



EUROPEAN MASTER IN TOURISM MANAGEMENT  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN DENMARK  
FACULTY OF ECONOMICS, UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA  
FACULTY OF TOURISM, UNIVERSITY OF GIRONA

SUMMARY  
**THE EXPERIENCE OF A DUAL NARRATIVE TOUR  
– A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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AUGUSTIN JANA



## **THE EXPERIENCE OF A DUAL NARRATIVE TOUR**

“I have no idea how to solve the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. And that’s okay. It’s all about learning, growth and awareness.” (Participant 111, diary). The aim of this research is to uncover the meaning that the participants attributed to the experience of a dual narrative tour by using a phenomenological approach.

In today’s globalized world, there is an increasing need for understanding between different cultures and perspectives in order to diminish conflict. Tourism offers the potential to increase the tourists’ as well as the hosts’ tolerance and understanding of other perspectives (Fisher & Price, 1991), ultimately affecting the creation of positive peace in an area. However, the relationship between tourism and peace remains debatable and depends to a large degree on the chosen definition of peace. For this research, the following definition was applied: Peace can be defined either as negative peace (absence of war) or as a more active phenomenon of positive peace (social justice; Galtung, 1996). Whereas tourism is unable to cause an absence of war, it can influence the creation of (positive) peace in other ways when managed well. Alternative tourism programs aim at challenging stereotypes and facilitating contact between the hosts and the tourists. It thereby generates understanding and allows for the creation of a personal connection between them, which can be considered the prerequisites of positive peace.

The tourism experience is a complex, heterogeneous phenomenon and very subjective in nature, as it is co-constructed together with the tourists (Feldman, 2000). When looking at the tourism experience it is crucial to recognize its stages, which include the time before, during and after the trip (Clawson & Ketch, 1971). Nowadays, tourists are increasingly looking for unique experiences. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand what this experience means to the tourist living through it. To be able to do this, this research is looking into a novel kind of experience designed by MEJDI Tours, a company founded by a Palestinian tourism professional and a Jewish social entrepreneur with a mission of connecting the world through travel (MEJDI Tours, 2017). Their trips can be considered as alternative tourism programs and through the application of a multi narrative approach, the tourists are able to interact with the local population and listen to their stories, all the while exploring unique places. The company is dedicated to sustainability and social justice. MEJDI can be considered as an ambassador for the notion that tourism creates peace and set an example of how this could be achieved by creating dual narrative tours, where each group is accompanied by two guides – one from each side of a conflict. The specially trained guides each share their narrative on the events and sights, offering more balanced insights for the tourists. During these trips, the tourists are able to see that there is more than one perspective of every story and form their own opinion about the topic. The locals in return feel valued by being able to tell their stories and having someone listen to it. By applying this in a region of conflict, MEJDI attempts to deconstruct stereotypes and preconceptions asserted by the media, creating new levels of understanding and reflection (Wildman, 2012).

The experience of being part of a dual narrative tour has not yet been researched as MEJDI Tours is currently the only company offering this special type of trip. Due to this, the presented research intends to indicate valuable insights about what this experience means for the tourists. Three research questions framed this thesis: The main one intended to discover what it meant for the customers to experience a dual narrative tour. The two sub-questions aimed at unveiling what the main attributes of this experience were and examine whether the meaning attributed to the experience was in line with MEJDI's mission of connecting the world through travel.

This research is based upon a 15-day trip to Israel/Palestine and included MEJDI's dual narrative approach, offering multiple perspectives of the conflict. The sample included a group of 17 US students, guests and professors who joined this trip in order to learn more about the area and the conflict. By employing a phenomenological approach with an interpretive paradigm, this research is aimed at discovering how the participants attribute meaning to this experience. This is an effort to uncover an underlying structure rather than confirming a hypothesis.

For doing this, participant observation including in-depth interviews with all participants was carried out. The researcher was fully immersed into the group, joining all activities of the trip, to gain a better understanding of this experience. Therefore, it was crucial to reflect on the role of the researcher in order to be able to separate the researcher's from the participants' experience by employing bracketing measures. In this research, the participants were considered co-researchers and aided in the analysis of their own experience (Munhall & Boyd, 1993), making the results a co-creation (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000).

All data was coded and the analysis revealed several themes that make up the essence of this experience. The findings presented three larger themes that were essential for this experience: Social Interaction, Learning and Confusion. Within the social interaction theme, two subthemes (Seeing the Humans and Profiting from the Others) could be determined and learning could be divided into three further subthemes (Not a Usual Vacation, Seeing the Bias and Spreading the Knowledge).

### *Social Interaction*

The interaction with different people was described as the most meaningful part of this experience. Especially the stay at a Palestinian host family as well as dinners with a Jewish and a Muslim family respectively received special attention in the recollection of the tourists. These encounters allowed them to get unique insights into the local culture and hear the perspective of ordinary instead of spokespeople. They received first-hand information about the daily life and hardships of the locals and realized that the situation is normal for them. Meeting these people allowed the participants to view the human side of this conflict, making it more tangible and real. In addition, it created a connection between the participants and the locals that the participants did not expect and which helped in breaking down preexisting

prejudices and established a lasting relationship. This connection is going to guide the focus when looking at the conflict in the future, since it no longer is simply some conflict far away but involves people they met and shared a meal with.

Not only the interaction with the locals but also the communication within the group was perceived as beneficial by the participants. The other group members significantly shaped the experience with their individual contributions that can be traced back to their personal backgrounds and previous experiences. Having the opportunity to reflect on the experience as a group added value to it. Equally important to this was the awareness the participants gained about not every experience being the same despite the group being on the same trip. This highlighted the heterogeneity and subjectivity of tourism experiences (Ryan, 2002).

### *Learning*

As the group was comprised of university students, the learning experience was the focus of this trip. The participants acknowledged that this was not a usual trip for them since most of them had never joined a guided tour to a contested area before. Expanding their knowledge was the main reason for joining this trip. They appreciated the open conversations with the speakers which stood in stark contrast to the normal classroom learning experience. Being there in person changed how the participants were affected by what they heard and it had a stronger impact on them than reading about it in a book ever could have.

In addition to learning about the conflict, the participants were able to reflect on their own biases by comparing the situation in Israel/Palestine to the one in their home countries. They were surprised by the similarities they encountered as they did not expect this. It permitted them to draw parallels and made them aware of the interconnectedness of both worlds. However, the participants also recognized the difficulty of keeping an open mind despite their prejudices and wondered about the applicability of this knowledge for their future life. They acknowledged the influence of their previous knowledge and past experiences on how they perceived this trip. Raising this awareness and understanding is very important for initiating change and potentially having an influence on a peace-building process.

The participants voiced the desire to share all of the parts of this experience, however, they were also aware of potential barriers for doing this. They realized that the experience of a dual narrative tour can only be fully comprehended when personally experienced. Apart from not being able to understand, people at home might also not want to hear more, as this knowledge could potentially be considered a burden.

### *Confusion*

Confusion was a central and reoccurring theme of the experience. The participants heard and saw many things that they were not (yet) able to process and fully understand. They express being confused about the conflict in general and about which narrative can be trusted

as all of them seemed valid to the participants. Despite the struggle, the participants highly valued this unique opportunity. This experience made them aware of discrepancies in the image of the destination that they previously held and which role the media played in generating this (false) image. In order to dissolve this confusion, further reflection is necessary. The participants expressed the desire to include more facilitated sessions for this purpose at different times during the trip. However, full processing can only take place when the last stage of the experience is reached, i.e. after the participants returned home. Being on this trip was not only emotionally but also physically challenging for the participants. Nonetheless, it did exhibit the potential to influence on the formation of positive peace by fostering understanding and creating a connection between the locals and the participants.

This trip held some attributes that were common in all of the participants' accounts. These are the three main and five sub-themes previously mentioned. However, depending on the participants background they experienced the same events differently because they placed their focus on other things. Significant differences in the intensities of the events can between others be seen in the experience of the professors who accompanied the students. The essence of the experience is equally valid for them as it is for the students, nonetheless, their overall experience varied; they were less surprised by the events on-site and everything was not new for them since they had already done a similar trip before. Instead they placed more value on the students' experience and profited from the group more than they did from individual reflection.

When comparing the meaning placed on this experience as well as its main attributes to the mission of MEJDI Tours, it becomes apparent, that they are in line with each other. The trip is able to establish a connection between the participants and the area, thus raising awareness and correcting the image of the destination by presenting a more balanced account of the events. Therefore, it can be concluded that the experience of a dual narrative tour was extremely meaningful for the tourists and will not easily be forgotten.

The understanding of the meaning of a dual narrative tour can for example be used for improvements of existing or the marketing of future trips. It could be further improved by including more opportunities for reflection during the trip and by offering the participants further possibilities of involvement after the trip.

The results of this research are not generalizable for a greater public as experiences are highly subjective and another trip with a different group might hold different meaning. Further limitations include the sampling frame, the setup of the interviews and the inability to portray all stages of the tourism experience in this research. In the future, the generated insights could be used to design further studies which include all stages in order to gain a complete picture of this tourism experience. Moreover, this trip should be compared to others in order to determine its (long-term) influence on attitude change and peace-building.

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