

Introduction

Out of all the different approaches to tourism across the social sciences, perhaps one neglected concept is that of 'freedom'. This is surprising. After all, for most tourists surely a sense of freedom is at least a part of what they seek. If more of us can travel for leisure, are we not more liberated, more free ?

There are different and competing notions of freedom. Critical theorists question how free we really are in our leisure lives as well as our working lives. Critics of tourism broach the impact of the exercise of individual freedom to travel on societal problems such as global warming and gentrification. Others are also concerned at personal behaviour on holiday, where hedonistic tourists offend local sensibilities. To take Isaiah Berlin's 'two concepts of liberty'; the 'freedom to' of the former clashes with the 'freedom from' of the latter. Is the freedom of the investor given too much power to shape communities, physically and culturally, and what is the role of democracy and governance in reflecting free choices of communities and citizens?

The contributions here broach the issue of freedom in varied, interesting ways. Duncan Simpson's historical project on the Youth Hostels Association looks at an important tradition in the British context, but one that has parallels around the world. The growth of youth hostelling marked a freedom for young people to enjoy travelling. His writing (as well as wonderful pictures featured on his blog) captures something vital about travel – a spirit of adventure, a feeling of liberation.

Recently, in response to 'overtourism', a number of destinations have proposed and enacted changes that on the face of it limit individual freedoms. Dominic Standish writes of a case in point; Venice. Here there is a long-standing debate about how to regulate tourism to maintain Venice as a city for residents rather than a place catering for tourism. Freedom can be looked at from different perspectives. The tourists 'freedom to' picnic in Piazza San Marco may clash with Venecian's 'freedom from' what some see as the excesses of tourism. Tourism as freedom is contested today, perhaps nowhere more so than in Venice.