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## What is tourism?

### By the end of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Describe why tourism is a multi-discipline
- Discuss the similarities and differences between the two types of definitions used to describe this phenomenon
- Describe why tourism is an extreme form of leisure
- Identify and analyse the force field of tourism knowledge
- Understand the development of myths about tourism and assess their validity.

### Introduction

Tourism is not absolute. That is what makes it such an exciting field of study, on the one hand, and such an exasperating phenomenon to study on the other hand. Life is much easier when things are framed in black-and-white terms: good versus bad; healthy versus unhealthy; left versus right; right versus wrong. Increasingly, as well, people like to have the world presented to them in a simplistic manner where they are faced with apparently easy choices. Life would be easy, if only the world was simple. Yet, in reality the world is a rich tapestry of colours. What on the surface appears to be a simple yes/no choice, in reality becomes a very complex situation when one scratches below the surface.

Tourism is no different. We can all come up with absolute examples of what is and what is not tourism and who is and who is not a tourist. Visitors from China who spend five days on a package tour sightseeing and shopping in London are clearly tourists. Their activities and their resultant expenditures are also clearly tourism related. By contrast, if someone goes shopping for groceries near their home, they are clearly not a tourist. Other absolute categories such as, business travellers, people visiting friends and relatives and special interest tourists can also

be defined. But after that, what constitutes tourism and the tourist enters a grey area. What if you have a second home and spend every weekend there? Are you a tourist? What if you are studying abroad for 11 months? Are you a tourist? The answer depends on how tourism and the tourist are defined.

By the same token, identifying all businesses that represent the tourism sector and the people who work in this sector is challenging (Leiper, 1999). People talk about theme parks as tourist attractions. Yet, a large portion of their visitors are local residents. Most so called tourist retail shops, restaurants and even travel providers also rely heavily on local traffic to keep them viable. Even the hotel sector is reliant to a certain extent on the local market for functions, weddings, meetings, special events, food and beverage and even accommodation.

Who works in the tourism industry? Again, we talk about tourism employees, but as Leiper (1999) mentions there is a huge grey area. You could probably say that hotel, airline, travel agent, theme park and tour operations staff work in the tourism industry, although certainly not all of their income comes from tourists. But, what about immigration officers, doctors, accountants, lawyers, insurance agents, the police and many others? Most people would not think they are part of the tourism sector, but they deal with tourists on a daily basis or serve the tourism sector indirectly.

This chapter will examine some of the inherent complexities in tourism and explain the resulting difficulties that have arisen through the academic inquiry of this activity.

## **Tourism is a complex topic of enquiry**

Our understanding of tourism, and its resulting theories, concepts and models are a reflection of this complexity. How can we understand tourism as an absolute entity when we cannot even agree on whether it is a discipline, a field of study, a post disciplinary subject of enquiry, a pandiscipline (Coles, Hall & Duval, 2006; Hall et al., 2014; Tribe, 1997; Weaver, 2023) or if it is even an industry (Lew, 2012)?

Tourism has been the subject of academic inquiry for well over 80 years. A huge body of literature has developed over that time. More than 3000 universities worldwide teach tourism and more than 300 academic journals publish refereed, scholarly research. More than 10,000 academic papers are published each year (McKercher & Dolnicar, 2022), with the volume of published material doubling every five years (McKercher & Tung, 2015). Many things promoted as being core truths about tourism are accepted as fact, even though the basic premises behind them either have no sound evidence or have been disproven (McKercher & Prideaux, 2014).

Yet, in spite of the 80 years of research some key issues remain understudied. How much good work has been conducted on gender and tourism? Why is so little