

SCIENTIFIC NOTES

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GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL TRAVEL: THE EXAMPLE OF A 'STUDY TOUR'

Tourist travel is about two centuries old. Such journeys should show the beautiful monuments and museums of the regions and cities visited, along with the spectacle of natural sights, and of course not forgetting to take care of the wider education of the young.

We know that such a 'grand tour' as undertaken by certain young people from Britain in the 19th c. gave birth to the term 'tourism', a term which was then quickly taken up in other languages. In this way a form of cultural tourism was developed which for a long time triumphed with the '*Guide Bleu*' as its symbol (translated from French into many languages) and which has its counterparts in other countries. This subject has already been discussed in this journal in 2005 (*Turyzm*, vol. 15, no 1–2, pp. 95–120).

However, for several decades now, such travel has been diversifying and tour operators now offer organized cultural tours whose content significantly differs (some examples have been given in the article referred to above). Seeing the Sahara is not only to admire its dunes and oases, but also to approach the natural heart and mystique of the 'desert', to meet and talk with nomads, and to camp out in the open; one should return not only enriched but transformed. It is also necessary to care about 'sustainable tourism' and 'committed tourism' which ensures resources are transferred to the local economy.

Can geography provide the subject-matter for a cultural tour? *A priori*, this seems obvious and, for example, the first '*Guides Verts*' published after the war provided the necessary explanations for understanding glacial relief and karst landforms, but they appealed especially to physical geography and neglected other aspects. The real content of our discipline was ignored and travellers did not get an overall view of the area visited only bringing back memories of disconnected juxtapositions of monu-

ments and natural sights: a global geographic vision was ignored.

At the *Société de Géographie* in Marseille, we tried to set up a new form of cultural tour which makes use of geography and its global vision of space. Our discipline had often been perceived as a catalogue of cities and mountains, a digest of production statistics, a list of rivers which flow through various large cities, etc. This is not the point however. The purpose of geography is to study how various human societies have occupied space, have organised that space according to what 'nature' has given more or less happily for such a society. This results in a *civilisation* and the creation of individual living 'territories', which are fascinating to study. At university students are educated in this way and field trips teach and help them to recognize what has produced the characteristics of each such space.

It is well known that a *Société de Géographie* is not a coterie of specialists. Alongside professors of geography it brings together those of a curious spirit who love geography and care about travelling with open eyes and a lot of intellectual background. Those associations have their history with the first, which was later imitated elsewhere, being created in Paris in 1821. In France the movement developed especially after the war in 1870–1, a period when European countries were still exploring a variety of *terrae incognitae* and dividing up the world between them. The craze for those new lands and their peoples was considerable and everyone wanted to know about sub-saharan Africa, about the heart of South America or the polar zones. The *Sociétés de Géographie* answered this demand and after the return of explorers to Europe fought to have them give lectures on their journeys, to describe mysterious countries while letting people dream. They published reports including accounts of the explorers' journeys

and kept the public informed about new discoveries. The creation of the teaching of geography in France accompanied this thirst for knowledge.

More than a century has passed since this period and there is practically nowhere left to discover. The *Sociétés de Géographie* have almost all disappeared, in France from dozens to just a few. But to bring them alive again today it is necessary to adapt them to the present context. In a world where globalization triumphs, with a geography which has been developing and become conceptually more refined, it is necessary, but not sufficient, to organize lectures about countries little-known to the public. In addition they should be organised about those where unexpected, and initially incomprehensible, conflicts have appeared, or on geopolitical or demographic themes, etc.

However it is also advisable to offer new activities: in an age where it is easy to travel and it no longer constitutes an adventure as it did in the 19th c., a geographic tour seems indispensable. In Marseille the sixteenth such tour is being prepared (for the 'exploration' of Quebec) for early autumn 2009.

It is certain that this type of travel has nothing in common with those organized for students by academic institutions. Their point is to show new students straightforward examples of landforms, different housing environments, industrial landscapes etc. In the our case, it is advisable to explain to a curious, older, although not specialized public the whole complexity of space which will delight their taste for art and the *civilisation* which gave it birth. A desire to understand how people live and the difficulties they come across, a care to be informed about political situations and local geopolitics, and the pleasure of seeing and having explained beautiful natural landscapes. It must be said immediately that this way of travelling is a real novelty for those who undertake it and some say: 'we have the impression that we have suddenly become 'intelligent'.

The first question is about how much time should be made available. This is partly a question of money but within a *Société de Géographie* this should not limit destinations, the duration of the visit or the distance to be travelled to get there. Argentina is an exceptional destination because of its unexpected and varied natural sights, and an interesting highlight sets the Pampas against the giant city of Buenos Aires. There is also its political evolution and fascinating geopolitics, but it is necessary to stay there three weeks and pay a high price. For a European, the countries of our continent are essential along with some immediate neighbours. A stay from ten to fifteen days is sufficient.

For the organiser, the first preoccupation is the choice of a country to visit, somewhere which has

a unity yet presents varied interests. In the case of an island, this choice is simple because it can be easily toured. In this way we have studied Cyprus and Iceland, small but easy to present in their whole and variety. For Sicily though, whose natural, historical and cultural wealth is substantial, it was not possible to see everything. Portugal is bigger, and more varied than it is believed, but the cultural 'density' is less, likewise Bulgaria, Slovakia, and even Romania, but a selective tour can stand in for the whole. For some countries, very large or elongated, it is necessary to make a choice. Norway, for example, an attractive place for its nature, its society and social-democratic ideas, and its history, all of which need to be known. This required selection and we focussed on its central part from Oslo to Trondheim and Bergen because this zone allows the spectacular landscapes and its big cities to be seen, as well as the socio-economic system which was the dream of generations of Europeans. Morocco is a big country and especially interesting for its Atlas mountains, its semi-desert and its majestic imperial cities, but it had to be 'cut up'; South Morocco, beginning with Marrakech, was indispensable; the north with Rabat and the Gharb, the Rif and Tangier, Meknes and Fes made up another tour.

When a nearby or often visited country is concerned, the choice is difficult. The Netherlands are very popular, but it is particularly Amsterdam with its prestigious museums and the large cities nearby which are visited the most. So therefore we used the title: 'The Netherlands off the beaten track' which allowed us to see the delta, the 'Zuider Zee', Friesland, the east etc., placing such different regions as a part of the wider Dutch society with its common problems. The question of Italy is more tricky as it is the country most visited by the French. Here we are considering an itinerary from Umbria to Abruzzi, but it will only be a part of a wider whole.

Next we are faced with the problem of an itinerary and this is entirely the responsibility of the geographer organiser: there is no question of letting ourselves go on a ready-made tour relevant only to tourist preoccupations, even if we add our own 'cultural' angle. It is advisable therefore to decide what we want to show because it will provide a good sample of what can be visited and because it allows general statements to be made by putting those places of interest into both national and geographic contexts, and evoking at the same time those which cannot be seen. This is very important because local guides are accustomed only to talk about each place in detail without caring about general views or without presenting the personality and the individuality of a region.

It seems an indispensable obligation to write a 'handbook-guide' giving a broad view of what they will see, and to send it to participants to be read a long time before departure. The classic guides are in general well done, but in a spirit which is foreign to geographers in the field. They must appeal to the reader using an easy but precise style, however points of interest are juxtaposed without paying attention to creating a coherent whole from the various elements. There is nothing wrong with this approach but its purpose is not the same. Geographers nevertheless have sometimes noted down the mistakes that made them smile or annoyed them, for example one guide while describing the karst canyons of Istria in Croatia used the term fjord!

Everything in geography that leads to an understanding of what we can see on a journey should be included in this 'handbook-guide'? As geography is a way of approaching the study of space, and as it is at the crossroads of many other disciplines, it can give a general vision without reducing itself to a single aspect. It can put everything into its proper place, calling however on different specialists when necessary. According to Gibert 'a geographer is an "ensemblier"'.

In a text of about twenty-five or thirty pages, including maps and diagrams, it is advisable to start with a presentation of some characteristics of the country to be visited, showing its individuality, what is interesting, its 'cultural personality' and contemporary issues. Next, we can, in a more classic way, speak of its physical environment (geomorphology, climate and so on), history, population (demography, ethnic groups and minorities), its economy, *civilisation*, culture, internal political situation and geopolitical problems. The text is always presented taking care to introduce and link in advance the different aspects which, day by day, will be shown during the tour. A precise description of the itinerary comes with this introduction.

It is necessary to avoid unlinked chapters which provide information but do not indicate what is essential. Iceland is one example which can illustrate this. If everything must be presented it is particularly necessary to emphasise certain points such as its insularity and location in high latitudes. These historically have kept the country safe from invasions and have saved it, until now, from having to maintain an army. But as it had constituted a strategic maritime position during the Second World War the Americans as a result set up bases leaving only in 2006, while it led the country to join NATO from 1948. Volcanism, where Iceland is a veritable 'museum' of landforms, should be explained while introducing participants to the revolutionary ideas of plate tectonics, and at the same time evoking

the numerous and catastrophic eruptions which killed a third of the population and half the livestock. Mediaeval history presents a political system without a government but with laws, and a democratic assembly which met once a year and which has led to a variant of social democracy. The long Danish domination until 1945; the poverty that has marked each century in consequence of natural disasters, and the indifference of the Danes towards the Icelanders; and the extraordinary socio-economic development since independence which pulled Iceland up to seventh place globally in terms of personal income.

The example of those countries facing the Baltic Sea from the east is very interesting. During a 'study tour' (*un voyage d'étude*) for St. Petersburg's third centenary, we started from Lithuania and went north to the city of Peter the Great. We emphasised the Baltic coast of Europe, according to Paul Valéry 'a little headland of the Asian continent' with its small 'Baltic' peoples (including the Finno-Ugrians of Estonia). These had always been dominated by other bigger countries bordering the Baltic who had wanted to control its 'little lake' (cf. the 'Swedish lake' of Charles XII), the last being the Russia of the Tsars, prolonged into the Soviet era. It was for Russia, until then more Asiatic than European, an only outlet to an open western sea, in spite of the ice and the straits between Denmark and Sweden. All the ports on this coast, from Russia to Lithuania, passing through Livonia and Courland, gained first rank strategic value. To understand its geography, above all it is through the history that has made it and an analysis of its geopolitics, rather than describing its fluvio-glacial landforms.

How to choose a tour operator? There is the risk of imposing a ready-made tour or one only slightly adapted which would not be appropriate. A tour operator has to be found who understands that they must organize a tour according to different ideas. It is therefore necessary to explain its spirit which, at the outset, may not be grasped and to ask for the provision of services, thanks to contacts that are available on the spot. So, we provide the entire daily itinerary including sightseeing and expected contributors, breaks at midday and in the evening; and it is the tour operator's responsibility to find tickets for flights, hotels and restaurants, coaches, and employ general or specialised guides to a city or a monument. This is certainly not without interest to such an operator and we have never been disappointed with those who have accepted.

It is certain however that if a tour operator accepts, the local guide employed does not always share the 'goodwill'. Nevertheless, if such a guide is informed that this is not typical but a specific 'study tour', from a geographical perspective and the person

responsible for the content is not the guide (nor the tour operator) but the president of a *Société de Géographie*, it is often, but not always, understood. Some do not accept not being the sole authority or that there is someone else who from the beginning of each day outlines its itinerary and purpose. They cannot understand that a stranger can talk about their country instead of themselves and they do not grasp the spirit of our tours. We have a bitter memory of a 'national guide' from a country (which shall be nameless) whose face revealed his disagreement with everything that was said. Hopefully, the French tour operator always explains very carefully to his contact what an employed local guide should expect and what the task is. We can remember two friendly Icelandic guides speaking perfect French, who with the necessary academic competence, explained the earthquakes and terrible eruptions of the volcano Hekla (where Christians had placed Hell) or the 'little plain' where Icelandic representatives met every spring to debate their laws. We can also remember a Cypriot guide who asked for permission to record what the contributors were saying in French.

This last remark brings us to the question of speakers other than local guides or ourselves. It is necessary to use all available resources. If there is a colleague or friend from a university of a visited country who wants to present in the field or as a lecture, or if some tour participants can talk with expertise about history, art or literature concerning the region visited, we should not hesitate to appeal to them. Even better, it is indispensable to meet local people, inviting them to dinner in order to talk openly or to ask them to speak. Concerning France, a great advantage is *Alliance Française* which exists almost everywhere and brings contacts with excellent French speakers to better comprehend a country.

The approach is not simple and requires a lot of work from those geographers organizing the tours, but it is appropriate for the participants. Their loyalty is remarkable and it is easy to find the number necessary to ensure good prices. Anyway, groups should not be too large and about thirty is a good figure. About fifteen years ago, we made one of our first 'study tours' to Poland and there was some difficulty in persuading friends that it was a particularly interesting country. A lack of knowledge and that it was too 'eastern' encouraged scepticism, however finally everyone was persuaded. The surprise was total and the country seduced us, notably thanks to help from Polish colleagues and friends among Polish geographers. The idea for the tour was accepted and there was no longer any reticence.

If a journey is 'serious', it can and must be pleasant and convivial. Local gastronomy is intrinsically a part of geography and local wine is a not unimportant aspect. The dinner on the last day is a good opportunity for a celebration that the *Société de Géographie* in Marseille never foregoes. There is even a tradition that at the end of the dinner, a written 'test' of about twenty five questions is given to participants. For each question three answers, all very plausible and tempting, are given but only one correct. Success is guaranteed because it is a sort of final entertainment, without 'punishment'. Nevertheless, as nobody wants to be seen as a 'bad student', everyone reads the handbook-guide thoroughly and pays more attention in the field. Teaching methods should never be neglected.

Translation from French: Anna Sobolewska