

Co-creating with the universe: A phenomenological study of New Age tourists

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SUMMARY

This paper discusses a phenomenological investigation of the experiences of New Age tourists in New Zealand. New Age tourism is becoming a noteworthy form of the tourism experience, while remaining an enigma in the field of tourism studies. This paper sets out to uncover some of the unknowns behind this type of travelling. To understand New Age tourism, one has to understand New Age tourists - their interests, experiences and perspective on travelling. It is shown that New Age tourists are highly individualised people characterised by their interest in unique 'life experiences'. Indeed, the New Age travellers in New Zealand are defined by their search for extraordinary and transcendental awareness, with the objectives being personal, spiritual and emotional growth. The method of data collection was phenomenological interviews, focusing on how New Age tourists perceive and describe their experiences. The phenomenological descriptions were derived through validated invariant constituents and themes, representing the group as a whole. This paper will discuss several major themes such as feelings of energy, being able to distinguish between different energies, having an extraordinary experience, or connecting to something. The outcome of this study is to bring new information and knowledge into tourism by gaining a deeper understanding of the New Age tourism experience.

Key Words:

New Age tourism; New Age traveller; New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

Some fundamental taxonomic and material questions remain unanswered when it comes to New Age location, practice, and history (Sutcliffe 2003). In the field of tourism studies, New Age is a novice constituent conveying new (aged) perspectives on why people travel to certain sites. Although New Age tourism has drawn the attention of few academics (Attix 2002; Digance 2003; Digance and Cusack 2002; Pernecky and Johnston 2006; Shackley 2001; Sutton and House 2003), it continues to be an enigma waiting to be clearly

defined, and New Age travellers' experiences cry out to be understood. For the purpose of this study, New Age tourism and its adherents were conceptualized in the context of consumerism of New Age products and services, with seekership being the driving force. Redden (2005: 240) offers the following explanation: "If seekership is the dominant mode of participation, it is - in material terms - primarily effected through selection and consumption of commodified goods and services made available by New Age businesses".

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With regard to seekership, “self-spirituality” and individual spiritual development are dominant themes in New Age (Heelas 1996; Luckmann 1996), and thus more attention needs to be paid to the motivation for visiting certain places as well as the New Age experience itself.

The main asset of this paper is therefore twofold; firstly it bridges the gap by contributing to the body of knowledge in tourism studies, and secondly it provides a qualitative in-depth understanding of the core of this phenomenon: the inner journey of the New Age traveller.

In order to study New Age tourists in depth, phenomenological investigation was employed, resulting in a noteworthy account of the New Age experience and its meaning for those involved. In doing so, this paper first clarifies the phenomenological method employed, followed by the synthesis of significant themes resulting in composite meanings and essences of the New Age tourism experience.

METHODOLOGY: APPLYING PHENOMENOLOGY TO NEW AGE TOURISM

One of the earliest works to use phenomenology as a method in tourism studies was Cohen's (1979) *Phenomenology of tourist experience*. More recent papers include: *The precinct experience: a phenomenological account* (Hayllar and Griffin 2005); *Motivations of farm tourism hosts and guests in the South West Tapestry Region, Western Australia* (Ingram 2002); and *Geographical consciousness and tourism experience* by Li (2000). No literature was found using phenomenology to study New Age tourism; in fact the application of phenomenology as a research method in the field of tourism studies was found to be minimal. Hence what is meant by phenomenology?

Phenomenology is the science that studies truth. It stands back from our rational involvement with things and marvels at the fact that there is disclosure, that things do appear, that the world can be understood, and that we in our life of thinking serve as datives for the manifestation of things (Sokolowski 2000: 185).

Different phenomenological approaches such as *descriptive phenomenology*, *existential phenomenology* or *hermeneutic phenomenology* can be applied to one's research (Welch 2001). However, it is how the world of human experience can be explicated that differs between each phenomenological view. This study was grounded in Welch's beliefs that differences separating each phenomenologist arise from his/her particular ontological and epistemological position.

The phenomenology used in this research falls within the category of *transcendental* phenomenology, a work of Edmund Husserl and more recently Amadeo Giorgi, and therefore as a method it is more rigorous and descriptive (Lavery 2003). It can, however, also be labeled as *phenomenology of practice* for the focus lies on practice and application within the applied domains of the human sciences (Manen 2000).

The data was based on five tourists' experiences on a New Age or spiritual trip with the Good Company Pacific (2002), a business that specializes in spiritual and sacred travel in New Zealand, and one other tourist who had visited sacred and power places in New Zealand. The major criterion for selecting participants for this research was their involvement in New Age tourism: such as visiting sacred or power places defined by Pernecky and Johnston's (2006) New Age tourism activities chart. The New Age tourism activities comprise six major groups representing the involvement of New Age travellers in: (1) power/sacred places, (2) divination, (3) workshops, seminars and festivals, (4) wellness and holistic health, (5) greenery and eco-spirit, and (6) other interests that include New Age accommodation or visiting retreat centres. All respondents were well traveled and had visited a number of destinations that may be labeled spiritual or New Age sites. These spiritual places are to be found throughout both the North and South Islands of New Zealand, with the most important locations being Nelson, Castle Hill, Dargaville, Russell, Gisborne, the East Cape, and places visited by the Good Company Pacific (2002) such as “The Stone City” in the Waipoua Forest. Internationally, the informants had visited places such as Arizona (USA), Peru, Bolivia, Egypt, England, Israel and Easter Island. The activities and events experienced at these sites varied from individual to group experiences involving various practices such as meditation, toning and dowsing.

In a phenomenological study the number of participants is recommended to be six (Jennings 2001) but also between one and ten depending on the nature of the research (Becker 1986; Kamm 1966). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) suggest that the sample in an interview-based study is something that should be determined toward the end of the research, and one should stop when what needs to be known has been found out. In this project, the researcher felt that six participants provided sufficient and rich data before reaching the stage of collecting similar repetitive information from more informants.

In order to obtain respondents' profiles, they were asked to fill out a simple questionnaire. The information showed that the travellers were all women, mostly over fifty years old, either New Zealand Europeans (4 respondents) or Other Europeans (2 respondents) living in the country. They were all High School or University educated and their income level varied from ten to fifty thousand New Zealand dollars annually, however three participants preferred not to answer the question regarding income. In terms of religious beliefs, the majority (4 respondents) saw themselves without a religion, one adhered to a personal belief system, and one respondent classified herself as "eclectic".

Data were collected by means of a phenomenological interview. These were reflective and conducted within a year of participants' experiences. In phenomenology, the method of 'dialogue' has an extensive history, and the phenomenological interview is an almost inevitable procedure for attaining a rigorous and significant description of human experience (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997). The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions (Moustakas 1994).

Participants involved in the in-depth interviews were considered "co-researchers", for interviewees do not function merely as research subjects (Pollio et al., 1997). To defend validity, the phenomenological technique of "bracketing" was also employed. Bracketing involves suspending one's various beliefs (Manen 2000) and setting aside of all knowledge, biases and assumptions about the phenomenon (Ingram 2002).

In this study a phenomenological model from Moustakas (1994) was adopted. This model involves four

main stages: (1) preparing to collect data, (2) collecting data, (3) organizing, analyzing, and synthesizing data, and (4) summary, implications, and outcomes. It was imperative that the research question had both social meaning and personal significance. The position of each key word, or the focus of each question, determined what was primary in pursuing the topic and what data was to be collected.

The research question was formulated as follows: "How do people perceive and describe their experience of visiting New Age places (places of New Age interest)?" The major components of this question were HOW, PERCEIVE, DESCRIBE and EXPERIENCE. The use of these words enabled the researcher to analyse how New Age places were perceived by different people, what visiting those places meant to them, what drove them to experience such places, and how the participants perceived and described New Age tourism in their overall experience.

The Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions (a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience) formed a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole (Moustakas 1994). In order to study the co-researchers' similarities and differences, the frequency of a particular experience is indicated in Table 1 with a simple frequency count. This method was adopted from Li (2000) and enabled the researcher to distinguish between major and minor themes based on the particularities of a visitor's lived experiences. Only major themes (shared by more than 50 percent of all co-researchers) were included in the composite phenomenological description of co-researchers' experience.

The data in Table 1 reveals that the co-researchers had certain similarities and differences in terms of thematic experiences. For example, all co-researchers shared the experience of *feeling energy*, which is indicated by the number six (i.e. six out of six had experienced that). On the other hand, only one co-researcher suggested that *going to sacred sites is like a vacation rather than a journey*, as indicated by number one under the column for co-researcher number four (Co-4). The following part of this paper will explore the key themes and look into the experiences of people visiting a New Age place/site.

Table 1
DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN CO-RESEARCHERS' EXPERIENCES

Tourism Experience	Co-1	Co-2	Co-3	Co-4	Co-5	Co-6
• Visiting sacred places changes you	6	6	6	6	6	6
• Experience of feeling energy	6	6	6	6	6	6
• Having an extraordinary experience	5	5	5	5		5
• Visiting sacred places is an emotional experience	5	5	5		5	5
• Belief in oneness and universal energy or source	5	5		5	5	5
• Going to sacred places is a growing experience	5		5	5	5	5
• Having this 'New Age' experience is important	5	5	5	5	5	
• What we do is different	5	5	5	5	5	
• Having various skills and using tools is part of the experience	5	5	5	5	5	
• Visiting sacred places has a purpose	5	5	5	5	5	
• Going to sacred places is a learning experience		5	5	5	5	5
• Being able to distinguish between different energies	4	4	4	4		
• Connecting to something	4	4	4	4		
• Experiences at sacred sites are unique and cannot be experienced anywhere else	4	4	4		4	
• Experience of being guided by something – intuitively 'knowing'	4		4		4	4
• Friendship with nature	4	4	4			4
• Visiting sacred places involves an experience of bodily changes		4	4	4	4	
• Visiting sacred sites in a group enables stronger and more exciting experience		4	4		4	4
• Need for individuality rather than Gurus and Leaders		4	4	4	4	
• Belief in past life	3	3				3
• Independent travel is preferred to group travel	3		3	3		
• Going to sacred sites can affect other people	3		3	3		
• Perception of the environment is very strong	3		3		3	
• Spiritual identity is very important	3		3		3	
• Visiting sacred places can be compared to going to a church		3	3	3		
• Feeling of belonging to a club		2	2			
• There is no need for visiting the same place twice		2	2			
• Doing 'these things' may go to extremes			2	2		
• Curiosity is the main reason for visiting sacred sites			2	2		
• Group travel means having to compromise				2	2	
• Belief and interest in astrology	1					
• To ask for permission to perform ritual is important	1					
• Group travel is safer		1				
• Healing the land is part of visiting sacred sites		1				
• Going to sacred sites is like a vacation rather than journey				1		
• Bad experience with group travel				1		
• Involvement in Maori culture and rituals					1	
• Having an experience impossible to describe						1

NEW AGE TOURISM EXPERIENCE: A SYNTHESIS OF SIGNIFICANT THEMES

By analysing the Individual Structural and Individual Textural Descriptions of interview transcripts, a total of 19 key themes representing the experiences of the

majority of co-researchers (ie. with frequency counts of 4 and more) were identified. However, due to the similarity of their experiences, not every co-researcher's

Table 2

MAJOR CATEGORIES OF THEMES IN NEW AGE TOURISM EXPERIENCE

<p>(a) New Age tourism as the search for the 'extraordinary'</p> <p>Visiting sacred places changes you</p> <p>Connecting to something</p> <p>Being able to distinguish between different energies</p> <p>Friendship with nature</p> <p>Belief in oneness and universal energy or source</p>
<p>(b) New Age tourism as an experiential phenomenon</p> <p>Having an extraordinary experience</p> <p>Experience of feeling energy</p> <p>Going to sacred places is a growing experience</p> <p>Going to sacred places is a learning experience</p> <p>Visiting sacred places is an emotional experience</p> <p>Visiting sacred places involves an experience of bodily changes</p> <p>Experience of being guided by something - intuitively 'knowing'</p> <p>Having various skills and using tools is part of the experience</p> <p>Visiting sacred sites in a group enables stronger and more exciting experience</p> <p>Experiences at sacred sites are unique and cannot be experienced anywhere else</p>
<p>(c) Distinctive sociological features of New Age tourism</p> <p>What we do is different</p> <p>Having this 'New Age' experience is important</p> <p>Visiting sacred places has a purpose</p> <p>Need for individuality rather than Gurus and Leaders</p>

story is discussed in detail. In other words, to prevent repetition under each theme, only the most salient and significant experiences are described. All co-researchers have been given pseudonyms.

The 19 themes were aggregated into the following three major groups: (a) *New Age tourism as the search for the 'extraordinary'*, (b) *New Age tourism as an experiential phenomenon*, and (c) *the New Age tourist as manifesting distinctive sociological features*. These are shown in Table 2.

**(a) New Age tourism:
In search of the extraordinary**

This category includes five major themes. New Age tourism is interpreted here as a search for the "out of the ordinary". By going to New Age sites, people are transformed from their everyday lives as they experience a "connection" with cosmic forces; in many

cases visitors not only feel an "energy" but are also able to distinguish between different energies in different places. Most co-researchers also enjoy a unique relationship with nature, believing that they are part of a "oneness" or "universal energy". It is a matter of speculation whether the co-researchers would have had their unique experiences if they did not embody such spiritual beliefs in the first place (or whether their beliefs have been shaped by their travel experiences).

**Theme 1:
Visiting New Age places
changes you**

Visiting sacred sites has profound impacts on most of the co-researchers. It can certainly make one feel different from before, and it can even be a life changing experience at an "Aetheric level". For example, Betty believed that by visiting sacred sites, she felt energetically very different.

When she was asked whether she had noticed any difference looking at herself before and after the experience, her reply was: “Yes, definitely. It has changed my life”.

Another informant, Cindy, thought that she had become more tolerant. She believed that “special places” impact the energies of people, and by seeing others react to these places, she has become extremely hesitant to deny the power of such places. As she explained: “By having seen people reacting to different places I would say everything is possible. Whereas a couple of years ago I would have said... *that is a weirdo*”. Not only has visiting sacred places been a great experience for Cindy, she is now convinced that everybody is affected in one way or another. Even if a person does not feel or experience anything significant immediately, she suggests it is still beneficial for them to have walked the path, to have been there and to have seen the sacred site as it may trigger something in the future.

For another co-researcher Eve, visiting sacred landscapes has led her to re-think her life priorities. Her interest in spiritual matters, for example, has impressed upon her that her highly ‘commercialised life’ as a career woman in the media industry had seemed very empty by comparison. Instead, she felt the need to pursue her own writing and to spend time exploring her own interests without the constraints imposed by the needs of the commercial world (particularly the need to please advertisers, accountants and readers). Eve said that all she wants to do in future is to “keep on expanding and never stopping” as visiting sacred sites has “greatly changed her internally”.

Theme 2: Connecting to something

Visiting sacred sites and places with unique power is more than just a tourist experience. All co-researchers mentioned that they felt some kind of “connection to something”. By this, they meant a communion with “something higher” or a “connection to Earth energies” or a “higher source”. Diana, for example, saw the primary reason for visiting sacred or power sites as to feel a “cosmic connection”. She felt drawn, in a way that she was unable to describe intellectually, to the Earth and its positive energy.

Angela compared the feeling of being at certain sites to feeling “at home”. For instance in Nelson, she felt that the place was very open, warm and inviting towards her. She also felt that the place was “very real” as the people seemed genuine and were not “working through a ton of plastic”. She was also aware of being very connected to the town and to her “higher self” throughout her visit to Nelson.

Sometimes, the feeling of connection is not confined to a particular town or place, but to nature. For instance, during her travels throughout New Zealand, Betty said that she felt a special connection with the land and its natural elements. She described this as a connection to a “source”, and in the process it has “re-awakened” a part of her. She saw the process of connection as sacred and felt a special bond with the land and its natural landscapes. As she explained: “rather than going to church I connect my own spirituality with the place, the land, the things that grow – the trees and the stones and the wisdom of the stones”.

As for Cindy, whenever she visited places where she felt a connection with life energy, her hands would start to tingle. “It is a feeling of having an energy footprint”, Cindy commented. Moreover, she was convinced that she is being “protected” and “sheltered” by the energy around her.

Theme 3: The ability to distinguish between different energies

Most co-researchers had an experience where they had been able to distinguish between “good” and “bad” energy, and between “positive” and “negative” energy. This was often translated as a feeling of being invited to or a sense of comfort in a particular place, or the contrary feeling of wanting to “get out” of a place as soon as possible. These feelings had helped Cindy a few times in her life when she knew exactly that it was time to “move on immediately”. She described the positive energy as “very calm, peaceful, tremendously just enjoying, just being there”. On the other hand, the negative energy almost always gave her goose bumps and she likened the feeling to “the alarm button [being] pushed to be alert”. She offered an example when she was travelling once: “I did backpacking on my own.

I know exactly the feeling, exactly. It is like ok, I should not pursue that path any further, I should turn around and look for the fastest transportation means to get me out of that place". According to Angela, how one feels towards a place depends on whether one perceives environments on a "material plane" or a "spiritual plane" – in other words, whether one sees oneself as either "connected" or "disconnected" from the environment.

Some co-researchers were able to describe more precisely what the positive and negative energies felt like. Betty, explained that she is able to feel in certain sites a large amount of energy "coming out", as well as "goddess energy coming in". Such energies, she explained are extremely strong and create powerful experiences. Diana compared good energy to a feeling of being at peace. She clarified it: "just like you feel after your first half bottle of wine, ha ha, or your first half of whatever it is that you do to feel good, feel happy, relaxed, and connected". On the other hand, bad energy can create very unpleasant experiences. She described one occasion: "I felt nauseated...sick. It was so depressing I had to get out and I could not do it and I got confused...disoriented".

Theme 4: Friendship with nature

Nature plays a very important role for most of the participants. Co-researchers had immense respect for nature and all living things. Often they formed a unique relationship with nature and saw its beauty in all aspects. Cindy, for example, explained that each time she is in nature, she feels "grateful for being allowed" in to a beautiful place; she also becomes more sensitive to the environment and becomes more aware, for example, of how "often birds come very close by". Indeed, many of the interviewees similarly expressed greater sensitivity towards the beauty and power of nature. Angela, while "blessing" her greenstone (jade) in the sea became highly aware of the clearness and the beauty of water. Betty on the other hand felt that rocks hold much information and "power", and one of the purposes of her trip to sacred sites was to "honour" these rocks and to "pay respect". Also for Florence, her experience of discovering "her" personal rock she had found in the woods was an important moment in her life. Over time, she has developed a special "relationship" with that particular rock.

Theme 5: Belief in oneness and universal energy source

Most co-researchers believed that they are part of one universe, and are connected to a universal energy source. It is perhaps this theme that is inherent and core to New Age travel, for having such a belief system opens the doors to the New Age paradigm and its distinctive experiences. New Age tourists are often able to see "spirits" and to communicate with them. For example, Florence recounted an episode in which she was in the kitchen one day where she saw a "beautiful coloured ball". When she was asked whether what she saw could perhaps be a balloon, she replied:

No no...it was a spirit. I don't know but I read a book years later that I understand it's like a sensor but I mean it was put there for me to see. If you have been looking you probably wouldn't have seen it. It was a lesson for me to learn that they will put me anywhere and I won't have any say over it. Umm...then it just fffffs into the sky and turned from this beautiful yellow – blue – pink ball...then it turned into this brilliant luminous white light. It was just something the universe sent out to show me that I have no need to worry that I will always be in the right place at the right time.

Spirits and energy also reside in nature. For example, Betty expressed her certainty that the sacred sites she had visited are all "alive energetically" and there is often "an interaction that goes on" between people and stones. According to her, people "bring" something to the stones, and the stones give something back to people in the form of an energetic exchange. Betty recounted a past incident when she "connected" to a particularly big stone, which she explained as feeling like a "whale". In the process, she felt herself transformed into a "cosmic grid of energy".

Visiting New Age landscapes also frequently triggers profound and mystic questions for some respondents. For instance, Diana who was particularly interested in the mystery of sacred places felt that visiting New Age sites often involves a process of self-discovery and learning. She said it involves constantly asking questions: how sacred places work, what it is she is connecting to, what does it all mean, and where does the sacred power come from? Constantly contemplating the power of landscapes as well as querying whether power comes from the earth, universe, or some other

cosmic sources is part of the “game”. In the process of thinking and discovering, Diana felt that she was connecting to, in her words, a “biggest scheme of things, different vibrations, a different level of spirituality”. In other words, by communing in sacred places, Diana was tapping into “the universal source” of knowledge and power.

(b) New Age tourism: An experiential phenomenon

This category includes ten major themes that are discussed in detail below. It can be argued that New Age tourism is tourism based on a complex experience. This is because New Age tourism involves several experiences simultaneously; these experiences are extraordinary and co-researchers claim to be able to feel energy, bodily changes and emotional transformations. Often too, they experience a feeling of “being guided” or “intuitively knowing”, a feeling that may not be experienced anywhere else. In the process, the co-researchers learn many new things and grow spiritually and emotionally through the experience.

Theme 1: Having an extraordinary experience

All of the co-researchers had had extraordinary experiences and each experience was unique to each co-researcher. Perhaps more bizarre than unique (although not of spiritual nature) was a particularly memorable episode shared by Eve when she visited Egypt and was involved in a group meditation in a corner of a temple, surrounded by “armed guard” to ensure that the group was not disturbed. As she recounted: “it was so bizarre; we were meditating in places with armed guards watching over us”.

On the other hand, Angela had encountered an exciting moment when washing a piece of greenstone in the ocean that was given to her by a friend from Bali. She spoke of the unusual outcome when she cleansed the greenstone: “I washed my stone in the ocean and as soon I did that it was starting to hum! I was like wow! When I got back to Bali I was telling my friend and she said it’s because it is from New Zealand”.

Another astonishing experience was that of Betty who had a vision of “people who have been here before” during one of her trips to Castle Hill in New Zealand’s

South Island. She recounted her experience in the following way:

When I first went out to Castle Hill and I just sat there for a long time and suddenly this woman from way back appeared in my mind’s eye clothed in clothing of that time. She was very matter of fact. She just showed me herself and then she went away in some sort of light... And then it sort of became a flying ship. I was just sitting there and I thought ...OH you’re right... ok. I thought she was just showing me how she came in this dimension and went out back to another dimension. Just came in into my meditation space and out again.

Diana described her incident with a group of people in a forest, when they heard singing coming from within the group. Yet there was nobody in the group singing. She explained that it was “ghosts” or “little fairy people”, and that she was able to hear their music. Apart from unusual sounds, unusual visions are also common for New Agers. Florence once had a unique vision visiting a sacred site in New Zealand. What she saw was a “meeting house” of Maori design. She tried to lift her arms upwards but was unable to move them much at all. Trying to lift them was like “hitting something hard”. She felt as if she was transformed to “a different time warp” where her actions were constrained.

Theme 2: Experience of feeling energy

All co-researchers also experienced a “feeling of energy” at different sacred sites. For Cindy, it was the feeling of “tingling hands”. Co-researchers’ bodies too felt different in such environments, an apparent explanation according to one interview is that the energy in the surroundings causes the ions in the body to vibrate at a different frequency. Sometimes, co-respondents detected energy or spirits by feeling of cold or getting goose-bumps.

Places can also feel “nice” or “comfortable”. Angela said has lived in many different places around the world where sometimes she felt extremely “alive”, and yet at other times feels very “dormant”. In New Zealand, Angela claims that her entire body comes alive (or in her own words, “all parts are working”), whereas in England, she often felt that a big part of her “died” and only a “tiny part came alive”.

Sometimes, the feeling of energy and being alive comes from being in close communion with nature. For instance, Betty revealed her absolute amazement during her encounter of “hugging” and experiencing the energy of a rock. She said:

The thought that came in was...this is a whale. Everybody thinks it (the rock) looks like a whale. I thought it was whale energy and I put my hand over it. I found myself rubbing my hands over it like it was a human being's body, massaging it. I was going OOOOOOHH and could not believe I was doing that. That is just what it felt called upon in the moment.

Similarly, Eve confirmed that sacred places are an amazing storehouse of energy, and she was able to feel the “intensity of being” in such places as opposed to walking on a normal street. She was also convinced that it is indeed possible to “feel different energies in different places”.

Theme 3: Going to New Age places is a learning experience

For most of the co-researchers, visiting these sacred sites is a learning experience. Not only do they learn about new places and environments, they also improve their skills in connecting with different energies and grow spiritually as a result. For instance, Betty who had a unique relationship with rocks felt that she was always learning to connect with different energies through different rocks. With each rock, she felt as if she was “learning a language, learning to see things or to feel things”. Cindy suggested that some sacred places can “help to get inside oneself”. From her point of view there is a reason for that. It might be because churches, particularly old churches, may have been built on sacred places so there is a reason, she believes, why these buildings are there.

For Diana, visiting New Age environments involves “learning about the connection to the mystery of life”. By visiting sacred sites or places where she can “dowse” energy, Diana learned more about the act of “dowsing” itself as well as the sacred site. It is therefore not surprising that the New Age experience can be an enriching and educational one for involved co-researchers. As Eve put it, she always felt much “richer”, “rounder” and more “fulfilled” after visiting sacred New

Age sites. She also had high expectations of learning something new every time she visited (or revisited) such places.

Theme 4: Going to New Age places is a growing experience

Not only did the co-researchers perceive visiting New Age sites to be a learning experience, it was a growing experience too. The interviewees claimed that New Age experiences helped them grow as human beings. Indeed, the experience is often a personal journey that happens on an “aetheric” level. The traveller becomes a better person, although the learning experience may often be a solitary one. Eve explained her experiences in the following manner: “It is something that sort of pushes you along on your own journey that other people can't necessary come with you on. ...it is not their journey and it can be quite a lonely thing”. Similarly Angela opined that the New Age experience is like a quest for personal growth and development, and only she can undertake the growing experience on her own. As she explained: “There are places that I need to go to in order to get to grow up, or to get to the next step, or to get the next piece of energy that is coming in, as I go up to another level”.

Theme 5: Visiting New Age sites is an emotional experience

Facing different emotions at New Age places is part of the co-researchers' experience. Often there are feelings of joy, love, peace, happiness and “being alive”. Visiting New Age sites can also bring calmness, goodness and an abundance of gratefulness. Angela described her feeling of “calm” and “quiet” as she was blessing her greenstone. Similarly Betty, while “hugging” a stone, felt totally at peace with the land and the stone as she became attuned to what she was doing. She portrayed the feeling as what the “moment asked for”, and so she willingly entered into that. Eve also felt that some sacred sites could stir up powerful emotions deep within the psyche: “I get sort of internal physical sort of tugs in the solar plexus area. I suppose if I am in a place that really strikes me profoundly it is a sort of feeling deep in the gut...OH GOD THIS IS AN AMAZING PLACE”.

Theme 6: Visiting New Age places involves an experience of bodily changes

Bodily changes such as the feeling of being re-energised or, on the contrary, becoming exhausted are part of the co-researchers' experiences in New Age environments. According to Eve, some places do evoke physical sensations in people, whereas Betty felt an energetic awareness every time she "hugged a stone". The more she "connected" with the environment, the more intense was the sensation. Sometimes New Age places can even lead to bodily sensations. Cindy often experienced "tingling" in her hands and felt "awake, positively alert and energetic" in such environments. Some places would even re-energise her and if she had been tired before, she would not be after. Cindy had also witnessed other members of her travel group reacting strongly by making strange noises and shaking.

The feelings of bodily change are not always positive though. When asked how visiting New Age sites affected her, Diana's reply was rather ominous: "sometimes it gives me a sort of feeling of lightness [as if] I have slept for days". Nevertheless at other times, such as her visit to Castle Hill in the South Island, she felt the entire experience to be "enervating" and "exhausting".

Theme 7: Experience of being guided by something or intuitively 'knowing'

An experience of intuition or guidance is also part of many co-researchers' trips to New Age landscapes. This is a difficult feeling to describe but in some cases it may be compared to a feeling of "attraction" or "compulsion" to visit particular sites. For example, Angela clarified that visiting certain New Age places seemed destined for her: "I very much wanted to go to these places and it was like an intuitive knowing that it was important to go. I needed to go that place". According to Florence, it is very difficult to explain the moments of intuition to anybody. On one of her New Age trips, Florence found a rock which she named Jacob and she described the moment as follows:

Somewhere, somehow I knew there was something which was the reason why I was going. Somewhere I knew there was something and we went up the bush and we were walking along a beautiful forest.

It did have a beautiful feel and somehow I sort of was aware that... I looked over and I ran over and OOOOOOHH I picked this rock up like a long lost friend and I knew it was mine. How did I know that? Nothing told me! I assume it is intuition but it is so subtle. I don't hear it, I don't feel it, I just know.

At times, intuition can lead to episodes of enlightenment at a much later point in time. Eve spoke of the "AHA moments" in her travel experiences that made her realise the reason why she goes where she goes. Eve would notice that things would make sense to her only weeks or months later. For example, she could look at a particular shape or a symbol, or hear a song and feel "synchronous things showing up". As a result, she intuitively felt that there must have been a reason why she chose to visit a particular place or see a particular thing.

Theme 8: Having various skills and using tools is part of the experience

Most co-researchers have developed or learned different techniques to "feel" or "connect" to energy. Such tools include dowsing, and channelling, as well as the use of pendulums.

Betty had developed a method of "singing and toning" to connect to cosmic forces. She explained that she has been in the process of learning, experimenting and "seeing what happens" with this skill. During one of her trips to a New Age site, she visited some very old rocks - about 10,000 years old: she was able to "tone the energy centres" and the "chakras" of a particularly huge stone. She described the experience as "healing" because she had a very bad knee on that day, but after the "toning" her pain had vanished. When asked what exactly she meant by toning, she explained:

There are seven energy centres and I have been taught how to tone human being energy centres. And you hear all sorts of resonance when you tune into the chakra...with your voice... Ooooooooooui. There is something that comes to meet you. And there is a kind of harmonic thing that happens. So I thought I'll try the stone. I have not done it before. I have toned the stones generally and I have sat with people using pounamu (jade) and the Aotea stone. We have the possibility to connect with the land and it brings in all

sorts of interesting energies and being. And I have never done one stone like I did the other day. It was very healing to do it. You asked me what I feel and that's what I would say about that. As I moved up, the energy got stronger and stronger and you could hear the resonance going oooooo...

In a similar vein, when Angela “blessed” her green-stone, she took care to check where the ‘best’ part of the water was. She did so by using a “pendulum” which she described as follows:

... a piece of cainaita is one of the crystals you don't need to cleanse. Because it is a self-cleansing stone and it is on a piece of string. Basically what I do is I ask a question and it will give me an answer. So you know, once I have actually asked the spirit whether it is ok to bless my stone in the water then I ask the pendulum where is the best place to dip. So you do that by saying 'is this a good place to do it: yes or no'. If it says no, you go to the other side of the river and ask again until you find the right place.

Sometimes, skills can be acquired through learning and constant practice. For instance, Cindy attended channelling classes and practiced channelling at different sites. She explained that different places evoke the presence of different beings, and it was easier to channel in some places than in others. Every experience is different and sometimes she felt stronger energies at some places, and in other places she was not able to “get into it” at all. There were also times when she could sit in a place for hours without realising how long she has been there for. Similarly for Eve, there was a period few years ago when she was intensively practicing “channelling”. She described her experience of channelling and the remarkable achievements of writing an entire book through channelling:

So for about two or three times a week I would sit, settle myself in, open up that head space and often a word would come to me or a phrase and I could deliver in my own voice what was like a sermon I suppose... that might have been on sea shells or might have been on sand or things about the importance of steps. You know physical steps symbolizing the steps we have to take in our life. It was a sort of like a primer on how to live. I got about fifty thousand words which I would speak into a microphone, transcribe it and then I wrote a book about this odd experience that had happened

and some stories from my own life and my childhood with what I have received from a higher source”.

As with channelling, dowsing is another skill deployed by New Agers to connect with the earth's energies. One of the co-researchers Diana was usually pleasantly surprised about her ability in dowsing. She particularly delighted in knowing that there were different earth energies which she could easily tap into through dowsing. Diana described dowsing as a “technique being in a right frame of mind and asking to be shown what it is that you are looking for if it is present”.

Theme 9: Visiting New Age sites in a group enables stronger and more exciting experiences

Although all co-researchers have individual experiences, visiting sacred sites and power places in an interactive group and observing other people can create a stronger and more exciting experience. Group visits also mean people learning from each other and sharing one another's experiences. Indeed, the whole experience will impart a different energy – “group energy”.

While some co-researchers preferred to visit New Age sites solo, others enjoyed the company of people. Betty was one of those who prefer to do things in a group as she felt she got much more out of the experience. She described that the communal New Age experience as the most fantastic “coming together of people”. As a result of visiting sacred sites with a group, she had also formed friendships with different people with whom she had “connected on a deep level”.

On the other hand, co-researcher Cindy preferred travelling to New Age sites on her own as she felt, saw and heard a much more by being alone. She explained that she prefers to surround herself only with people who “do feel”, as it is only them whom she is able to learn most from. However, Cindy acknowledged that the energy was more interesting if it was shared with others; group meditations were also more powerful than solitary meditation. She also believed that there were some places where it was helpful to have others around. This was because when she saw others reacting strongly, her experience was enhanced as well. Likewise, Eve felt that it was much more fun to be surrounded by people with different interests and

opinions. From her point of view, being in a group provided fun and lots of interesting meals with good conversations.

**Theme 10:
Experiences at New Age sites are unique and cannot be experienced anywhere else**

In general when people travel, they visit different places to experience something new and unique. In terms of New Age tourism, New Age sites possess different characteristics and are sought for their unique qualities. Visiting New Age places can “open one up” to new sights and experiences that are normally not enjoyed in standard group tours. That uniqueness can come in different forms. In Angela’s case, the uniqueness of her experience lay in the fact that her greenstone originated from New Zealand. As a result, she felt that the stone was able to “pick up” vibrations whenever she was in a sacred environment.

Another reason why people travel to New Age places is because they are unable to enjoy the same experience at home. As Betty explained, one often needs to journey from home in search of unique place energies and connection. In her own words: “You go out looking and exploring and finding things that are connected to your past, and that makes it a very mysterious business. And it takes you on a journey”. And that journey can be a “terrific experience” as portrayed by Eve. She illustrated her life as that of a typical white, middle-class woman who goes to the supermarket and movies, a life that is perfectly pleasant. But after her New Age adventures, she discovered a whole new life and suggested that “unless we go and expose ourselves to it, it is hard to understand”.

**(c) New Age tourism:
Distinctive sociological features**

This category includes four major themes. It can be argued that New Age tourism comprises many unique practices, and that New Age visitors manifest distinct sociological characteristics. Firstly, most co-researchers were aware that their experiences are different and may not always be understood by others. Secondly, what these people practice is an important part of their lives, and these practices are undertaken for specific purposes.

Finally, the New Age tourists represent a highly individualistic group of people as reflected by their distinctive needs and expectations. Such travellers actively pursue unique experiences and will not accept “gurus” or leaders during their travels.

**Theme 1:
What we do is different**

Most co-researchers were aware of having an interest in something that is both unique and different from mainstream society. They felt that they can be understood only by people with similar interests because others are simply not interested and can often be judgmental.

As an example, Diana said that she would not share her experiences with people unless they are very good friends. She said: “you have to function in a real world and there is an aspect about doing this kind of thing that some people would not understand. They would think you need to see a psychiatrist”. When asked whether she had encountered misunderstanding from others, she replied: “Yes. People don’t understand. Ordinary New Zealanders, when you start talking about that sort of thing get this glazed look and they would just think...we knew she was different anyway”.

Similarly Betty felt self-conscious if she was not with a group of people with similar interests; in fact even within a group of New Agers, she sometimes felt as being different. For example, on one occasion, she went on a tour where everybody worked on their “pendulums” whereas she had preferred to practice “toning”. Betty felt self-conscious as toning drew too much attention which she did not enjoy. Thus it was very important for her to travel in a group where everybody had a similar intent.

Sometimes co-researchers just want to be left alone to “do their thing”, but other “normal tourists” simply do not understand their spiritual needs. Eve, for example, had an experience in Egypt when she went to see the Sphinx:

I was dying to stand there and gaze at this face and dream on it or think on it and one of the other people on the tour was ‘oh would you take a photo...make sure you get both of us in’ and I wanted to say... would you go away, just leave me alone for five minutes. I just want to be on my own.

Eve's experiences were not something she could easily share even with the people closest to her, such as her husband. She explained: "It is difficult to be in a marriage where your partner is not really interested in these things". As a result, she tends not to talk about her spiritual interests, instead internalising it and expressing it in her writing or with her most intimate friends.

Theme 2: Having a 'New Age travel' experience is important

Going on New Age trips and visiting sacred or power places was very important for all of the participants. Sometimes they do not necessarily know why they visit a particular place but they simply want to be there. They are "drawn to places" and visiting New Age sites can often be a "profound time" in their lives. For example, Angela felt that visiting spiritual sites was an integral part of her life and it was essential to pursue in the future. Also for Betty, New Age travel was something she would try to accomplish several times a year. As she explained "I can imagine that it will become quite a part of my life. It is more and more important. More and more so...it is a journey really".

Theme 3: Visiting New Age places has a purpose

There is a deeper meaning to visiting New Age sites than just sightseeing and travelling. People go to sacred environments for various reasons that range from "collecting energies", "tuning-in", "dowsing Earth energies" to even mission-like purposes. Cindy for example suggested she tends to go to places "where energy has an important role". Throughout her travels, her main purpose was to collect different energies.

New Age travel may also be for very specific objectives. For example, Angela's main purpose for going to the South Island (New Zealand) was to polish her greenstone and to find out where it came from. She visited a greenstone carver and after showing him the piece, he told her its exact origin. He "finished the stone off" for her and put oil on it. She also learned from the carver that she had to go to Pupu springs because she needed to bless her stone in what the Maori consider a sacred spring. She explained that she felt connected with the carver and was able to see very clearly why

she was there and what she was doing. In Angela's words, "When you go to sacred places you usually are on a bit of a mission".

For other co-researchers, New Age travel was undertaken for various transcendental purposes including the need for meditation, communion with nature, or simply connecting with cosmic energies. For instance whenever Eve visited a sacred site, she preferred to be on her own "in a corner". She liked to sit and experience things with closed eyes and "absorb whatever there was to be absorbed". She then was able to go into a meditative state and "open up". The first time she had this experience, she physically felt as if a "fundamental part" of her existence was being opened up and she was being "rewired".

Also Diana always travelled with the expectation of experiencing something new. Sometimes she was disappointed because she didn't "get anything from it", at other times she felt very excited to be in a particular place. Diana was fascinated by the ability to dowse earth energy and when asked what exactly she did at these sites, she replied: "Well I would dowse the energy and I would start to find out where it was, what kind of energy it might be." Her travel to New Age environments was therefore often prompted by the need to experience and understand the energies of different environments.

Theme 4: Need for individuality rather than gurus and leaders

Individuality, one of the key words in defining New Age (Clarke 2002; Luckmann 1996), is manifested in the co-researchers' experiences. New Agers do not like to be told what to do and how to do things; instead they want to make decisions and control their experiences individually.

Betty, for instance, thought that what she does is definitely about her individualism. Betty's need for individuality can best be evidenced by what she said about having Maori guides during her travels in New Zealand:

You know we didn't have Maori people on the tour and we were really pleased. We did not want to have any Maori people saying 'Ohh you know'... we just wanted to be there as Europeans developing our own sensory systems. We did not need anyone. We just

went and felt ourselves and I would rather do that. Maori people can tell you lot of things that they are experiencing but we wanted to find our own way.

It is important to qualify that Betty has much respect for Maori people and for what they can teach her. However, she preferred not to “sit back” and let others to tell her about what she was seeing and experiencing, preferring instead to actively seek answers for herself and to “connect” to the land.

For others, it was the Guru-like behaviour of tour leaders that they found difficult to cope with. This was the reason why Cindy, for example, did not like to travel with tour groups. She explained that in group travel, there tends to be people with “Guru behaviour” and others with “disciple mentalities”. She particularly disliked the fact that some leaders liked to be “worshipped”. Diana found some organiser or group leaders overly communal and intrusive. For example, they would make use of “very touchy feely language” which she was extremely uncomfortable about. She said:

They wanted to hold hands and they used a language that was not sort of ordinary language. They did not use the word trip they used this word ‘journeying’ and I mean journeying? ... no way! That is going on an adventure out in the world having an experience but I am not journeying. And they wanted to hold hands in a circle and people to express what they felt, shared, sharing, expressing... and it is like... what is that about?! I don’t want to talk about that. If I want to talk about that I will find someone I connect with and talk about it. So it is like there could be something, a bit of a religious fervour. You know...how new religions get established and they get all these people that come along because they need something like that. There is a slight element that there could be people that go on guided tours like this that are in that situation.

Similarly for Eve, her last trip was “too spiritually intense”. When visiting a sacred site, everybody was organized to stand around and had to hold hands in circles and “share”. She felt the experience to be excruciatingly intense and uncomfortable: “Sometimes we were standing there for an hour and a half or something in the hot sun with those mosquitoes biting and I was just thinking...could we stop doing this now please, could we just go inside and sit down and keep talking but not have to stand in circles holding hands”.

Although the trip was fascinating, Eve felt that it was too ritualistic and she preferred to undertake activities on her own.

COMPOSITE MEANINGS AND ESSENCES OF THE NEW AGE TOURISM EXPERIENCE

The composite description of the meanings and essences is the final stage of the phenomenological model (Moustakas 1994). It provides a synthesis of the experience, in this case the New Age tourism experience. It is essential to emphasize that these composite meanings and essences are not to be perceived as a generalization of the New Age tourism experience but rather as a guide to an understanding of what occurs and what is perceived/lived by most participants during New Age voyages.

New Age travel is an exciting and interesting form of tourism. People visit sacred sites, power places and other landscapes of spiritual importance. The purpose of travelling to these sites varies from person to person and is determined by individual interest. While some people go to channel, others prefer to dowse, meditate or tune in to different life energies. The reason for visiting sacred sites may also be very specific, as in the case of one co-researcher who felt it her mission to visit New Zealand in order to bless a piece of greenstone.

For many, visiting New Age sites is an important experience and an integral part of their existence. Indeed, some people feel drawn to certain places; they feel that they should simply be there and they perceive their travel as a profound and life changing experience. Why is New Age travel so important to them? This is because the travellers feel the importance of energy and the need to be connected to these energies and to the land.

In so doing, they feel that they are communicating with a much higher source. According to Hess (1993), there is a level of ideological commonality in New Age; personal and collective transformation, holistic conceptions of nature and the cosmos, and the sacralisation of the inner self.

By going to New Age sites, one also learns and grows. People learn about new places, new forms of spirituality, as well as the mysteries of life. They learn and grow by exploring earth energies and by connecting with the universe.

They also learn more about themselves, other people and foreign cultures. As a result, they mature spiritually, emotionally and psychologically.

Visiting New Age sites also means having emotional experiences; such as feelings of love, joy, happiness or being alive. Going to these sites enables one to experience bodily changes which one would not otherwise experience staying at home. At best, they feel re-energised or positively alert; at worst they may feel exhausted and confused. But even the negative is worth the experience. Going to these sites also changes one emotionally and psychologically. After visiting sacred sites, some people feel as if they have become more tolerant, open and charged with energy. In many cases, the experiences have been described as life changing.

In order to enjoy their feat, New Age tourists use various tools and skills. Sometimes they travel in groups, but most importantly they must have a belief. Dowsing, tuning and channelling are some other skills and techniques used. Pendulums and meditation are better-known methods of connecting to cosmic and life energies. Also a relationship with nature is unique for many people. The New Ager is not simply touching or looking at some stones, for example. Rather, by hugging the stones, they are communing with a friend and connecting with the universe. All the above experiences can be multiplied if one travels with a group. This is because different people use different skills, and travellers can learn and observe each other. Going with a group also means they can talk and laugh about things, transforming the holiday into a more interactive experience. Another benefit of group travel is for New Agers in the early stages of their spiritual growth. By travelling with more experienced people, they can observe what others are feeling and reacting, and in the process mature spiritually as well.

Ultimately, what is the key to accessing the New Age experience? It may simply be a personal belief of the traveller visiting sacred sites. Being a part of the universal energy and believing that they are communicating with a universal source or exploring the biggest scheme of things is what makes their experience what it is. For that is the difference between ordinary people who may visit the same site and feel, see, and experience nothing, and the New Age tourists who visit a place and experience a life changing event. The New Age tourist experience is also unique, and different sites are sought for different reasons.

To decide where to go or what to do, one does not spend one's time searching for information on Google; instead one often relies on one's intuition or inner guides. People who visit New Age sites simply "know". They know where to go and what to do, and they feel attracted if not drawn to new experiences, for these can reveal what it is they need to be doing in their lives.

At this juncture, one is tempted to ask whether there are any negative aspects to the New Age tourism experience for the participant. The answer is "yes". Some New Age travellers often want to experience events and places as unique individual beings. They do not want to be told what to do or even how to do things. Consequently gurus, leaders or tour guides are not necessarily perceived positively. Indeed it can be difficult for New Age tourists to subscribe to anybody's leadership, as individuality is one of the key tenets in the New Age movement (Clarke 2002; Green and Aldred 2002; Luckmann 1996).

Although phenomenology is not concerned with generating concepts, abstractions and theories (Willis 2001), with regard to the theme of this issue it is of use to reflect briefly on related topics such as pilgrimages. However, any attempt to distinguish between New Age experiences and sacred, religious and spiritual encounters is out of the scope of this paper, if not impossible. In fact one needs to question whether these categories are distinguishable, for New Age comprises all of these themes, and there are even individuals who consider themselves as New Agers but also as Christians (Pernecky and Johnston 2006). Although no attention was paid to the post-modernism of New Age in this paper, post-modernism plays an important role in contemporary society and the integration of old and new can be seen in spirituality, making it harder for academics to categorize.

One way of looking at pilgrims is to propose that they are present in most religions and travel to a variety of places and locations. Similarly to tourists, pilgrims too can be divided into subgroups of interest, and categorised as New Age pilgrims (Ivakhiv 2003), Religious Pilgrims (Vukonić 1992), Goddess Pilgrims (Rountree 2002), and Sikh pilgrims (Jutla 2002). The literature proves that the description of a pilgrim varies between scholars and across disciplines: their activities, aims and motives differ greatly. Digance (2003) suggests that every person visiting a sacred place is a possible pilgrim.

If we were to label New Age tourists as pilgrims, then perhaps the most suitable concept is one of Bowman's (1993), discussing conscious and unconscious pilgrims. According to her the conscious pilgrim visits a place with a purpose or a need that is to be addressed, while the unconscious pilgrim is drawn to a place without necessarily knowing why. This notion is also in conformity with Pernecky and Johnston's (2006) proposal that there are different levels of specialization within New Age tourism, based on people's experience, levels of investment and the centrality of New Age to their lifestyle.

To sum it up, New Age tourists visiting sacred landscapes are highly aware of their unique interests which they are unable to share with anyone except for others with very similar interests. Nevertheless, their experiences are considered well worth it. Going to New Age sites is important, exciting, unique and life changing, and in many cases often constitutes the most profound experiences of their lives.

CONCLUSION

The New Age tourism phenomenon is a tantalizing concept of travel, for it gives novel meaning to the act of visiting places and to what is being experienced by those involved. This paper set out to answer the question: "How do people perceive and describe the experience of visiting New Age places?" The discussion above has answered this question to some extent by showing what New Age tourists do, why they do what they do, where they go, what they experience and what motivates them to seek out these unique experiences, or at least some of them. As such, this paper offers some remarkable insights into New Age tourists. Therefore the use of phenomenology as a method proved to be appropriate for collecting, analysing and summarising the research data. The major outcome of this study can be seen as of academic character, for it enabled a deeper understanding of the New Age tourism experience to be gained.

It provides new information and knowledge into tourism and thus can potentially be used for businesses developing New Age tourism products as well as businesses catering to New Age tourists. Tourism providers might be interested in what makes the New Age trip successful as well as what represents the drawbacks for participants when developing new

products/services. In its rich data, this paper may also serve as a guide or informative source for people interested in this type of travelling. Either way, this research provides invaluable empirical insights into the burgeoning field of contemporary travel, bridging the gap of knowledge shortfalls with regard to this phenomenon.

Although some may suggest that New Age is declining in popularity, the community it has brought together continues to grow as one of the most important minority faith communities in the west (Melton 2001). New Age tourism therefore, gaining a greater impetus in the travel industry as well as the academic field, is a noteworthy constituent of spirituality-related travel. Future studies of New Age tourism may focus on an informant sample that is far more global, spotlighting tourist destinations other than New Zealand. Particular techniques and tools employed by New Age travellers such as *channelling* and *pendulums* can also be looked into. New Age tourists may be studied from a sociological, cultural or religious perspective in order to gain deeper insights into their motivations and aspirations, and links between New Age travel and post-modernism may also be investigated.

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