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**(Not so) risky business: Pre-paid commercially packaged volunteer tourism
as a ‘safer’ alternative to independent travel**

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism (VT) appears to have become increasingly commercialised in recent years. This trend sees many mainstream tourism companies now offering food, accommodation, language lessons, and even tourist activities as part of pre-paid packaged VT programmes. To explore this trend, this paper offers a case study of a large commercial VT organisation in Cusco, Peru offering pre-paid VT packages. Five themes are explored: the provision of safety and security particularly for novice travellers; support in terms of an automatic peer group and on-the-ground support from the VT organisation staff; stability when compared to long-term independent travel; an introduction to future overseas volunteering; and value for money when compared to other forms of travel. This paper explores pre-paid all-inclusive commercially packaged VT as a ‘safer’ alternative to independent travel, examines some of the factors VTs consider when choosing a VT organisation, and discusses some of the implications for VT management.

Introduction

Volunteer tourism (VT) involves tourists volunteering “in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment” (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Volunteer tourists (VTs) are “any tourist who participates in volunteer work while travelling... regardless of whether the volunteer work is the sole purpose of his/her vacation” (Guttentag, 2009, p. 538). VT encompasses a wide range of volunteer activities, including community development, conservation, scientific research, construction, education, and medical assistance (Tourism Research and Marketing, 2008; Wearing, 2001) and the volunteering component of the overall VT experience can vary from hours or days (Hindle, 2007) to several weeks (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Sin, 2009) or months (Broad, 2003).

VT has traditionally been positioned as an alternative tourism experience (Wearing, 2001). Alternative tourism has always defined itself in contrast to group tours which are most often associated with mass tourism. However, as alternative forms of tourism such as backpacking become increasingly commercialised and backpacker tour companies such as Contiki and G Adventures become increasingly popular, the distinction between mass tourism and alternative tourism can become somewhat blurred (cf. Weaver, 2012).

This paper explores how pre-packaged VT experiences may offer a safer, more secure and more stable alternative to more independent travel modes. VT is examined in this way not to discredit the experiences of VTs, nor the potential contributions they make to the host community, but rather to highlight some of the potential similarities between commercial VT and more traditional packaged tours which have always been popular for travelers averse to risk (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006; Cohen, 1972; Plog, 1974, 2001). VT typically involves VTs from developed countries travelling to less-developed counties (Tourism Research and Marketing, 2008). There is limited evidence to suggest traditional risk factors associated with VT can be mitigated by taking part in pre-paid commercially packaged VT, that is, essentially a VT packaged tour (Lo & Lee, 2011).

The paper commences by exploring the relevant VT literature and outlining the methods used for the case study research. The key themes that emerged from the data regarding safety and convenience are then presented. The themes are then discussed in relation to the wider

tourism literature including both package tours and independent travel. Implications are then highlighted for the future of commercial VT. The findings and discussion presented in this paper are part of a larger research project exploring the consequences of the increasing commercialisation of VT more generally.

Commercialisation of Volunteer Tourism

Nowadays, international travel is cheaper and easier than ever before (Hottola, 2005) and in contemporary Western society “travel abroad... is no longer perceived as particularly exotic or unusual” (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 1008). As travel becomes increasingly popular and normalised, tourists thus began to search for different tourism experiences that allow them to get off the beaten track (Ooi & Laing, 2010). As a result, alternative forms of niche tourism have developed in contrast to mass tourism. Early alternative tourists included Cohen’s (1972; 1973) hippie-era “drifters”, often referred to as the forerunners of contemporary backpackers. Plog’s (1974; 2001) allocentric-psychocentric model continued Cohen’s (1972) line of enquiry by identifying two extremes of tourists: psychocentrics and allocentrics. The former were self-inhibited dependable travellers who preferred familiar settings and packaged tours. This tourist was much like Cohen’s (1972) “organized mass tourist”, institutionalised tourists who sat at the opposite end of the spectrum to the less-structured “drifters”.

While drifters were originally perceived as alternative, and even somewhat subversive, the increasing popularisation of drifting in the late 1960s and 1970s led Cohen (1973, p. 90) to observe that drifting had been:

Transformed in a peculiar way: on the one hand, it became more closely associated with the ‘counter-culture’; on the other hand, however, though originally a reaction against routinized forms of travel, it also became institutionalised on a level completely segregated from, but parallel to that of ordinary mass tourism.

A number of tourism scholars have argued that a similar “progressive institutionalisation” has also occurred in contemporary backpacking (Teo & Leong, 2006, p. 110). For example, Speitzhofer (1998, p. 982) concludes that backpacking has itself become “no more than a variant of mass tourism on a low budget level” (see also Uriely, Yonay & Simchai, 2002).

Like drifting and backpacking previously, VT has recently become extremely popular in a short period of time (Guttentag, 2009; Ooi & Laing, 2010; Wearing & McGehee, 2013) and there has been a sharp increase in the number of people engaging in organised short-term VT programmes (Raymond & Hall, 2008). VT was originally described as highly altruistic and was predominantly organised by non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations which had direct relationships with the host communities in which they were operating (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing & Neil, 2012). However, as VT has developed as an industry, its traditional focus has shifted and VT has become increasingly commercialised (Tomazos & Cooper, 2011).

Tomazos and Butler (2008, p. 2) argue that:

From being a relatively informal and low cost alternative to a conventional holiday, volunteer tourism now ranges from its original model, not even involving international travel, to highly expensive participation involving long haul flights to remote locations, with increasingly complex and often costly travel arrangements. A proportion of the organisations involved in offering projects and arranging participation are clearly involved in such activities on a profit making basis and view volunteer tourism as one more form of tourism to be commercially exploited.

In this paper we propose that within contemporary neo-liberal society VT has become another niche form of mass tourism, albeit one that includes some form of overseas volunteering.

Research Method

This paper is part of a larger study of a highly commercial VT organisation located in Cusco, Peru. Peru is situated in the north-west of South America and bordered by Ecuador and Colombia to the north, Brazil to the east, Bolivia and Chile to the south, and by the Pacific Ocean to the west. In 2012, at the time of data collection, Peru had a population of nearly 30 million inhabitants and a poverty rate of approximately 25.8% (The World Bank, 2013). Cusco is the centre of the Peruvian tourism industry and is well-known as the gateway to the famous Incan archaeological site of Machu Picchu (Lonely Planet, 2014).

The case study organisation is referred to here by the pseudonym *Manos del Mundo* (MDM) and was founded in 2003 by an American man and his Peruvian wife. MDM was originally established in Cusco as an English language school but has since expanded to include Spanish classes, VT placements and teaching English (TEFL) courses. Volunteering projects offered by the company include childcare/orphanage work, construction, English teaching, conservation work and medical placements. MDM is one of the largest VT organisations in Cusco and at the time of data collection hosted between 75 and 250 VTs in Cusco at any one time.

In 2012, the lead author spent fifteen weeks in Cusco conducting data collection. During this period she lived at one of the two MDM VT houses and volunteered for three hours each evening teaching English at a local community centre. During her time in Cusco she conducted participant observation as well as semi-structured in-depth interviews with 33 VTs, and information-gathering interviews with three MDM staff members. Interview participants were recruited using an arms-length approach. Purposeful sampling was used to identify VT interview participants that presented “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Snowball sampling was also used as some of the VTs who had already been interviewed encouraged newly arrived VTs to approach the interviewer about the research project and (if considered suitable participants) interviews were subsequently arranged.

All 36 interviews were digitally audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and analysed for themes using a grounded theory approach. All italics used in quotes presented in the findings section are taken directly from interview transcripts and are used to indicate emphasis by the speaker. Interview participants’ identities have been kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Similarly, due to the small sample size MDM staff members are not individually identified in order to protect their anonymity.

In total, 12 male and 21 female VTs were interviewed. The VTs ranged in age from 18 to 64 years with an average age of just over 29. All were either from, or currently residing in, an English-speaking country. The VTs’ Spanish language skills ranged from non-existent to fluent, with the majority speaking basic to pre-intermediate Spanish on arrival in Cusco. The length of stay also varied widely from one to fourteen weeks. Fourteen of the VT participants stayed 1-2 weeks, seven stayed 3-4 weeks, seven stayed 5-8 weeks, two stayed 10 weeks, one stayed 11 weeks, and two stayed 14 weeks. Sixteen of the VTs interviewed stayed in one of the two volunteer houses, fifteen stayed in a homestay, and two stayed in

both types of accommodation during their time in Cusco. At the time of data collection MDM offered medical, teaching, childcare, and construction volunteer placements. Of the 33 VTs interviewed, 13 volunteered in a medical capacity, 11 at childcare projects, 7 taught English, and 5 volunteered at construction projects (some VTs took part in more than one project).

The majority of VTs had pre-booked an all-inclusive VT package online either directly with MDM or through two affiliated overseas-based sending organisations. Only one VT interviewed booked with MDM after arriving in Cusco. The VTs paid a lump-sum to MDM which included participation in the volunteering project, accommodation, three meals per day, and 24/7 in-country assistance from MDM staff. Some included daily Spanish lessons. Upon arrival in Cusco, VTs were collected from the airport by an MDM staff member and taken to their accommodation. VTs volunteered for 3-5 hours in the mornings or afternoons; during the rest of the day they either studied Spanish, participated in a tandem language exchange, went sight-seeing, or simply relaxed at their accommodation. Staff at the MDM office were available daily for currency exchange, help with purchasing phone-cards, and also provided suggestions of places to go in Cusco. MDM staff also provided support in emergencies, for example telephoning for a doctor and allowing VTs to use the MDM telephone to report a lost/stolen credit card.

Research Findings

In this paper we explore ideas of safety and security in pre-paid commercially packaged VT by comparing commercially packaged VT with independent travellers (e.g. backpackers) and highlighting similarities and differences between commercially packaged VT and group travel more generally. Prior studies are used in order to provide a benchmark for comparisons. The findings are separated into the five key themes identified in the thematic analysis of the VT and MDM staff interview transcripts: safety and security, support, stability, introduction to future volunteering, and value for money. Where two countries are listed for interview respondents the first refers to the VT's country of origin while the second refers to the VTs' country of residence prior to travelling to Cusco. Age on arrival in Cusco (in years) is also provided.

Safety and security

Katie (USA, 18) had just graduated from high school when she travelled to Cusco and for her “just the safety was a big part of it for my parents ‘cause I’m still young”. Although

somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Joseph (USA, 22) stated he was worried he would “end up *dead* somehow” travelling to South America alone and as such he chose to volunteer with MDM because he was “nervous” and MDM “just seemed a little bit more secure”. To further illustrate his point he recounted how he had become lost at the airport leaving the United States and had missed his flight to South America. He was very relieved to arrive in Cusco where he was met at the airport by an MDM representative before being driven to his homestay.

The VTs acknowledged they could have travelled to Cusco and arranged their own volunteer project for less money than what they paid to MDM or the affiliated sending organisations. However, one of the reasons the VTs were willing to pay more for the services and support provided by a large Western-style organisation like MDM was because of concerns around safety. Emma (Canada, 24) stated that:

You're definitely paying for an experience. But especially 'cause it's my first time travelling on my own... I kind of needed that reassurance, like they're kind of helping you, easing you into that... I didn't quite feel comfortable just going off on my own.

Similarly Frances (England, 22) believed:

*You pay **more** for the security, like you could definitely do it [VT] a lot cheaper on your own but... I just prefer when I'm not at home to have those secure networks around me. It's other volunteers who speak English, it's MDM who can... sort out issues.*

Although MDM was not the cheapest VT option in Cusco, Sonan (Bhutan/Canada, 20) said she “figured it's better to splurge a little more and have an actual experience and be *safe*”.

Support

Similar to backpacking and other forms of youth travel, challenging oneself is a regularly-cited motivation of VTs (e.g. Sin, 2009). However, travelling alone to a foreign country can be daunting. Booking a packaged VT trip, such as that provided by MDM, therefore provides somewhat of a compromise. Many of the younger VTs interviewed stated that coming to Cusco through MDM – with pre-paid meals and accommodation and guaranteed support

available 24/7 – was a way of reassuring both themselves and their parents. For example, Dawson (Hong Kong/Australia, 22) wanted to “get out of my comfort zone but with *some* support network”. Similarly, Sarah (USA, 20) “wanted to be somewhere where I wasn’t isolated... even though I wanted to learn Spanish... I wanted to have... a support system... I wasn’t ready to be in... a village and... [be]... the only English-speaking person”.

Many of the VTs, particularly those travelling alone, mentioned that one of the major benefits of booking with a large VT organisation such as MDM related to social support. In particular, due to the number of VTs volunteering with MDM at any one time, MDM could essentially guarantee there would be many other VTs in Cusco at the same time. This made it relatively easy to find other like-minded (English-speaking) people with whom to socialise and travel. This provided an extra level of support whereby VTs (and parents of younger VTs) could be assured of a ready-made peer group and emotional/social support during the VTs’ time in Cusco. Dawson stated that “the biggest attraction” of MDM was that “they had a lot of volunteers which means like a lot of people speak English so I then I had the language to fall back on if everything fell apart”. Melissa commented that “I’m here by myself [so] I’m hoping to meet other people to travel and do some trips and stuff ‘cause although I like travelling on my own, sometimes it can be quite lonely”.

On their website MDM promote the fact they have Cusco-based staff available to assist in emergencies, for example telephoning a doctor, or accompanying VTs to file police reports and to request emergency travel documents in the case of a stolen/lost passport. In her field notes the first author noted that MDM:

Does a lot more for the volunteers than I expected. For example, they sell phone cards & will also exchange money [from US\$ to soles]. Very helpfully they also swap large notes for small notes or coins (since no-one here ever has change). They will also call a doctor for you & help you with insurance & police reports if anything gets stolen (which happens a lot here)... There are [also] far more staff at [the VT house] than I expected. I assumed there would be someone to cook & clean but I didn’t realise there would be multiple staff at the house 24/7. At night the front door is locked and you can only enter by knocking on the door and waiting for the night manager to let you in.

As one MDM staff member notes, MDM does not just hold the hands of VTs in Cusco, they “hold your whole body”. For some VTs, particularly the older ones, this was somewhat excessive. Other VTs however appreciated the high level of support.

Melissa (New Zealand/Australia, 34) stated that:

*Stuff like my phone getting stolen and other people’s stuff getting stolen, just the support that you get from the staff... helping you with information for the police station and all that sort of stuff... Especially being in a country where you don’t speak the language and everything’s **so** different, like, you know, the laws and everything are so different. I would rather **pay** to have that sort of support.*

In addition to providing support in an emergency, the MDM staff also provided everyday support such as recommending restaurants or where to buy a phone card. Katie stated that the MDM staff “know everything... I can just come here and ask them like ‘What’s a good place to eat?’ or ‘What should I do today?’... It’s nice that there’s English-speaking people here that can help me”. The VTs appreciated the help and many of the VTs and MDM staff became friends.

Stability

Many of the VTs described volunteering as providing “stability” and “structure” to their travels. For example, Frances travelled for four weeks, volunteered for six weeks, and travelled for another four weeks. She chose to volunteer in the middle of the trip to provide “stability”. For Margaret (USA/Turkey, 64) VT “means that there’s some structure, you know you have some place that you’re going to go to. That you’re not out there forging it by yourself”.

Many of the VTs chose to volunteer because they wanted a reason to spend a prolonged period of time in one place rather than sight-seeing or moving around. For example, Dawson chose to volunteer because he “wanted to stay in one place for a long time and... get to know the culture” rather than sight-seeing and constantly moving. Similarly, Frances “liked the fact that you can settle in a place, get to know the other people you’re volunteering with, get to know the [local] people”. Paula (Australia, 23) thought it was “nice staying in one place, getting to know a town a bit... it’s just been fun, being able to unpack!” She spoke of her time volunteering as “having a break from the travelling... and it’s just been so nice to stop

and... not have to meet new people at breakfast... I think staying somewhere for a while it makes the whole trip seem more worthwhile". The interviewer asked if the VT perhaps "anchored the trip in some way?" to which Paula replied "yeah, exactly".

This emphasis on VT providing a means of spending a prolonged period of time in one place contrasts with backpacking which involves frequent moving from place to place and often from country to country. Many of the VTs spoke about VT in contrast to backpacking, emphasising the lack of organisation and stability associated with independent backpacking compared to VT. For example Margaret explained that "backpackers are very different [to VTs], they just kind of land somewhere and say 'okay, where am I going to stay tonight?' It's very different". At her exit interview Frances said now she had finished her VT she was "going to go off and be a backpacker", that is, she would be "travelling around" rather than staying in one place as she had done while volunteering.

Introduction to future volunteering

Many of the VTs spoke about choosing a commercially packaged VT programme like MDM as an introduction to future overseas volunteering. They purposefully chose a more secure and all-inclusive package for the first trip and were willing to pay more for this first trip. For example, John (USA, 37), was "hoping to... get my feet wet, so I can turn around and bring my kids with me [next time]... And now we know that our accommodations are going to be okay so that if I did bring my kids I'm not going to be sleeping in an alley or something!" Georgia (USA, 42) and Susan (Australia, 58) both spoke of their one week MDM experience as providing a "taste" of VT, while Matt (Australia/USA, 34) said now "you've done your first one and you know how organised it can be". Emma described MDM as a way of "easing" you into VT.

Daniel (England, 19) believed that MDM:

*Was a very nice place to come for the first time... It feels like an easier-going volunteering experience... I feel like this was a good place to start... I'd recommend [MDM] to people **starting** their volunteering experience... Because it was structured, it was easy to do, there were lots of people coming... But to people who are more experienced and have volunteered before, I wouldn't, I would not just because they might feel like they're taking a step back in what they're doing, depending on the person.*

Similarly, Terry (Canada, 26) felt MDM was:

Good as like a basis, sort of an introduction. Like I didn't know what to expect in medicine in like a third-world country, I've never really practised medicine outside of Canada and I didn't really know... what to really expect... So I feel like this experience was a good introduction.

However, he believed now that he had experienced volunteering overseas the next time he would prefer a more volunteering-focussed programme such as Médecins Sans Frontières.

Value for money

Whether or not the VTs perceived VT as more expensive than other forms of travel depended on whether they were comparing the cost of VT with the cost of budget backpacking, or with more conventional mass tourism. This was particularly applicable to both older VTs who tended to stay in motels/hotels when not volunteering, and younger VTs who had done most of their previous travel with their parents. Neither age nor length of volunteering appeared to be connected to whether VT was perceived as more or less expensive to other forms of travel. For example, of those aged 22 years and below and staying for four weeks or longer, three believed VT to be more expensive than travelling, while three believed the opposite.

Bill (USA, 43) believed VT was more expensive than just travelling. However, he claimed this was irrelevant as his decision to volunteer was not based on economic factors. He stated that:

*If all I wanted to do was get out of the house for cheap I could go bowling and I wouldn't care if I was helping anybody or not. I could set a set of pins up in the backyard and I wouldn't even have to **go** bowling... I think you could certainly make the argument that it's [VT] **more** expensive, but... I think on balance the world benefits more from ecotourism [VT] than it does from, I don't know, whatever the opposite of eco [tourism] is.*

Similarly, Clare (Australia, 36) did not consider whether VT was more or less expensive than backpacking when she decided to book her trip:

It wasn't a weigh-up between is it cheaper or more expensive to just travel a country on my own because I'm not really volunteering to see Cusco... I'm

volunteering for different reasons and being here and having the opportunity to see places is just a bonus.

The VTs chose to volunteer based on motivating factors such as the desire to give back or to gain a deeper understanding of local culture, rather than a decision based on price.

The VTs were willing to pay to volunteer because they believed they were actively contributing to the host community. James (Lebanon/England, 23) believed that:

If I were to be travelling alone for three more weeks by myself, I think that whatever utility or happiness that I would have got out of seeing these things by myself wouldn't have been as much as the happiness or utility that I get out of being here, helping.

Therefore, he viewed his VT experience as being worthwhile and as providing value for money. As Fiona (Australia, 22) stated, "I'd rather be doing something helpful and have a better experience rather than just walking around by myself."

All of the VTs interviewed stated that whether or not VT was cheaper than other forms of travel was irrelevant as they were not looking for the *cheapest* form of travel, but rather a programme that allowed them to volunteer overseas. For example, Matt said the price of volunteering did not factor in his decision because he was "going to volunteer regardless... it wasn't just about the cost. If I could afford it I was going to do it". Comparing costs across different types of travel (e.g. backpacking versus VT) was not important, although comparing costs and value for money across different VT programmes and organisations was extremely important for many of the VTs interviewed. This is unsurprising as the majority were either students or long-term travellers, both groups likely to be travelling on a strict budget.

Overall, when assessing value for money, cost was not the only aspect VTs considered. For example, James looked at both cost and convenience as well as "number of projects at hand, like the easiness to switch from project to project if you didn't like one project.

Accommodation situation I guess, location". Kim (Australia, 22) stated that even if MDM were not necessarily the cheapest VT option:

I think it's pretty much on par, a little less maybe but you know, it works out. Like some places you wouldn't get food, some places you'd get a translator, you know. It's much of a muchness. But I still think it's a pretty good price for what it is.

Overall, all of the VTs interviewed believed MDM was priced fairly based on what was provided.

Many of the VTs emphasised how “convenient” it was to book with MDM with all food, accommodation and airport transfers included in addition to the volunteering programme. As Helen (Canada/New Zealand, 26) stated “I think maybe it would be cheaper if I could just find my own place, ‘cause four hundred soles [NZ\$170] a month isn't much, and kind of sort out my own volunteering, but it's nice to have it all planned for you”. Similarly, Sarah said she “just wanted something that was the least amount of work for me [to organise]. And this was, basically everything was provided for me” and she was willing to pay extra for this convenience and security. Kim said that “you could probably do it cheaper but it's a convenience thing... They organise everything, it's the support”.

Essentially, the VTs interviewed perceived the price paid for the safety, security and support provided by MDM as providing value for money. While the VTs acknowledged they could have volunteered overseas for cheaper had they organised it themselves, they valued the benefits provided by MDM, albeit at a higher cost. However, the VTs were willing to pay this heightened cost for a first-time VT trip as an introduction to VT, although several mentioned that now they had VT experience they would feel more comfortable volunteering with a less-structured organisation that provided less support, most likely at a lower cost. Thus, the VTs' perceived value of the price of volunteering shifted depending on their VT experience, expectations and requirements.

Discussion of Findings

Bennett (2004, p. 112-113) suggested people in the developed world “lead urban lives, dedicated to the avoidance of risk” and therefore they travel in order to challenge themselves. He referred to travelling as “a sort of bungee-jump. It has the tang of adventure... but is safer than crossing the road”. Based on the findings from our case study of VTs in Cusco, Peru, we have expanded this metaphor of the bungee-jumper and applied it to VTs. Commercial VT is personally challenging and requires a leap of faith into the unknown. However, like bungee-jumping, there is also a safety net. For the VTs in this case study, it was the structure and

security provided by MDM. Paid bilingual staff were available 24/7, new VTs arrived into an established peer group, accommodation and three meals per day were pre-paid. These factors all combined to provide a degree of support and security to the VTs (and to their parents at home).

Volunteering with such a large commercial VT organisation can be a more prudent option for those willing (or whose parents were willing) to pay for the security of additional support. If anything happened to the VTs, for example having their credit cards and/or passport stolen, MDM staff were on standby, essentially serving as a comforting safety net. Previous research has highlighted that risk-averse tourists are more likely to choose package tours (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006; Cohen, 1972; Plog, 1974, 2001). However, safety concerns have also been shown to be important to alternative tourists, including mountaineering tourists (Pomfret, 2011) and VTs (Lo & Lee, 2011). For example, Pomfret (2011, p. 506) discussed that while a level of risk is inherent to mountaineering experiences, “various elements of the package mountaineering holiday interplay to reduce the real and perceived risks and make safe the experience”. He stated that “respondents alluded to a preference for a carefully managed package holiday for which they were well prepared and during which they are safeguarded from potential perils due to the constant presence of professional, experienced guides” (p. 508-509). It is important to note that although MDM staff were available to assist the VTs, there was no “tour guide” per se and the VTs had a lot of freedom compared to more structured VT programmes with fixed start and end dates.

The VTs benefitted from joining as established (English-speaking) peer network in Cusco. These research findings suggest support from both peers and staff is valued by VTs and assists in providing a well-rounded VT experience. Bochner, McLeod and Lin’s (1977) research, conducted with international students in Hawai’i, found that friendships with co-nationals were more important to students than their friendships with both host-nationals and other-nationals (i.e. other international students not from the same country of origin). This functional model for the development of overseas students’ friendship patterns has since been replicated by Furnham and Alibhai (1985) with a larger sample of international students which showed similar results. As in the VT case study explored in this paper, support networks of like-minded individuals and knowledgeable staff can assist in familiarising the VT to the organisation, the VT work, the community, and the culture in a less-obtrusive way.

Research suggests backpackers also have more interaction with other backpackers than they do with the host community (e.g. Godfrey, 2011).

VT can provide stability and a sense of purpose during a longer independent trip.

Backpacking, and travel more generally, are typically associated with somewhat self-centred motivating factors such as a desire to relax (Maoz, 2007), personal development (Gnoth, 1997; Gogia, 2006; Obenour, 2004) and to have new experiences unavailable at home (Godfrey, 2011). Gray's (1970) ideas of "sunlust" and "wanderlust" also fall within this category. Conversely, VT is often associated with more altruistic motivators such as 'giving back' (Rehberg, 2005; Sin, 2009), or what Brown (2005) refers to as "travelling with a purpose". In this way VT can be framed as a means of providing justification for an extended trip – whether to the VT themselves or to friends and family at home. In contrast to traditional package tours which tend to involve multiple destinations, VT also provides a reason or rationalization for spending a prolonged period of time in one place.

Risk-averse tourists tend to favour package tours (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006; Cohen, 1972; Plog, 1974, 2001) and commercial VT experiences offer a less-threatening and more supportive introduction to VT, particularly for those without previous independent travel experience. As stated previously, booking a packaged VT experience ensured increased security and support for the VTs and they were willing to pay an increased price to ensure this for their first VT experience. Booking and paying for a VT package in advance ensures support right from arrival in the country, with MDM providing airport pick-up as part of their VT packages. While Peru is a developing country, as the gateway to Machu Picchu, Cusco is a major tourist destination. Lonely Planet describes it as a "backpacker mecca" and highlights the McDonalds and KFC (and Starbucks) located in the central Plaza de Armas (Lonely Planet, 2014). In addition to the support offered by MDM, Cusco has a well-developed tourism infrastructure and is therefore arguably an easier city in which to travel for those with limited independent travel experience.

As highlighted in this paper, an important implication for commercial VT organisations is that VTs consider safety, support, stability and an introduction to future volunteering as key factors in their VT experience. These factors have a positive influence on how VTs evaluate "value for money" with regards to their chosen VT package and therefore need to be taken into consideration in the development and delivery of commercial VT programmes. While VTs may be less inclined to compare the price of VT with the price of other travel options

(e.g. backpacking, traditional package tours), the price of individual VT offerings may be significant for many potential VTs.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore pre-paid packaged VT programs within a changing landscape of VT and alternative tourism. A particular focus was placed on safety and security which are traditionally recognised as key characteristics of package tours (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006; Cohen, 1972; Plog, 1974, 2001). In order to understand the increasingly commercial nature of VT, our research compared commercially packaged VT with independent tourism (e.g. backpacking) by highlighting the similarities and differences between commercially packaged VT and package tours more generally. From this case study five key themes emerged around the provision of commercial VT experiences: increased safety and security particularly for novice travellers; support in terms of an automatic peer group as well as on-the-ground support from the VT organisation staff; stability when compared to long-term independent travel; an introduction to future overseas volunteering; and value for money when compared to other forms of travel. We consider these five key themes to be important factors in VTs' decision when choosing a VT experience.

Overall, this study highlighted pre-paid all-inclusive commercially packaged VT as a 'safer' and more prudent alternative to independent travel. Large-scale pre-paid commercially packaged VT may appeal to VTs because of the reasons explored in this paper; however, there is the risk that this form of VT may not be the best to meet the needs of the host community. In this paper we have focused on the benefits of commercially packaged VT for the VTs themselves and not the host community's perspectives. Previous research has suggested large-scale commercial VT may focus on meeting the wants of VTs rather than needs of the host communities (Forsythe, 2011; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing & Neil, 2012). Further research is thus required to explore the views of the host communities to ensure that VT programmes achieve their maximum potential, and that host communities are not being negatively impacted by the increasing shift to large-scale commercial VT.

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