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Writing workshops as cultural tourism: a case study and discussion on this evolving form of tourism

Abstract:

Cultural tourism is regarded as ‘the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs’ (Richards, 1996). Writing workshops and retreats (in both Australia and around the world) are held in such diverse locations that the very definition of ‘normal’ can be considered irrelevant. From surf writing camps in Mexico (Sayulita Writers Workshops) to historic houses in England (Arvon Foundation), the range of experiences available would surely satisfy anyone’s ‘cultural needs’.

This paper looks at the evolution of one particular community-based writing workshop over a 5 year period. It examines the growth and development of the workshops, held annually on an island in Queensland and hosted by the literary magazine of a regional university. Data will be used to demonstrate and account for the growth and success of the workshop and this will be used to add weight to a larger discussion regarding the growth of the writing workshop as cultural tourism. Comparisons and contrasts will be made with other successful workshops held in Ubud, Bali and Larapinta, Alice Springs to answer these important questions.

Biographical note:

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Introduction and definitions

Cultural tourism has its origins in the Grand Tours of the 17th and 18th centuries, travel experiences for aristocrats ‘for whom a trip to continental Europe was often a coda to a classical education’ (Richards 1996: 11). As travel became more affordable for the middle classes, the focus on educational outcomes was reduced in favour of ‘culture as a source of pleasure and entertainment’ (Ibid: 12). By the late 1970s tourism was a major global industry and the tourist market moved to create the ‘short break’ holiday, with most geared towards visiting cultural attractions. Writing workshops constitute a continuation of this evolution.

This paper provides an overview of the development of writing workshops as cultural tourism. It will focus on one such community-based writing workshop, held annually on North Keppel Island in Queensland. Comparisons and contrasts will be made with other writing workshops held in Ubud, Bali and Larapinta, Alice Springs to answer questions regarding their relationship with formal writing courses offered by tertiary institutions, and to demonstrate how ‘exotic’ locations are used to promote workshops to potential participants. The discussion will attempt to account for the popularity and growth of this form of cultural tourism and examine their position as somewhat strange bedfellows. As unlikely as this relationship between largely touristic writing workshops and university writing programs seems, it is one which lends itself to further consideration.

The definition of cultural tourism is itself still evolving. Cultural Data Online acknowledges the view that a ‘wide range of meanings exist for the term’ (2001) and provide ten examples in their comprehensive study of cultural tourism. All focus on the activities of the participants and the range of cultural experiences available, from the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) definition of a cultural tourist being ‘a person who stayed more than 40 kilometres away from home for at least one night to attend a cultural venue’ (1997), to the Cultural Tourism Industry Group’s assertion that ‘cultural tourism is an entertainment and educational experience that combines the arts with natural and social heritage and history’. These definitions will be used for the purposes of this paper, as will Richards’ stated claim that cultural tourism is ‘the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs’ (Richards 1996). Writing workshops and retreats (in both Australia and around the world) are held in such diverse locations that the very definition of ‘normal’ can be considered irrelevant. From surf writing camps in Mexico (Sayulita Writers Workshops) to historic houses in England (Arvon Foundation), the range of experiences available would surely satisfy anyone’s ‘cultural needs’.

In this instance, the workshops and retreats focused on in this paper are those held in places other than a participant’s home town, state and, occasionally, other than his or her country. Workshops held in Writers Centres and community centres or libraries are not included in the evaluation of writing workshops as cultural tourism. The focus here is on travelling to a specific and preferably ‘exotic’ destination to participate in a longer workshop or retreat. The writing workshops and retreats described in this paper are live-in, residential experiences at resorts and conference centres, or in specific

experiential locations, such as camping in the Australian Outback, surf camps in Mexico or Costa Rica or self-contained apartments in Paris for Australian writers. They are smaller in size than local workshops, with less than 30 participants, and usually have a theme or focus.

The sheer range of workshops and retreats available worldwide is staggering, and many can be found with simple Google searches. However, searchable databases have proven to be quite useful to discover the full breadth of workshops available. The comprehensive online Shaw Guides (www.shawguides.com) offer over 6,000 'Learning Vacation and Creative Career Programs Worldwide' in areas such as Cultural Travel, Language Vacations, Recreational and Career Cooking and Wine Schools, Sport Programs and Photography and Film Workshops. Their popular Writing Workshop and Conferences pages offer 1018 listings categorised by US State, country (Australia, Belize, Canada to Russia, Scotland and Wales), genre (autobiography and memoir, horror and travel writing to Young Adult) and month. This equates to hundreds of workshops and retreats, as some fall outside the focus of this paper by offering short course and online workshops. However it is clear the number of residential retreats and workshops available point to an emerging and growing form of tourism.

The location, duration and cost of workshops and retreats vary widely, from month-long sojourns in Paris (Paris American Academy) to eight day camping expeditions in the Wrangell Mountains, Alaska. Each of the workshops available is priced according to duration, location and level of accommodation provided, as well as the popularity and qualifications of the facilitators. The Paris American Academy offers a month-long workshop on travel writing and creative non-fiction, which features renowned travel blogger and self-styled vagabond Rolf Potts. The cost is US\$3,600 for the workshop, which includes '4-5 days a week of instruction, formal orientation and introduction to Paris and the Latin Quarter, welcome and farewell banquets, and "survival" French language classes' (Paris American Academy 2010). These costs do not include airfares, accommodation or meals. The most basic (shared) accommodation available is US\$1,900. Accordingly, the Wrangell Mountains workshop costs US\$595 for all meals, workshops and camping. The facilitators are local Fairbanks writing and visual art academics, and graduates from MFA programs with backgrounds in the National Park Service. The workshops are held in the Wrangell Mountain Center and offer a broad focus: memoir, poetry and nature writing.

The range of programs and retreats available demonstrates there are ample workshops for every budget, every writer and every genre of writing. To gain an appreciation of the range and scale of writing workshops, and their growth as a form of cultural tourism, it is useful to focus on several in-depth, to discover how they function, how they have been developed and how we might account for their success and popularity. To do this, this paper looks at the evolution of community-based writing workshops over a 5 year period. It examines the growth and development of the workshops, held annually on an island off the Capricorn Coast in Queensland and hosted by the literary magazine of a regional university. Data in the form of feedback forms, programs, grant applications and other organisational materials will be used to demonstrate and account for the growth and success of the workshop and this will be used to add

weight to a larger discussion regarding the growth of the writing workshop as cultural tourism.

Several key questions will be raised and discussed below: what makes these workshops so successful and appealing to writers? How are 'exotic' locations used to sell writing workshops to non-writers and writers alike? How do these workshops compete with academic writing programs, or can they exist in cohesion with existing writing programs – and even, as will be shown with the case study, enhance them? Comparisons and contrasts will be made with other successful workshops held in Ubud, Bali and Larapinta, Alice Springs to provide some answers to these important questions.

The *Idiom 23* Writing Workshops: a case study

Named for the Tropic of Capricorn, the *Idiom 23* collective has published *Idiom 23* Literary Magazine, administered the Bauhinia Literary Awards and organised the annual *Idiom 23* Writers Workshops for twenty years, with the support of Central Queensland University. The *Idiom 23* Writers Workshops have been running since the early 90s onshore in the rainforest of Byfield and on several islands in the Keppel group, both located near Yeppoon, Queensland. Initially, an average of 25 participants gathered each year on Pumpkin Island for a three-day weekend writing retreat. The island provides basic cabin-style accommodation; all food, water and other supplies were transported by charter boat, as were participants and staff. A Writer in Residence was appointed to facilitate writing activities and the workshop was supported by the financial assistance of RADF (Regional Arts Development Fund) grants.

By the 2000s, the location changed to North Keppel Island, home of the NKIEEC (North Keppel Island Environmental Education Centre) where an increased availability of accommodation places allowed for an increase in participation rates. NKIEEC can accommodate 42 participants and provides catering and transport on their own vessel. The Centre is owned and operated by Education Queensland and takes as its primary focus environmental education for school-age children. Workshops and tutorials are conducted in the field (on the reef) and in a dining hall and longhouse (open-sided covered shelter). Private groups can apply for weekend workshops on other topics, although there must exist some focus on environmental awareness in the curriculum.

The *Idiom 23* Writing workshops attract a varied clientele, ranging from teachers and retirees to students, local artists and members of community groups such as the U3A (University of the Third Age). The age range of attendees varied too, with the youngest being 20 and the members of the U3A in their 70s. However, almost exclusively female participants attend the workshop. Between 2005 and 2010 only 10 men attended out of almost 200 participants. This disparity is reflected in the participation rates for men in the other workshops described later in this paper. Many of the participants return time and again to North Keppel Island and the workshops, and are already acquainted with each other via work or social connections. Returning attendees and these prior connections are also reflected in the other workshops focused on later in this paper.

From the year 2005 to 2010, the *Idiom 23* Writing Workshops gained momentum, capitalising on an increased interest in cultural tourism. The workshop was held in the Byfield rainforest in 2007, but was otherwise conducted at the NKIEEC. Assistance from Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF) funding was utilised to keep fees affordable; between 2005 and 2010 the base price to attend the NKIEEC rose from \$160 to \$180: this was the price participants paid for attendance from Friday morning to Sunday afternoon, and included all meals, accommodation, transport and the workshop sessions themselves. Each participant paid the base cost to attend the weekend retreat; being a community-based event, no profit was sought or made. RADF grants were awarded each year to subsidise the workshop costs, as well as provide airfares and payments for Writers in Residence and tutors. Writers in Residence were paid between \$400-500, depending on level of expertise, and tutors between \$100-300 for individual sessions.

Between 2005 and 2010 participant numbers varied: in 2005, 35 attendees gathered on NKI for *A Sense of Place*, in 2006 *Kanomi Writing Workshop* attracted 32 writers. These numbers were limited to 28 in 2007 for *Being at Byfield* when the workshop was held in a local rainforest in small rustic cabins, but increased to a maximum of 42 attendees back on North Keppel Island in 2008 for *Footprints in the sand: writing as a journey*. This high number of attendees proved unmanageable in terms of accommodation configurations and subsequent years saw the numbers decrease to 36 participants in 2009 for *Weaving Words on Kanomi* and 25 in 2010 for *Memory and Memoir: Writing Your Life*. The latter number has been determined as the optimal amount of attendees, providing ample space for attendees in cabins and teaching spaces and as such participant numbers will now be deliberately limited.

The curriculum of the *Idiom 23* workshops is varied in theme and focus. Workshops have primarily focused on writing and the environment, with sessions on poetry, prose and songwriting, all conducted in outdoor teaching spaces to highlight the natural environment and develop a sense of place. Sensory-based writing workshops are held on remote beaches and inter-tidal walks conducted to facilitate an appreciation of the historical and ecological importance of the island. Feedback from workshop participants over the period 2005-2010 has led to changes in the daily program and curriculum of the workshops. Over time the workshops have focused less on poetry and more on prose, have included optional advanced-level writing workshops, and provided extended writing time for participants outside of structured workshops.

In 2010, in response to participant feedback from 2009 which requested a change in focus, life writing and memoir sessions dominated the workshop. Subsequent feedback after these changes were made in 2010 from workshop participants was very positive. All participants were in favour of the focus on life writing and memoir, demonstrating this was a popular modification. This development is reflected in the growth in the number of writing workshops and retreats focused on memoir and life writing across the world.

On the Shaw Guides website, out of 1018 listings for all workshops and retreats, those which focus on Autobiography / Memoir number 433. This figure only is exceeded by Fiction at 822 workshops, poetry with 509 workshops and publishing with 542

workshops. It should be noted that most workshops use ‘fiction’ and ‘publishing’ as search terms, so there will exist some crossover; many workshops are listed under multiple broad terms such as ‘fiction’. Therefore, of the various sub-genres available excluding these broad terms – from Children’s Writing (336), to Horror (96), Romance (238) and Mystery (359) – Autobiography / Memoir offers by far the greatest number of workshops and retreats (433).

Writing in the Tropics and in the Desert: two case studies

Two of the many writing workshops available on Autobiography / Memoir are held in Ubud, Bali and Larapinta, Northern Territory respectively and they will be discussed to shed light on the popularity and growth of writing workshops as cultural tourism.

The *Writing, Yoga and Improvisation in Bali* writing retreat is an 8-day workshop held in Ubud, Bali and facilitated by Australian Walkley Award-winning journalist and novelist Sarah Armstrong, with journeyman writer Alan Close. The cost of attendance for this residential workshop is AUD\$1620, which includes accommodation in bungalows, breakfast each day and three workshop sessions a day. Sessions were held in a *wantilan* (an open-sided pagoda structure) set in a rice paddy, near day spas and *warungs* (family-owned restaurants). The workshop is promoted as a cultural and spiritual experience. The writing sessions focus primarily on life writing and memoir and are supplemented by yoga and movement / performance sessions (improvisation) to inspire creativity and fluidity.

In the workshop held from 28 September to the 6 October 2008, of the 15 participants only four were male. The participants came from all walks of life: a television producer, journalists, retirees, teachers, owners of small business. All were Australian, some of whom are expatriates. Many of the attendees were returning to Indonesia for the workshop having attended previous retreats and workshops with Sarah and Alan, and several participants were already acquainted through social connections from their respective home towns and work. A core group of attendees were further acquainted with Sarah and Alan from their hometown of Mullumbimby.

The majority of participants at the *Storyworks: You in the Desert* retreat of August 2010 were also female: out of 13 participants, just 2 two were male. The workshop was held from 14-19 August in the Northern Territory, Australia, with participants camping on Ormiston Creek, using bush showers and eating camp food. The cost of AUD\$1590 included 5 days accommodation in swags and tents, all meals and workshops. All sessions incorporated bushwalking on the Larapinta Trail. Life writing was the focus of the curriculum, facilitated by Bridget Brandon, a Sydney-based drama teacher who founded Storyworks and has been organising the workshops for 11 years. As has been the case with all the workshops described here, many of the participants had attended previous years’ workshops and had prior connections with each other. The attendees again came from a wide variety of backgrounds and included academics, a postman, an archaeologist, people who worked in Government, Education and Law agencies and retirees.

Writing Workshops as Cultural Tourism: some points of interest

The success and appeal of these workshops appears to be based on several factors: if the tutors and writers in residence are well-known, such as the case of Rolf Potts or Australian life writing guru Patty Miller, and if the location is particularly alluring and provides an all-inclusive experience. Providing meals, accommodation and all workshops is the equivalent of a package-deal holiday. Budding writers need simply to travel to the location of the workshop and venue and enjoy the experience. The addition of other lifestyle activities – yoga, bushwalking, even surfing – adds to the allure of the workshop and provides a holistic experience.

Images of exotic locations and experiences abound in the promotional materials for the three workshops. These images provide a focus on the lifestyle and cultural tourism elements of the workshop experience. This captures the leisure market area of the tourism sector and inspires initial interest. The *Idiom 23* website features professional photographs of the island and surrounds, and each year the workshop flyer depicts a scene of tranquillity and gentle beauty. Similarly the workshops held in Ubud and Larapinta utilise scenic photography and evocative descriptions of the locations on their websites to entice writers and non-writers alike. This is a practice popular with the more established writing workshops and retreats advertised through the Shaw Guides database. The extensive Skyros website features the azure skies and oceans of Greece, where their acclaimed Writers Lab is located. Other images show the jungles of Thailand, the haciendas of Havana and impressive stone houses on the Isle of Wight. One can only imagine the promotional materials informed the Guardian newspaper to declare Skyros the number one writing holiday in the world in a 2008 article.

Other workshops have taken their lead from Skyros: workshops in Costa Rica, Oaxaca Mexico, Canada and Ireland promote their exotic locations on image-laden websites in far greater depth than their accompanying curriculum. The focus is primarily on travel and cultural and spiritual experience rather than educational outcomes.

This focus on travelling to an exotic destination to embark on a residential writing experience is at odds with the educational outcomes favoured by university writing programs. The evidence from the case studies presented here suggests writing workshops and retreats cater to a different kind of consumer than writing programs. Attendees are predominately older and largely retired. The courses they attend focus on spiritual and personal development over theoretical knowledge and publication. Women attend writing workshops in far greater numbers than men, and this is mirrored in a sample of writing subjects at a regional Australian university. The sample is taken from the same time period as is the focus of the case studies indicated in this paper, 2005-2010. During this time females comprised 90% of enrolments in these writing subjects. While not a comprehensive account of the breadth of writing programs available in Australia, it does provide a glimpse, and when compared to the ratio of women to men attending writing workshops and retreats, points to a trend. This is however a small sample and further data analysis might prove the trend exists on a larger scale.

Conclusion

While writing workshops and retreats do not compete with existing writing courses and programs, they can enhance the curriculum offered and provide a useful entry point for students wishing to enrol in tertiary institutions. They become somewhat strange bedfellows with largely similar functions; to encourage the practice and development of writing, and in this sense can work together to enable students to achieve their writing goals. This has been the case with the *Idiom 23* workshops. Writing activities developed over several workshops have been incorporated into new writing subjects in 2010 at Central Queensland University. In addition several previous workshop participants have enrolled in the Masters of Letters (MLitt), an Honours equivalent degree program. Two are continuing their MLitt degree program with another graduating in 2010.

The popularity of writing workshops might also benefit tertiary institutions if they were able to extend writing programs to include short courses and retreats in their offerings. This would be largely dependent on the tertiary institutions geographic location and access to the kinds of exotic locations which predominate in writing workshop promotional materials. The *Idiom 23* workshops have the advantage of a unique and exotic location, the Keppel Islands group on the Capricorn Coast.

Writing workshops and retreats offered as cultural tourism provide specific experiences for a particular clientele, one quite different to that seeking a tertiary education. They largely exist outside of the university sectors scope and make available unique opportunities for writing in diverse locations. The combination of travel and writing and focus on the increasingly popular life writing stream of creative writing, as well as highlighting access to lifestyle activities, makes them an ideal option for budding writers not seeking tertiary qualifications and the rigours of academic life. Universities with access to exotic locations or unique facilities could provide this type of workshop to enhance existing programs or to compliment non-degree programs. In the meantime, it is clear that writing workshops occupy a unique position in the tourism industry, and continue to develop as their own form of cultural tourism

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