

Summary:

Tourist experiences in a coastal landscape

Background

Romanticism has influenced the ways landscapes and nature are perceived, and the cultural values, taste and preferences attached to the natural environment. In addition to this cult of nature, romanticism has included a nostalgic interest in the social and cultural aspects of rural communities, including their history, heritage, simple and natural life styles etc. “Untouched nature” and “authentic” rural communities become a symbol for victims of the far-reaching industrialisation and urbanisation of society, and those areas that avoid this violent process of modernity and technology become a new object of worship and pilgrimage. With its simplicity, idyll and authenticity, the “green dream-place” becomes the contrasting world to the polluted, complex and artificial urban environment.

Natural elements and local and regional social and cultural aspects therefore have a great impact on tourism. These features therefore play a major role in tourism development and marketing, and they are crucial factors in the tourist experience. In the tourism literature the tourists’ quest for authenticity is often underlined, which means that modern tourists are in search of unspoilt nature and landscapes and local cultures with a distinct regional or local character.

Lofoten and the fishing villages – the study area

The Lofoten islands are located off the coast of Northern Norway. The alpine mountains create a sharp contrast to the surrounding ocean. For many centuries, the people of these small communities or intimate local villages have lived off the rich fisheries in the area. Over the past decades, however, tourists in increasing numbers have come to enjoy the spectacular natural environment. Many of them stay in local fishermen’s huts (“rorbuer”) during the summer season. A series of these old huts have been renovated and transformed into tourist accommodations. In other areas new and modern “rorbu”-like tourist resorts have been built in order to create a more or less similar impression of a typical fishing village of the area. The wooden huts are kept in a special style and colour and located at the waterfront.

The report explores how tourists perceive the natural and man-made aspects of the fishing villages and their surroundings in the Lofoten islands. The tourists’ perceptions of coastal landscapes and human settlements are identified through qualitative interviews with independent tourists staying in fishermen’s huts in three different locations; Nusfjord, Henningsvær and Nyvågar.

Nusfjord is a small fishing village (with only 40 residents) offering tourist accommodation in 30 fishermen’s huts. The original harbour with its old wooden

buildings is located in a small fjord surrounded by steep mountains, creating an intimate atmosphere. This traditional fishing village with most of its old buildings is considered “worthy of preservation” by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, and the built environment in this community therefore has a protected status.

Henningsvær is a fishing village with approximately 400 inhabitants. It is still an active fishing community, but development of the tourist trade has resulted in a new hotel, renovation and construction of fishermen’s huts, restaurants, art galleries etc. However, the main part of the tourist accommodation is still located within the older installations used by fishermen in the old days. Henningsvær is a small island connected by a bridge to the rest of Lofoten.

Nyvågar, on the other hand, is a resort entirely built up to serve the tourists. The “fishermen’s huts” are in fact hotel-like accommodation and services. Nobody lives in the area. The buildings are still kept in a rather traditional style. A maritime environment with a small vessel harbour is part of the site, which is surrounded by a cluster of built attractions (aquarium, museum, art gallery, etc).

The built environment in Nusfjord is preserved as the fishing village used to be a few generations ago. Henningsvær is a lively community with a mix of new and old buildings and both fishing and tourist activities. Nyvågar is the one-sided result of modern tourism development. Taken together, Nusfjord can be seen as the “preserved” case, Henningsvær as the “organically developed” case, and Nyvågar as the case “generated by the tourism industry”. However, even if the three cases can be described as three different representations of the region, they share some common features as they are real fishing villages or copies of traditional fishermen’s huts considered typical of Lofoten. The natural surroundings are also similar in all three locations.

Method

A qualitative approach was used in order to reveal how the natural and man-made aspects of the fishing villages and their surroundings are perceived and interpreted by the tourists staying in fishermen’s huts. The interviews took place in the three locations in the summer season 1999. To avoid tourists who only had a very brief impression of the site visited, qualitative interviews were carried out among independent tourists who had stayed at least two consecutive nights in fishermen’s huts. Most of the tourists interviewed had made their reservations before they arrived in the area and had not selected their accommodation in an accidental way.

Altogether 27 interviews were carried out with a reasonable balance between the three case areas, and in 18 of these interviews two or more respondents in the same travelling company took part. The interviews were taped and written out in full length. The interviews took from 45 minutes up to 1½ hours. An interview guide was used in order to cover those topics that were seen as crucial in the project.

Results

About half of the respondents were in their 40s or 50s. Many of the respondents were couples staying together with other couples (friends or family), and some travelling parties also included children. Two thirds of the respondents were Norwegian residents, many of whom lived in the south-east part of the country.

Most of the foreign tourists were from the German speaking part of Europe. One-third of the tourists interviewed had never been to Lofoten before. The majority of the visitors had stayed in their fishing village for several nights.

The most frequently expressed motive for visiting Lofoten is to experience the scenic beauty of the area. The nature interest is dominating, and is often looked at as the only reason for seeing the archipelago. But in some cases other factors are important as main or secondary motives. Outdoor activities, the opportunity to enjoy a simple lifestyle, slow pace, tranquillity and peacefulness, local culture, atmosphere, socialising with local people (expressed by Norwegian respondents), and resting and relaxing with the family are the most typical additional motives. The image of the area as not being too crowded by other tourists is also mentioned in this context.

The respondents were asked about their knowledge and perceptions of Lofoten before they arrived in the area. At the outset the respondents' overall image varied a lot, but most associations were connected with natural features like the special mountains surrounded by the ocean and fjords, and unique light and weather conditions. They envisioned a region with great visual contrasts. Lofoten also seems to be known among these tourists for its old fisheries and fishing villages with fishermen's huts and small fishing harbours. These observations, however, were probably influenced by actual visitor experiences as the interviews were conducted some days after their arrival.

Experiencing natural qualities

The interviews reveal that Lofoten's dramatic scenery is seen as quite overwhelming, and the peaked mountains in a coastal setting are particularly underlined as unique. The respondents are fascinated by the contrasting and almost unreal variation of the scenery, which seems to be beyond expectations. The coastal landscape is seen as open and great, quite different from what the visitors have seen elsewhere or in their permanent habitat.

Also other characteristics are mentioned. The light conditions contribute to the striking variation and vividness of the scenery. Visitors report developing new circadian rhythms during their stay because of the light evenings and nights. Changing and often rough weather conditions give the visitor a strong feel of the weather. Low moving clouds of sea fog often generate a magical impression of the landscape.

The colours and the surprising fertility of the islands are also seen as fascinating and the fresh blue-green ocean adds to this feeling of being in a green world. The green mountains, colourful wild flowers, green pastures and grassland, and the taste of local berries are all part of this experience of a verdant coastal landscape.

Sensual experiences include breathing sea air and the smell of bladder wrack and fish. The freshness of the air is also noticed. Running water, waves and birds singing are sounds that belong to the natural world. The visitors find tranquillity in such a natural environment, and this is highly appreciated by the visitors as a break from an everyday life that is often reported to be demanding and stressful. Watches are often put aside, and the individual relates instead to the rhythm of the tide and the light conditions.

Physical intimacy with nature is a substantial value – the respondents have a distinct feeling of living in the middle of nature or at least with easy access to nature in all directions. This closeness is especially intense because of the proximity to the sea. The location of the fishermen's huts makes it possible to experience a magnificent natural landscape by glancing through the window or just outside the door. Where the fishermen's huts are built on poles in the water it is possible to listen to the waves and the tide from the inside.

Most respondents do not exercise during their holiday, apart from walking around the neighbourhood. However, it is not unusual to take part in outdoor activities like fishing or hiking.

Experiences with the man-made environment

The independent way of travelling and the enjoyment of a relatively simple holiday lifestyle are highly appreciated by the respondents, and this type of vacation is seen as liberation from the restrictions and conventions of their everyday life. The effect of staying in small-scale, transparent local communities or tourism resorts puts people in another mood, opening up their senses. A certain amount of time is necessary to accept and adopt the slow pace and local ways of doing things. The three sites Nusfjord, Henningsvær and Nyvågar are also seen as quite safe places to stay.

The local inhabitants are generally regarded as friendly and hospitable. However, the lack of a local community is noticed in Nyvågar. Nusfjord also has limited opportunities to experience local life due to the fact that there is such a small number of local residents. In Henningsvær the visitors appreciate the local fishing activities and the presence of a local population although the interest in direct contact varies among the respondents. The visitors find it interesting to watch the local life, and also the presence of other tourists may contribute to the character of the place. The mixture of locals and visitors is often seen as positive. However, foreign tourists are less discerning of the difference between local people and the Norwegian tourists. Visitors in Nusfjord perceive the local village as old and genuine, with a distinct character. They find the place very charming and idyllic with a physical setting well protected from the sea. In Nyvågar the respondents also appreciate the closeness to the sea and the high quality of the tourism facilities. In Henningsvær the location is valued as well as the variety of services.

Most of the respondents staying in original fishermen's huts emphasised this type of accommodation as real and truly authentic, and seemed quite satisfied with the simple material standard of these relative primitive huts. Those who stayed in the older, original huts supposed that it would be impossible to construct copies with an authentic and unique character. Moreover, some of these respondents held the critical viewpoint that new establishments could never be as harmonious as the older ones. In Nyvågar, the relatively new and artificial "village", the importance of authenticity was underlined less, but also these respondents pointed out that the local architecture was typical of the region and harmonised with the natural surroundings. In Henningsvær the older buildings and quay structures and boats were seen as typical of Lofoten fishing villages. In Nusfjord and Henningsvær respondents had a tendency to disassociate themselves from the type of accommodation found in Nyvågar.

The character of Nusfjord, Nyvågar and Henningsvær are all seen as typical of Lofoten, both because of their location and built environment. In general, the respondents also reported a certain lack of local aesthetic values in different parts of Lofoten, and these impressions are seen as stemming from the historically simple and meagre social conditions in the area. Fish are associated with Lofoten. And there was a certain amount of astonishment and disappointment about the fact that the local selection of fresh fish is limited in the summer season. There is a certain demand for this product as it is seen as typical of the region and has a great symbolic meaning.

The respondents take a varying degree of interest in local history and culture. The importance of reading about Lofoten or visiting the built attractions in the area was underlined by some of them. These respondents had acquired considerable knowledge about the region, while others did not pay any attention to such aspects.

The presence of other tourists and a certain amount of tourist infrastructure are generally regarded as positive, even if some respondents prefer to stay apart from other tourists. A strikingly common feature is the restrictive attitude to further development of tourism in Lofoten. There is a strong wish that the villages or the village-like resorts should definitely remain small scale, and those who seek authentic experiences are worried that the touristification might be too dominating. The interviews also revealed sceptical opinions of certain forms of organised tourism, these opinions might be classified as anti-tourist attitudes. They were clearly negative towards converting the old fishing villages into pure tourist resorts without any other locally based activities.

Authentic experiences

The findings support the assumption that there is a quest for authentic experiences among independent tourists in Lofoten. In their interpretations, the tourists emphasise first of all the natural beauty of the area but also man-made or social and cultural aspects are included. It is possible to categorise the consciousness of the respondents in the following hierarchy and these levels can be seen as types of experiences where both nature and human activities may play a part:

Peace and tranquillity are felt by sensing nature's own sounds, movements and rhythms. What the visitors see as slower pace of life, informality, hospitality and frankness of the local people also make them relax. There is a feeling of safety and friendliness. By enjoying these environmental qualities it is possible to find rest and relaxation in the three places that were examined.

Ambience and atmosphere are related to the perception of the destinations as small scale with small clusters of waterfront Lofoten houses nestled against a magnificent backdrop. This feeling of ambience does not, however, require a strong element of involvement among the tourists, and respondents in all three case areas express this kind of experience.

The authentic experience is associated with an environment that is understood as real or original. The traditional fishermen's huts in Nusfjord, the fishing boats, the harbour and the fish racks are elements that are perceived as unique and highly valued, and are therefore seen as difficult or impossible to copy. Nyvågar is an example of a reproduction that is not experienced as authentic. The visitors staying in the other two places do not consider this resort to be a place offering a complete

and true experience. The residents in Nyvågar still appreciate the place for the reasons mentioned above.

The experience of existential authenticity is identified when there is a strong degree of involvement and the respondents are excited about the true and authentic character of the place visited. There are examples of intimate testimonies of the genuine quality of peace and quiet, ambience and atmosphere, and the authentic character of the local site. Deeply felt experiences of both natural elements and the built environment may thrill the tourists in an absorbing way. However, some tourists claim that these values might be threatened as a result of modernisation or too rapid expansion of the tourism industry in the area.

Conclusion

The data shed light over the search for “green dream places” and nostalgic wishes to experience human environments representing an impression of simpler lifestyles rooted in the rural past. It is reasonable to interpret these attitudes as an indirect support of alternative tourism that often is seen as small-scale, ecologically sound, sustainable and sensitive, and do not destroy the natural qualities or the authentic character of the local villages and communities. The tastes and values of the individual tourists regarding nature and traditional rural communities parallel the values often associated with romanticism. The romantic movement has been the driving force behind essential parts of current tourism, and these interests are maintained by the advances of modern society.

This idealisation of the natural world and deeply rooted rural life is a cultural value that can be understood on the background of the pressure that these aspects are subjected to in contemporary society. Underlining the importance of these qualities and expressing anti-tourist attitudes can be understood as an escape from and reaction to the mainstream rational order of modern society. The paradox is that the kind of tourism attitudes demonstrated is both a result of modern life and a reaction to the threat of modernisation of the rural periphery and the negative impacts on previously intact landscapes.