
Tourism is an important cultural and economic factor in the fabric of modern societies; accordingly, over the past couple of years scholars from a variety of disciplines have begun exploring the interfaces between tourism and religion. Now some religion scholars have joined this conversation. The present book is a unique contribution because it is based on field research at two destinations, while most other extant studies are either highly general (if not speculative) or consist of case studies of single places. The two locations selected by Alex Norman are Rishikesh and the Camino de Santiago — two cases that appear sufficiently different to allow for significant contrast. Yet Norman narrows his focus by constructing two case studies of only one type of tourism, namely spiritual tourism, i.e., “tourism characterized by an intentional search for spiritual benefit that coincides with religious practices” (p. 1); a spiritual tourist “is conceived as a tourist who undertakes a spiritual practice or seeks spiritual progression in the course of their travels, usually with the intention of gaining ‘spiritual benefit’” (p. 17). Based on his interviews, Norman finds that typically these spiritual tourists lack traditional religious commitments and established connections to the “religious practices” they engage in or witness at their destinations. The book, therefore, is a contribution to the study of contemporary spirituality.

Spiritual Tourism is based on a dissertation at the University of Sydney, and the legacy of that genre remains quite apparent throughout the book. For instance, Norman diligently concatenates literature reviews that seem rather detached from the cases at hand. Even the concluding chapter begins by lining up findings of previous scholarship before Norman eventually turns to the results of his own study. “Spiritual tourism is the logical outcome of the combined processes of secularization, postmodernity and the history of tourism” (pp. 199–200). At Rishikesh (seventeen informants are listed in an appendix), the main concern of spiritual tourists appears to be the learning of resources that are considered useful “for the betterment of their daily lives” (p. 201), while spiritual tourists walking the Camino (thirty informants) participate “in a pilgrimage tradition in order to work through particular issues in their daily lives” (p. 202). “Overwhelmingly these tourists [i.e. spiritual tourists at both destinations] report that the chief reason for their journeys is related to an ongoing project of self-improvement” (p. 207).

The organization of the book is somewhat unusual. The introduction is followed by a first part (pp. 27–66) where Norman presents his ethnography,
which is very readable and provides several important observations. The second part (pp. 69–135) provides the historical and theoretical background to the study, but, somewhat surprisingly, the argument rarely draws on the ethnographic findings; there is more of a parallelism between theories and data than a confluence. That part of the argument operates independently from the ethnography and could well have been written without the ethnography taking place at all. The third and final part (pp. 137–208), which includes the conclusion (pp. 204–208), is introduced by the claim that it will present “a theory of spiritual tourism” (p. 137). Yet what Norman mainly discusses in this part are the mental images surrounding Rishikesh and the Camino. These images may pull the spiritual tourists to the destinations and are broadcast onwards to future travelers; the images are also relevant for the tourists negotiating their experiences at these places. Since the contemporary images that circulate in travel literature, web communities, blogs, and promotional materials are historically grounded, it is only in this chapter that Norman reviews the history of spiritual tourism to India (and Rishikesh) and the history of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The “theoretical” parts of this chapter are sections seeking to explain why spiritual tourists visit Rishikesh and take part in the Camino. The latter, Norman argues, offers the spiritual tourists “one type of experience: a walking pilgrimage. However, far from being a one-dimensional religious activity, the contemporary Camino bears witness to a suite of liminal, meditative, Romantic-inspired and life-changing processes and practices” (p. 181). For Rishikesh, Norman mainly finds that the place “makes a very pleasant holiday destination for the spiritual tourist” (not noisy and “easy-going”) and that it “offers certain types of experiences that are either unique or difficult to come by elsewhere, particularly at home” (p. 157). Norman also defends his spiritual tourism in Rishikesh against a potential critical examination that might (mis-)interpret it as “frivolous hedonism, meaningless voyeurism or youthful experimentation” (p. 159).

Norman is well advised, it seems to me, to include travel books and other materials shaping the perception of the destinations in his analysis. Yet one wonders why he neglects one of the key literary genres of tourism, namely, travel guides such as the Lonely Planet series. Consider Siv Ellen Kraft’s analysis of the Lonely Planet India, where she also comments on the presentation of Rishikesh, and where she notes that this guide book encourages precisely the kind of individual spiritual self-development projects analyzed by Norman in his book (Kraft 2007). For the case of Rishikesh, one might also have wished that Norman had done some local or oral history on the development of spiritual tourism to the town; it would have also been useful to get some idea of the quantitative dimension of spiritual tourism at that place. While his focus