
AlmaTourism

Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development

Inside the Pleasure Dome: Cultural Tourism on Australia's Gold Coast

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ABSTRACT

In 2018 the City of the Gold Coast in south-east Queensland, Australia, will host the next Commonwealth Games. The City is made up a 57 km stretch of coastline and hinterland divided by a major highway. The famous surfing beaches are framed by high-rise development while the hinterland is marketed as a green, unspoilt environment. The winning bid for the Games, and discussion about future infrastructure and marketing of the region's attributes, has focussed attention on the way City residents and policy makers think about their region in broad terms. Whereas in the past tourism marketing has been directed towards the pleasures of sun and surf by day and bright lights by night, various regional tourist stakeholders are beginning to reorient their programs. This paper considers some of the competing aims of the various stakeholders in this region and the interaction of existing 'cultures' with new technology and the demands of permanent residents, using data from a case study of e-literary trails developed in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland. The importance of tourist imaginaries as a basis for using rich accounts of the past for future planning is emphasized.

Keywords: Australia, Gold Coast, Culture, Tourism, Mobile Narratives, Digital.

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Introduction

The City of the Gold Coast is a 57 kilometre stretch of beach, waterways and sub-tropical hinterland in the south-east corner of Queensland, Australia. Historically represented as a hedonistic holiday location, and Australia's premier vacation destination, the Gold Coast now flags its status as a vibrant urban city. At the same time the City continues to promote the traditional mix of sun, sand and surf offerings. The increasingly diverse range of interests and activities in this location means that there are new opportunities, and challenges, for the tourism sector, which remains a key driver of the region's economy. Cultural tourism represents one such challenge. While Gold Coast policy makers and tourism strategists recognize the global growth in this sector, there are differing responses from a range of stakeholders as to how to negotiate the desires of the cultural tourist and the demands of local communities.

This paper identifies key Gold Coast tourism stakeholder responses to ideas about cultural tourism and considers the role of online and smart phone delivery of touristic material to visitors as a means of bridging resident and tourist ambitions by bringing the cultural attraction to the forefront of the usual tourist hierarchy. The propositions about the potential of ICTs (integrated computer technologies) in relation to building culture through place draws on earlier pilot trials carried out in Brisbane, Queensland, described below. Cultural tourism is understood to be important to the Gold Coast not only because of the international growth in this market but because in this region the pace of change, combined with a recent decline in visitor numbers to the region (although the reduction is small) means that new approaches must be entertained.

From the point of view of the tourist operator and resident, an examination of stakeholder activity shows that the discourse around culture and tourism mediates a broad array of concerns about commodification and development. This positioning is upheld in recent scholarship. Greg Richards and Wil Munster (2010) argue that research interest in cultural tourism has increased because of the recognition of the social and cultural value of cultural tourism rather than the early emphasis on economic perspectives. From the visitor's perspective, the contemporary tourist, sometimes called the post-tourist, seems to be straying into the domain of cultural tourism in search of access to a more sophisticated dimension in tourist locations. This 21st century tourist increasingly looks for a diversified, flexible, increasingly independent and mobile experience. Melanie Smith (2009) argues that as 'high' and 'low' cultures blend there are important crossovers between what was once called the 'mass' tourist and the 'cultural tourist': tourists wants to shop, go to a beach, and visit bars and nightclubs as well as go to a theatre or concert (Smith, 2009, p.195). The many definitions of cultural tourism all point to the privileging of individuality and independence. For example Milena Ivanovic considers cultural tourism one aspect of special interest tourism (SIT) (Ivanovic, 2008, p. 89), while Melanie Smith (2009) defines the sector as 'passive, active and interactive engagement with culture(s) and communities, whereby the visitor gains new experiences of an educational, creative and/or entertaining nature' (Smith, 2009, p 17).

1. Gold Coast

Certainly, Gold Coast-based marketing programs, such as 'Surfers Paradise Nights' (Tusk) are re-fashioning their offerings to focus on the creative and the experiential although at a state level the traditional 'sun, surf, and sand' images are re-worked, albeit with an increasing emphasis on eco-tourism. The current Queensland Tourism slogan (a 2010 initiative) is 'Gold Coast, Queensland *Famous for Fun*,' (http://www.tq.com.au/fms/tq_corporate/) which aims to appeal to the youth and family visitor experience while highlighting the 'natural' and 'outdoors' environment and identifying environmentally aware projects and landscapes in the region.



Figure 1. Surfers Paradise Beach, Queensland with the 'Famous for Fun' branding

However institutional responses to the delivery of cultural tourism specifics has been muted or delivered on a case-by-case basis. This is not surprising given the lingering popular perception that there is no link between 'culture' and 'the Gold Coast,' despite an active arts sector, strong community support for many local creative events, and an awareness of the importance of the Coast's heritage. As well, geographic dislocation hinders integrated planning around culture: the City is made up of a string of different communities along the coastal strip that is divided from the lush hinterland by a major highway. There is a general community sense of a two-tier environment: one designed for tourists and the other for long-term residents. Gold Coast Social Indicator figures for 2010 from the state government organization, Tourism and Events Queensland, show that 58% of Gold Coast residents surveyed said 'I see tourists around but don't usually talk to them.' This percentage expresses a statistically significant difference to the Queensland average for this question (52%).

The focus on the outdoors and physical landscape (arguably, at the expense of cultural experiences) is historically a typical marketing response from state governments, especially those with large remote regions. In 'Diversifying rural economies through

literary tourism: a review of literary tourism in Western Australia' (Yiannakis and Davies, 2012, p. 36) the authors comment on the state-wide campaigns that promote an active outdoor way of life and the lack of exposure in tourism campaigns to concepts such as literary tourism. At the Gold Coast, several factors have combined recently to stimulate further discussion about the nexus of culture and tourism. The Gold Coast is keen to present a picture of a thriving and safe city after a series of lurid media reports in recent years about criminal activity in the region (Smail, 2011). As Richards and Munsters point out, cultural tourism is often harnessed to create a cultural image. They cite the 2009 OECD statement on cultural tourism which says that 'attracting cultural tourists has become a common strategy for countries and regions seeking to conserve traditional cultures, to develop new cultural resources and to create a cultural image' (Richards, G., & Munsters, W., 2010, p. 1). More important, perhaps, are predictions from the City of the Gold Coast of strong growth in the residential population in the next decade (from around 500,000 today to 730,000 by 2026) based on projected figures from the (Office of Economic and Statistical Research, Queensland Government), although most of this growth is occurring in the hinterland and away from the beach areas.

Furthermore, the City of the Gold Coast's hosting of the 2018 Commonwealth Games will mean a major expansion of both hard and soft infrastructure projects in the lead up to the event. The Gold Coast City Council estimates that the Games will deliver A\$2 billion in economic benefits to the City and about 30,000 jobs in the next seven years (<http://www.goldcoast.qld.gov.au/thegoldcoast/commonwealth-games-5672.html>) The centrepiece of state government investment is a Health and Knowledge precinct and there will be new sporting venues as well as improvements to existing facilities. At this stage Games publicity has highlighted the education, business, and sporting potential of the Gold Coast, rather than the City's historical image as a holiday destination. The City is therefore canvassing alternative tourist options that present the city as a cosmopolitan space. Severe weather events in recent years that have eroded the famous sands of the beaches contribute to this desire to deliver alternative sources of interest for tourists.

Such internal and external pressures mean that tourist operators are looking to provide diverse experiences for tourists, including a digital connectivity that will bring visitors from the beach into other tourist offerings (a coffee shop, an art gallery). In this way the Gold Coast hopes to engage with the 'cultural tourism moment' as identified by Laurajane Smith, Emma Waterton and Steve Watson in *The Cultural Moment in Tourism* (2012). The authors discuss the way in which tourism is re-shaped by negotiation with an appropriation of the cultures the tourists are visiting. This tourist will create his or her production of the experience, often through a reliance on ICTs, information and communication technologies. They will become a type of explorer that I term a 'referential tourist': a sampler of a variety of experience in which some activities are designed by tourism professionals and some are self-directed. The referential tourist acknowledges references to other sites, cultures and expectations, while at the same time seeking a degree of authenticity.

2. Surfers Paradise

This interactive and mobile referential tourist will want to take advantage of the different communities and tourist offerings and move between different forms of entertainment, history, heritage, and the arts. They may move quickly from the social networked world of Surfers Paradise as displayed in the Surfers Paradise Nights campaign (see below) to an eco-friendly experience in the hinterland. The Surfers Paradise Nights campaign offers an interesting perspective on cultural shifts on the Gold Coast. The Surfers Paradise Alliance (SPA) is an alliance that represents the business interests of the Surfers Paradise locale that fans out from the famous beach located mid-way along the coastal strip. In May 2012 the SPA announced the Surfers Paradise 'Nights' campaign as a bid for the custom of the online digitally savvy youth market. (<http://www.surfersparadise.com/media-centre/media-releases/surfers-paradise-nights-vision-boost-for-local-economy>). Whereas the 'Famous for Fun' tag targets the experience and emotion of holidaymakers and focuses on four key 'fun' themes – beaches, theme parks, entertainment and hinterland—the 'Nights' campaign is a repositioning strategy to recruit a renewed interest among young visitors to Surfers Paradise in the face of falling visitor numbers.

The Surfers Paradise beach region represented by the SPA is the section of the Coast that draws, by a long margin, the most tourist traffic. The social media campaign that is part of the Surfers Paradise Nights program (Tusk, 2011) is aimed at youths aged 18-24, as well as the 25-39 age bracket, the latter being called 'adolescents' in the branding documents. The campaign hopes that the audience might see the Gold Coast as their 'third place': that is a place where they can be seen, in the world of social media, to spend most of their spare time. The program will use off-site acquisition communications to drive visitors to the digital mediums, or to influence them on other sites.

The 'Nights' campaign plays on the idea of time, representing the course of an evening. It reinforces the message that Surfers Paradise is not merely a destination for 'clubbing', but has a wide selection of offerings, including pubs, restaurants, lounge bars and nightclubs. All forms of new media are used in the architecture, including QR codes. 'Brand Ambassadors,' will 'contribute' to the hype of the moment via blogs, twitter, and youtube. The campaigns signal the growing influence of transmedia storytelling, in which the user/reader/viewer carries the story-world with them from one life event to the next. The tourists envisioned in the Surfers Paradise Nights campaign may well fit Melanie Smith's 2009 definition of the 'new leisure tourist,' that is young, seeking escapism, entertainment and fun and whose disregard of authenticity means that they are not a cultural tourist (Smith, M., p. 196). But this group may also be representative of the crossover of the leisure/cultural tourist identity. One of the stated aims of the campaign is to build a community that recognizes an emotive connection to place. Surfers Paradise Alliance chair Laura Younger says that in the campaign 'we seek to ignite a desire and emotive connection to this unique entertainment destination' as well as connecting to the community (<http://www.surfersparadise.com/media-centre/media-releases/surfers-paradise-nights-vision-boost-for-local-economy>).

These night tourists may visit from other regions in south-east Queensland as well as from other Australian states or international locations and they may be affiliated with a wider definition of culture. The authors of *The Cultural Moment in Tourism* (Smith et al, 2012, Preface) write that a cultural tourist now explores 'the interactions of people with places, spaces, intangible heritage and ways of life, not as linear alignments but as seductive 'moments' of encounter, engagement, performance and meaning-making.' The Surfers Paradise Nights campaign speaks to this type of interaction by giving visitors the space to both express themselves and uncover new experiences (and report on those activities).

The focus on identity and place appears to remain constant in this campaign, whether the mode of delivery is avant-garde or conventional. In the past, the high profile of the Gold Coast as a beach and night-life tourist location meant that there was little demand for the development of heritage and cultural tourism. However, now there appears to be a desire for a richer narrative about place and attention to Gold Coast coastal heritage. Such diversity would suit the 'post-tourist', who, as Can-Seng Ooi writes, is in search of a range of experiences and rapidly switches behaviour between an interest in the local or an interest in leisure-an interest which 'can take place at a single site at two distinct moments' (Ooi, 2002, p.76). Ooi concludes that 'cultures are resources for tourism' (Ooi, 2002, p. 120) because 'although cultural products may not generate much tourist revenue directly, they are packaged into products that draw people to a place' (Ooi, 2002, p.120).

Gold Coast creative communities expressed a similar desire for diversity and inclusion in the touristic aspects of today's experience economy. In 2011 the *Gold Coast Bulletin* reported on a forum that represented artists, planners, and cultural workers who demanded that 'Our city needs a living cultural heart.' The discussion lamented the divides that exist in the area, with one attendee calling for a new cultural centre and stating 'The Gold Coast is a water city, but the water divides us and we need to use it to unite us' (Willoughby, S, 2011). The City Council responded in 2012 with a 'Gold Coast Cultural Resources Audit' that lauded planning for a cultural and creative 'heart' that would meet the demands of various sectors

(<http://goldcoastculturalprecinct.info/sites/default/files/cultural-resources-audit-2012.pdf>). There seemed to be a general acknowledgement, among residents at least, that the City has to do more to develop a strong and united sense of place, and that this development should encompass a platform of cultural tourism that engages visitors with the local arts.

A key aspect of this type of shift towards cultural tourism must be an openness to a digital platform that speaks to visitor and local communities and generates tourist mobility around the story of the Gold Coast. As Bob McKercher and Hilary du Cros state 'many cultural tourism attractions are many steps removed from the tourist when the decision is made to visit a destination' (McKercher, B., & du Cros, H., 2002, p. 126). Online delivery shortens this distance. In the case of the Gold Coast, there is an abundance of cultural content. Australian author Frank Moorhouse says that the Gold Coast has long been a 'story' city and that this sense of narrative is increasing. Citing the growing pool of literary, film and television heritage he says the Coast has moved on from former associations:

[. . .] the Gold Coast was seen by Australians as the most hedonistic of Australian cities, devoted to the basic pleasures, sun, sand, shopping, steak, seafood, drugs, nightclubs and alcohol. And, of course, sex—promiscuous, gay, straight, honeymoon, as well as commercial and let's not forget that Surfers was for a time the home of the nation's most famous drag show. (Moorhouse, 2011, p. 28-29.)

Beaches have long been associated with sites of social pleasure and sexual excess, as John Urry points out in *The Tourist Gaze* (Urry, 2002, p. 29). Moorhouse's specific interest in the narratives that circulate from these sites of pleasure intersects with research undertaken by the Queensland University of Technology's Cultural Tourism Research team that shows that urban narratives can be captured and extended through interactive delivery. As Laurajane Smith et al identify in *The Cultural Moment in Tourism* (2012), the experience of culture is being understood now in broad ways never before imagined – culture is clearly now much more than performing arts and art museums, it involves the very fabric of community life and the many dimensions of the experience of visiting certain cities and regions for both locals and visitors. Robert Maitland in 'Everyday Life as a Creative Experience in Cities' (2010), states that:

Tourism and touristic practices are changing and evolving. Tourism, itself, we argue cannot any longer be bounded off as a separate activity, distinguished from other mobilities, and tourist demands cannot be clearly separated from those of residents and other users of cities. (Maitland, 2010, p. 177.)

Maitland's emphasis on tourism as one of many mobilities builds on Urry's earlier proposition that there are now countless mobilities in the 'physical, imaginative and virtual, voluntary and coerced' aspects of tourism activity (Urry, 2002, p. 161). In the Gold Coast region there is a need for an aggregation of those mobilities that include residents of the various communities and the domestic and international tourist populations. This aggregation, formed from narrative and place, can successfully transform an experience of place, as the following research indicates.

3. Brisbane

Cultural tourism can become a platform for residential discussions around place and identity: this context opens up the way for tourists to feel included while at the same time locals can begin to see their city in new and regenerating ways. Although the Brisbane study did not test for the motivation for engaging in a literary walk (given that the respondents were part of a specific research project) the findings support David Herbert's argument that 'places acquire meanings from imaginative worlds, but these meanings and the emotions they engender are real to the beholder' (Herbert, 2001, p. 318). The responses by participants to two pilot trials in Brisbane in 2009 demonstrates the importance of building narrative for both visitors *and* residents. As Herbert found in his research in literary tourism in the United Kingdom, 'stories excite interest, feelings, and involvement, and landscapes can be related to their narratives' (Herbert, 2001, p. 318).

This engagement with narrative is a feature of the Brisbane study. The first Brisbane trial took place in May 2009 in the suburb of Kelvin Grove. Participants, some of whom were new to Brisbane, were asked to follow the events of a short story, written specifically for the project, using a mobile phone, along a designated route. An integrated iPhone application was developed to enable the concept. This application consisted of a server to store data for different locations on the walk. For each location, a chapter and a GPS position were specified. The integrated GPS ensured that when the reader reached a key geographical marker, the relevant section of the story was released to them. The narrative was set in Brisbane during World War II, when the site was a busy military base for Australian and American forces. The story explores tensions between Australian civilians and troops and American forces based in Brisbane during this period. Divided into four chapters, the narrative centres on four different locations in Kelvin Grove. The story follows a young Brisbane woman who becomes pregnant to an American serviceman. Realising her predicament, an Australian soldier asks her to marry him so that she might avoid social disgrace. The narrative provides a descriptive account of the realities of wartime life for young women in Brisbane's suburb of Kelvin Grove.

After the trial, participants were asked to respond to a survey that focussed on the relationship of the narrative to place. Participants reported that they enjoyed feeling part of the story. One states, 'being at the place where the action takes place was an enhancing and exciting feature of reading the story' (Carson, S., et al, 2009). Another felt the aspects of 'place' could have been strengthened. Participants enjoyed reading the story on the iPhone because they could easily scroll down, although they said this was only enjoyable in reasonably short periods of time. In general, they very much wanted to feel that they were part of the story, for example a participant said, 'I was in the story world.' One interesting aspect of the reported experience was the cross-over between fictional and material worlds. Participants noted a tendency to move in and out of 'current' time. One respondent said it was remarkable that just as she was reading the chapter in which the protagonist tells the soldier that she is pregnant she overheard a similar conversation between two young women seated nearby. This movement in-and-out of fiction appears to fascinate some readers who enjoy the 'secret' aspect of the knowledge conveyed in the reading and walking experience. Some respondents would have liked more references to local sites, but all reported a sensation of being 'immersed' in the story. One suggested, 'I don't think the outside world, the traffic, came in on you or anything. No, I got immersed, because I do in a book or story.'

In June 2009 a second pilot was conducted in the inner Brisbane suburb of West End (Carson, S., et al, 2013). Whereas the Kelvin Grove trail had asked participants to follow, and respond to, a purposely-written narrative, the West End trial was designed for those interested in published literature or contemporary events. It also tested interest in a trail that included local business and entertainment landmarks, such as bookshops and well-known clubs. In this way, the second trial expanded on the first. As with the Kelvin Grove trial, the project was enabled by the development of an iPhone application and server to store GPS co-ordinates and a range of texts. In this pilot, if the reader wanted to read a text associated with a location, s/he sent a request, including current

position, to the server. The server compared the reader's position with the specified location, and returned the text if the reader was within range of the site.

The survey data show that the majority of participants enjoyed reading the story on mobile phones as a new, easy and comfortable way of reading. However, again, the enjoyment is for short segments of texts only. The following comment is an interesting response: 'not only did I get literature from it, but also I got an idea of West End better. I haven't been here for years.' Participants seemed to find a site interesting even if it no longer resembled its fictional representation. One walker said 'I especially like any part that does have a bit of story, like the story in Musgrave Park.' The text written for Musgrave Park included elements of contemporary Indigenous history. An important comment for the research was the response: 'it really does make you stop and think like a tourist in your home town.' The survey reflected a sense of excitement and enquiry about West End and the associated literary sites, as well as a desire to find out more about an area that had not been visited for a long time, or visited frequently without thinking about issues of place and literature.

In general, the participant responses showed a strong interest in creative uses of locative technology. This context differed from the vast majority of tourism applications which have the primary goal of facilitating navigation between points of interest. Tourism apps usually contain maps with points of interest highlighted and information describing each point. This is effective and valuable for users, but the creative use of the technology offered a way to develop a relationship with the past through the present. The participants reported a greater sense of engagement with the space through reading about the authors or their works and appreciated seeing a literary location even if the original house had long gone. The enjoyment was in their appreciation of the landscape and general locale regardless of changes in the built environment and their responses point to the power of story to embellish place when delivered in a digital format. Another advantage of the digital format is the potential for content to respond directly to the user's interests and to move in and out of another world at will. Melanie Smith comments that 'originality is becoming increasingly important in tourism as competition increases' and that 'offerings should be shaped around the unique tastes or unusual preferences of customers' (Smith, M. K., 2009: 202). She quotes Marianna Sigala on the way 'in which cultural tourism has been enhanced by new media and technologies, such as the 'webification' of cultural heritage attractions and the creation of virtual communities of cultural practitioners, visitors and educators' (in Smith, M.K, 2009: 226).

One of these new technologies is DIMMS (Destination Information Management and Marketing Systems). Dorothea Papathanassiou-Zuhrt and Odysseas Sakellaris describe this technology thus:

Still evolving, DIMMS constantly take into account the latest developments in technology and market demands, acting as tourism counsellors, who reduce the time and money budget needed to acquire information, enabling a vast customer pool to detect the desirable choices. Smart DIMMS offer a complex source of information concerning a holistic tourism product and the expected real benefits (Rachman and Buchanan, 199, pp. 14-21), while serving visitors and producers through the exchange and processing of information about tailor-made and ready-made products at local, regional and national levels. They guide existing and potential markets

to discover the unique features and attractions of a destination, rather than presenting exchangeable commodities, as they usually appear in the catalogues of tour operators. (Papathanassiou-Zurt and Sakellaris, 2012, p. 226).

Despite the advantages, there are certain pitfalls. Marianna Sigala and David Leslie (2012) warn against an unfettered institutional delivery of integrated computing systems, stating that there is a need to provide training, research and discussion in the shift to resource-based development: '[f]urthermore, there is a need to foster in the community better awareness and understanding of the actual and potential benefits, particularly the indirect, of tourism and to encourage participation and ownership' (Sigala, M., & Leslie, D., 2012, p. 237).

Indeed, one of the greatest challenges that the Gold Coast faces is the sense of separation along the length and breadth of the area. There are constant discussions about the need for maximising the City's creative potential, including a mix of soft and hard infrastructure, and the need for engagement with the arts, culture, and creative practice and each other. From the point of view of the need for hard infrastructure, the oft postponed re-development of the Evandale site (a site that is across the river from the Surfers Paradise beach and shopping strip) is now edging towards a reality. An international competition for a cultural centre that includes the creative arts and sustainable design and architecture for this location is underway. As well, the light rail system that is currently being constructed along the coastal strip aims at providing fast transport in advance of the Commonwealth Games. Residents hope that the link will also provide a way of connecting the various 'communities'.

Conclusion

The two sites of discussion in this study (the Gold Coast and Brisbane) represent very different engagements with the concepts of tourist imaginaries in the context of cultural tourism. The Gold Coast continues to focus on the attributes of the physical landscape although more recent online marketing includes images of local coffee houses and food stores as well as beach scenes and eco-tourism. There does not seem to have been further action (to date) to extend ideas that imagine the resident and tourist as co-producers of a sustainable tourist experience and to leverage the diverse desires of domestic and tourist populations through local culture. The Evandale Gold Coast Cultural Centre, when built, may well change this tourist environment and it will be interesting to monitor the degree of engagement between the centralized cosmopolitan site and the diverse beach communities and growing suburban developments in the region. As Greg Richards and Wil Munsters state 'cultural tourism is one of the oldest forms of travel and still continues to be a mainstay of the tourism industry in most parts of the world' (Richards, G., & Munsters, W., 2010, p.1). It seems then imperative for future planning to include the type of imaginative cultural processes seen at play in the Brisbane study. The Brisbane study points to the value of developing a domestic, 'suburban' and personalized digital response to, and engagement with, local culture. And planning for convergence and coherence, as

opposed to vertical sector development, is a challenge. However, the latest range of ICTs, including developments in animation and augmented reality, can assist with the sophisticated demands of the post-tourist (and residents). Sustainable digital delivery and community engagement will be necessary for the type of immersive experience that tourists are seeking. As the Gold Coast City's various audits, the diverse promotional campaigns, and the community meetings show, there will be a need for new approaches to develop appropriate methodologies of engagement and co-production as well as the delivery of descriptive or technological solutions. In this context, it remains to be seen whether the City can move from pleasure dome to a body with a cultural heart.

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