, the interactions were constrained by the situation and its relatively rigid role cast, but did not completely exclude informal rapport. This was normally first initiated by the customers. Especially solo travelers appeared to have interest in chatting with waiters while waiting for the kitchen to prepare the meal, and occasionally induced other guests to join in. In the second case, the situations were more intimate and the conversations therefore more private and diverse. An insignificant amount of time, less than one percent, was also spent in interaction with bus and railways station or airport and ferry staff in ticketing, and other brief service situations during transits between locations.

The temporality of these engagements had certain interesting patterns. On travel days, the travelers spent 'only' 26% of their AH in interaction with the people of the Indian service sector, while on leisure days the share was a rather significant 41%. On travel days, avoidance of unnecessary contacts with locals was a practical solution for reasons explained in the context of withdrawal. Fast breakfasts and check outs, short rickshaw drives, brief visits at ticket counters, shopping on the move, check-ins and dinners did not accumulate much interaction time. The travelers did, however, spend more time with the local service providers, i.e. the locals, than they did with fellow travelers, both on travel and leisure days.

On travel days, the search for services started early in the morning in connection with breakfasts, checking out, buying snacks for the day, local transportation to bus and train stations or airports, longer transits by taxi, and ticket sales. There was a steady increase afterwards, and a major one (on average 42%) at noon, in time spent with service sector, predominantly explained by meals and shopping for food on the road, with some public transportation and, in the case of early arrivals, accommodation search activities. After that, the contacts were steadily on a lower 20% level, indicating that the majority were already being transported (with less interaction). Another peak of up to 50% followed around dinner time between 5 to 7 PM, with a relatively rapid decrease to zero thereafter.

On leisure days, travelers had continuously increasing frequencies of service engagement through the whole morning (peak at 67%) and until early afternoon at 3.45 PM. The period clearly was the high time for spending money for various services and stocking up with goods for personal needs. The activities recorded were shopping (the main activity), brunches and lunches, information searches (the Internet, tourist information) and planning, service reservations, accommodation negotiations, long distance phone calls, local transportation, renting bicycles and cars, wellness services, and guided excursions for sightseeing.

A significant decrease (down to 23%) followed, till 7 PM, with similar activity content. At the beginning of the period, many travelers had an afternoon rest in the privacy of their accommodation. After sunset, the interaction with service sector intensified again to a high level (up to 63%) for an hour, but decreased sharply afterwards. During the intensive hour, the services obtained were dinners (the main activity), a cooking course, Internet information, last shopping of the day and local transportations between accommodations, shops and restaurants.

All in all, interaction with Indian service providers, initiated either by them or by the travelers themselves, was continuously present on both travel and leisure days. The intensity was much higher on the latter, when time was available for an unhurried consumption peak between late mornings and mid-afternoons.

The 'genuine locals'

The so-called 'genuine' engagements with local people—spontaneous, more or less without an agenda involving an exchange of rupees, and with relative situational equality—are often highly appreciated among independent travelers (e.g. Enoch & Grossman, 2010; Welk, 2004). They were amply available in Munnar, with a plenitude of other than agenda-driven locals in the proximity. These encounters did, however, constitute only five percent of the total AH of travel and leisure days (Fig. 1).

The occasions of 'genuine' rapport included chatting with or requesting advice from domestic tourists and commuters, or meeting school children, students, tea estate workers collecting tea, seashore fishermen or Indian cooking course participants, and private conversations with an accommodation manager and his family, who had become friends with a traveler. The variation was between zero and sixteen hours per day, the maximum occurring in connection with a long train journey. Without the sixteen hour case, the share of these contacts would have been three percent.

Among the 'genuine locals', as they were conceptualized by the travelers, fellow passengers in public transportation were an overwhelmingly dominant category. Out of the five percent, 78% was spent in engagement with Indian train and bus passengers. The tendency of middle class Indian families to take Western travelers under their wing in train travel situations is a positive feature of travel in India. On buses, interaction between visitors and hosts was clearly less frequent. In the survey sample, only two travelers had engaged in brief discussions with domestic passengers during the bus rides, even though majority of the respondents had traveled by bus.

The other groups in this category shared the remaining 22% of the five percent. Domestic tourists were second in the ranking order (8%), followed by students and pupils looking for contact with foreign visitors (5%). The first group shared a number of tourist attractions and some activities with the international visitors. The second group used a field trip or a school project as an excuse to talk with foreigners. The rest of the locals, listed above, each scored less than a two percent share.

Analyzing the discursive content of the rapport between travelers and the 'genuine locals' would be another interesting research project. Judging by the conversations heard, the discussions rarely went beyond testing and reproducing the common stereotypic assumptions dear to each party. In the case of Western travelers, comparisons between the present reality, as perceived, and the more favorable realities back home were a common topic. In these comparisons, the Indian partner was for example asked about his working conditions. After an explanation, a description of the situation in the traveler's country of origin followed, with an air of superiority (cf. Lozanski, 2010; Said, 1995). The Orientalist attitude was particularly common among the Swedes, proud of their welfare state model.

Alternatively, Western habits considered to be eccentric or code-breaking by Indian terms—such as living without a marriage and children—were often brought out, for confirmation and wonder. A shared inadequacy in understanding each other's culture tends to render the majority of intercultural encounters superficial, potentially unsatisfying and vulnerable to misinterpretation (Hottola, 2002, 2012b; Krebs & Denton, 1997; van den Berghe, 1994). The Other is therefore measured against the visitor's or host's own norms and values.

The majority of other than service oriented interaction with the Indian people occurred on travel days, constituting 7% of the AH. A low but continuous share, mostly between 3 and 10% of the AH, was spent in engagement with 'genuine locals' throughout the day, the continuity being a result of the sixteen hour train ride case. The interaction was most frequent between 8.15 AM and 2.30 PM (up to 17%), and decreased afterwards. The contacts were mostly explained by sharing transportation with domestic tourists. Other such situations included chatting with local passengers on a bus or receiving a useful tip of information from a man on a street.

On leisure days, the share of AH was only two percent, respectively. Moreover, the 'genuine' contacts with local people were thinly and irregularly spread throughout the day, with main occurrence around 10 AM and 1.30 PM. These interactions occurred in Munnar, in connection with walks on forest tracks and through tea plantations, where the locals encountered had no specific agendas in regard to tourists, and vice versa, or in situations where local pupils or students actively engaged with the foreigners to satisfy their curiosity. The Israeli travelers in the sample were also purposefully looking for local youth to distribute a gift of pens.

All in all, the spontaneous engagement with Indian people was scarce. One third of the interviewees had no interaction at all with 'genuine locals' on the two survey days.

Conclusions

The first application of time-space budgeting survey in an analysis of traveler everyday has been a fruitful one. The results did challenge and give measure to a number of conclusions in qualitative research on independent travel in South Asia, in many ways a unique case in the field. The time-geographical approach to the spatiotemporalities of the everyday did show its benefits by revealing realities otherwise hidden by the romanticized views of travel as an 'antithesis of tourism' (e.g. Welk, 2004). The temporality of time-use revealed interesting patterns in traveler behavior and culture, in particular in regard to differences between transition and stationary days, the two basic components of travel.

Memory problems did not arise in a substantial way, despite the high accuracy, adopted to catch also the short engagements. The main problem proved to be an excess of material. Even in a relatively small sample, the method produced a plenitude of detailed information for analysis, of which only a minor portion may be presented in a single article. Other focuses with their theoretical frameworks need to be published separately. Unlike the critics of time-geography did prematurely assume (Shoval, 2012, p. 175), it was however possible to incorporate social interaction in spatiotemporal analysis. More case studies would be desirable, also in conventional tourism. There are a number of published time-space budgeting surveys in package tourism (e.g. Pearce, 1988), but they all exclude social interaction and analyze mass tourism not representative of today's situation (cf. Vainikka, 2013).

A quantitative analysis contributed to a more comprehensive understanding. As a unilateral project, a time-space budgeting survey may, however, be too mechanistic. It needs a qualitative element to gain depth, by paying attention to the diversity, embodiment and individuality (see also Haldrup, 2004; Hall, 2012). In the present case, a bulk of relevant qualitative knowledge on guest-host interaction had already been published before the study, together with theoretical conclusions, and the survey was based on themes grown in that rich soil, in addition to being grounded in the field material.

The 'big picture' was as follows: Both the travel and stationary days combined, the independent travelers spent 48% of their active hours apart from other people, 22% with other travelers, 34% with local service providers and 5% in 'genuine' engagement with the locals. On travel days, extensions tended to be limited and about brief utilization of shopping, dining, local transportation and accommodation services in the morning and in the evening, teaming up with other travelers for practical reasons and sharing transport with the Indians. On leisure days, mornings and mid-days were about intensive engagement with the service sector, with a break in early afternoon, and mixed interaction with local service providers and fellow travelers afterwards, the latter dominating towards the end of the day. On both days, 'genuine' encounters with locals were not as a rule specifically invested in. It may be true that the duration of an exchange does not define its worth one-to-one, but time is a valued commodity (e.g. Hägerstrand, 1970). The way we spend it tells volumes about our priorities.

The outcomes partly substantiate the earlier conclusions on in-group cohesion towards fellow travelers (e.g. Cohen, 2004; Hottola, 2005; Westerhausen, 2002), in particular in situations with significant cultural difference, such as in India. They do, however, also provide some reason for critical disagreement. First of all, most of the time was spent in reversal and with local service providers. The in-group interaction was only the third priority. Second, less than half had teamed up during transitions, despite the obvious advantages, and most of the travelers went to bed early, instead of socializing at night.

Overall, the travelers of Munnar spent almost half of their AH and 66% of their total time without any engagement with other travelers or the locals (cf. Haldrup, 2004). There is an important conclusion to be made: not every independent traveler is social, nor social every day. Some tend to avoid other travelers or meet them only briefly in shared service situations—37% in the sample. There is a diversity of behaviors within, and the extremes either completely stay away from traveler groups or always try to join one. The picture remains incomplete, if we focus on the in-group cohesive segment and neglect the rest.

In regard to locals, the first look confirmed a high level of engagement in terms of time-use. The qualities of these interactions did, however, provide a different picture. On travel days, the situational context of sharing the contracted space of public transportation induced travelers to interact with the locals, 'pushing' people to chat. As Erving Goffman (1963), the pioneering theorist of human social relations, has argued, people are uniquely accessible in public space. During the stationary day, on the other hand, with ample opportunity to meet the genuine locals, the travelers preferred to be with themselves, or to interact with service providers and fellow travelers. They did not make a serious effort towards the 'ethical encounter' (Gibson, 2012) despite an ideology which encourages it.

The Munnar materials do not only agree with the earlier qualitative analysis on the Western difficulty of making genuine contacts with the locals on the road in South Asia (Hottola, 2004, 2005), because of mistrust and intercultural issues, but also reveal the travelers' active contribution to the scarcity of these encounters. Even though the travelers spent more time with the locals than with fellow visitors, they interacted predominantly with service providers, which covered 88% of their communication with the host population. Apparently, this satisfied their hunger of 'authentic India' and simultaneously kept the stress of intercultural learning on a tolerable level. Desiring to keep a paying customer satisfied, a service person meets the needs and views of a visitor. More genuine interaction, vulnerable to culture confusion, constituted only 12% of the visitor-host interface.

The result agrees with Murphy's (2001) conclusions of the secondary importance of establishing relationships with the hosts in independent travel, and disagrees with her earlier views (Loker, 1993) of travelers being keen to share the local lifestyles. Of the three categories of visitors to developing nations by Scheyvens (2002, p. 150)—self-gratifiers, travelers with a genuine interest to meet the locals, and the rest in-between, like Plog's (2001) mid-centrics—the first category was an overwhelmingly dominant one and the second practically non-existent in Munnar, when measured by time spent for interaction. Unlike Plog's somewhat overgeneralizing categorization assumes, a mere selection of India as a travel destination does not make a person an allocentric in the 2010s scene.

On the other hand, one may argue that the travelers were so busy in being tourists—organizing practicalities and consuming experiences—that there really was not that much time and energy left for reaching out. Local service providers and other travelers were more available, with immediate gratification (Hottola, 2007, p. 34; van den Berghe, 1994). Independent travel is a more demanding task than is oftentimes acknowledged, not only because of the knowledge and skills it requires (Cohen, 2004, p. 45; see also Sheng-Hshiung, Chang-Hua, & Chia-Li, 2010) but also as a time-management venture. Nevertheless, as the first sentence implies, the travelers of today are tourists and tend to have the priorities of the tourists, with less interest in meeting the authentic locals than is oftentimes assumed. In other words, the travelers preferred the metaspatial front stage of superficial, regulated encounters (cf. Goffman, 1963; Hottola, 2007, 2012a; MacCannell, 1976).

Lea's (1988) insightful analysis on the nature of touristic encounters in developing destinations therefore had explanatory power also in the context of more recent tourism phenomenona. The contacts between the visitors and the locals were predominantly not spontaneous but instrumentalized for specific and limited purposes, and they were both brief and transitory (see also van den Berghe, 1994). Furthermore, the theoretical insights of MacCannell (1976, 1992; cf. Hottola, 2007, 2012a) on tourism stood the test of time and new research findings. The scene in Munnar could be defined as 'somewhat empty meeting grounds', with limited and well measured contact surface between the visiting foreigners and the hosts. There indeed was no need to protect the authenticity of the 'back' by guiding the travelers to stay in the 'front' (cf. Maoz, 2006). They stayed there voluntarily.

Why? Principally, in order to maintain their psychological well-being. The traveler time-space budgets reflected a pattern of stress management and interplay of exposure and reversal (Hottola, 2004, 2005). The independent travelers in Munnar were not immune to culture confusion and intercultural stress and therefore adopted spatiotemporal and behavioral strategies to manage their interaction with local people, both in regard to duration and depth. They were by no means hermits or xenophobic but neither amateur ethnographers as sometimes implied in literature. There is a motivation to meet the locals and the 'authentic India', and these encounters may be valued afterwards, but the meetings have to be well-measured to be enjoyed. Otherwise, the mental capacity limits in learning may be exceeded, with a consequent loss of enjoyment in travel.

All in all, the socioeconomics of a touristic encounter and the sociopsychological logic of intercultural exchange guide behavior with an invisible hand also in independent travel. Even though tourists may have plenty of free time and considerable freedom of choice and therefore a chance to express their travel culture in behavior (Shoval, 2012, p. 178), more so in independent travel, there are inbuilt constraints in time use. Very few tourists look for complete, unregulated exposure to the hosts (Hottola, 2007, 2012a, p. 142–143; Robinson, 1999). Instead, they form their individual comfort zones, the ideal proximity to the culture visited. In regard to visitor-host interaction in Munnar, the primary zone was established with the service sector.

Nevertheless, it is not only about constraints, as in Hägerstrand's (1970, 1975) original thinking, but at least as much about maintaining and creating capabilities. En exposure requires a rest and a rest enables exposure. The pattern of exposure and reversal empowered the visitors in a sometimes demanding foreign environment, but also created suspension as articulated by Bissel (2007), Wilson and Richards (2008). The engagement with hosts and fellow travelers or the solitude and comforts of nature and accommodations became even more enjoyable after the oftentimes arduous transitions between locations, during which the organization and endurance of everything had dominated.

Finally, in the light of the results presented in this text, a rather uncomfortable question needs to be asked: Is there really a significant difference between visitor-host interaction in conventional tourism and independent travel? Most of us would probably like to maintain there is, just like the travelers themselves who tended to reject everything obviously 'touristy', even though they actually behaved like tourists. The research findings do, however, argue for a somewhat different conclusion. Travel and tourism may still be distinguishable, but they have started to overlap.

Interestingly, mass tourism is not the only form of tourism which has recently shifted away from its traditional modes of consumption, towards increasingly individualistic exploration away from the tourist bubble (e.g. Vainikka, 2013; Wright, 2002). There appears to be a mirror development in travel, too. Independent travel has become a middle class activity, a form of conventional tourism (e.g. Caprioglio O'Reilly, 2006; Cohen, 2011; Munt, 1997; Welk, 2004), with consumption-based everyday not dissimilar to more traditional forms of conventional tourism in regard to human interaction. There may be interaction with the locals but it is primarily about conducting business, and only rarely about meeting the locals who are not employed in tourism.

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