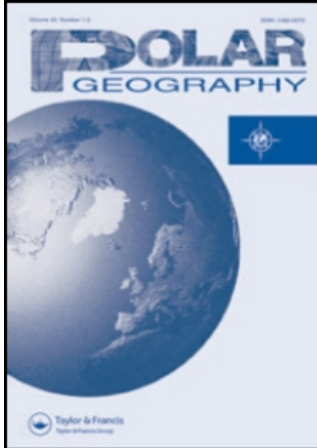


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The diversity of polar tourism. Some challenges facing the industry in Rovaniemi, Finland

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The diversity of polar tourism. Some challenges facing the industry in Rovaniemi, Finland

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Tourism in the Polar Regions is flourishing. Yet, because of a series of geographical and infrastructural barriers, tourism in the Polar and sub-Polar Region is a constant challenge for tourists and operators. Polar destinations also tend to be oriented toward one tourism season only with gaps between the peak and low seasons.

While polar destinations are at differing stages of development, Rovaniemi – the capital of Finnish Lapland – stands out as a very important North European tourism centre. However, even with successful tourism operations (in terms of figures – economic and attendances), Rovaniemi still encounters many development challenges.

Using previously published literature, field observation and semi-structured interviews with two of Rovaniemi's main operators, this article aims at identifying and discussing some of the challenges facing the tourism industry in this locality.

In the process, the article discusses the difficulty of naming this form of travel. Stressing that tourism in the Polar and sub-Polar Regions has up to now been mostly studied from a geographical perspective, the article emphasises the need for a complementary sociological approach to the study of tourism in the Polar Regions.

1. Introduction

Tourism in polar and sub-polar environments (in both hemispheres) has become increasingly popular. For over a decade, statistics show continuous increases in the number of tourists visiting destinations located in Polar or sub-Polar Regions (e.g. Antarctica: see IAATO 2006; Iceland: see IS 2005; Alaska: see DCCED 2004; Finnish Lapland: see SA 2002). Today, there are many destinations with numerous different activities available for tourists: watching polar bears in Churchill (Canada), taking a cruise along the coast of Antarctica, Baffin Island (Canada), Northern Russia or Norway, fishing in Alaska (USA) or the Kola Peninsula (Russia), visiting geysers and volcanoes in Iceland, not to mention cross-country skiing and visiting Santa Claus' home in Finnish Lapland. With the exception of large regions in Northern Russia and Northern Quebec (Canada), today an increasing amount of the Polar Regions are, in some form, connected with tourism.

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This increase in tourism may result from several reasons:

1. Increased disposable incomes of potential tourists;
2. Increased leisure time in countries of major tourism markets; and
3. Advances in technology of transportation and communication.

Also, global political turmoil and questions related to terrorism and health issues (e.g. fear of epidemics, such as SARS or Avian flu) may have impacted on the success of polar tourism. Indeed, Polar Regions are sometimes regarded as safe havens by the tourism industry (Antomarchi 2005).

The growing interest of tourists in the Polar Regions has generated parallel interest by academic writers towards polar tourism. As more and more articles and writings, both academic and non-academic, have been published on the topic, it has simultaneously revealed some conceptual problems. As tourism in the Polar Regions seems to show more variety in terms of the activities offered to tourists, one can ask if the 'traditional' definition of polar tourism still describes the reality. This question leads to the first aim of this article, to discuss the meaning of the most appropriate term – polar tourism – to describe tourism in the Polar Regions.

The discussion on the proper terminology to adopt is important as it can help to better understand both the experiences the visitors seek and the direction the industry should take. Tourism is often welcomed as a blessing in many polar and sub-polar communities facing economical difficulties as a result of unemployment, for instance. Yet, in spite of its success in many polar areas and destinations over a relatively short period of time, the polar tourism industry is simultaneously facing various challenges and obstacles due to some geographical and infrastructural barriers.

Tourism activities need investment that can require substantial financial resources. Expensive investments, in turn, should be used as effectively as possible. Yet, as it is often the case with many host-generating areas in Polar and sub-Polar Regions, visitors especially favour one season. With polar destinations, most tend to see their tourism peak coinciding with natural phenomena, especially in the presence of wildlife migration or the reproduction season, providing opportunities for safaris and viewing activities in wide-open spaces. Hence, summer and fall are usually the most favoured seasons for tourism across the Polar Regions. Finnish Lapland, however, constitutes a major exception to the rule.

The capital of Finnish Lapland, Rovaniemi, has positioned itself on the tourism map as a leading North European centre for winter tourism by developing a variety of outdoor activities. As a result of this, the city has faced an increasing demand from visitors from around the world in search of Nordic thrills in natural and urban surroundings. However, despite all the efforts in developmental work, the tourism industry in Rovaniemi still faces a series of challenges. It struggles to take full advantage of what the operators perceive as an 'economic goldmine', while not losing many of the aesthetic qualities that many visitors are seeking: the tranquillity and seclusion in what is for many of them a new, unspoiled and extreme environment.

Using the case of Rovaniemi, this article's second aim is to examine the challenges facing and increasingly diversifying the tourism industry with a product growing in popularity, yet restrained by certain limits.

To achieve this aim, the article has been divided into three parts. First, a conceptual discussion on polar tourism as a concept is provided. Second, the article takes a closer look at one polar destination – Rovaniemi in Finnish Lapland, where

the 'new' diversity of polar tourism flourishes. The author briefly discusses the evolution of polar tourism in Rovaniemi. A third section underlines some general challenges facing the tourism industry in Rovaniemi. It also provides a brief look at a new and possible tourism product, silence tourism, which the industry is creating to meet some of the challenges.

The conceptual discussion is based on a literature review on the topic. For the other parts of the article, data consists of literature, fieldwork, interviews and photos (taken by author). Fieldwork was conducted on the commercial tourism icebreaker *Sampo* (in the Lappish town of Kemi, located by the Gulf of Bothnia). During the field trip, passengers were surveyed and interviewed about their experience on the ship (in particular) and in Finnish Lapland (in general). The qualitative data was analysed using content analysis. The author also conducted observation fieldwork in a tourist attraction (Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi). In addition to these data, semi-directed interviews of managers of three large tour operators in Rovaniemi were conducted.

2. Tourism in polar areas: one phenomenon, many approaches

One of the most powerful forces behind the tourism phenomenon has been, and remains, the need for distinction (Boyer 1995). Hence, when enthusiasm for the outdoors met with the tourism industry, stimulated further in recent years in the context of the environmental crisis, tourism reinvented itself. Numerous new tourism products emerged in this conjuncture. All this was described by the term 'alternative tourism'. Although the term implied a distance from conventional (arguably equated with mass tourism), it was, perhaps, too vague. Hence, new terms appeared, according to the nature of the activity performed or the (new) environment marketed, resulting in the long list of terms we have today (e.g. ecotourism, extreme tourism and polar tourism, to name a few). In emic perceptions, the terms are often used interchangeably. In fact, many of these terms have become 'hotchpotch' concepts, adding to the confusion. Quoting from a popular Finnish proverb, "a dear child has many names" ("rakkaalla lapsella on monta nimeä"). For example, ecological (eco) tourism should not automatically be equated to polar tourism simply due to the possibility that natural polar environments might be involved in the product. Proper distinction between forms of tourism requires a conceptual clarification.

Polar tourism is one of the many terms used in discussions about tourism in the Polar Regions (Arctic and Antarctic) (see Hall and Johnston 1975; Grenier 1998; Levinson and Ger 1998; Grenier 2004). The terms are often equated with other labels, such as 'Nordic tourism' (DEIE 2005), 'northern tourism' (MNDM 2005), 'winter tourism' (Grenier 2004), 'Antarctic' and 'Arctic tourism' (see Enzenbacher 1992; Mason *et al.* 2000; Bauer 2001). The emergence of these terms illustrates both the need of those involved (operators, tourists and academics alike) to 'distinguish' this sector of tourism from other sectors, and the lack of consensus on the nature of the experience. Research on polar tourism has traditionally focussed on travel movements and visitors' profiles, attempting only occasionally to identify travel motivations and goals. Little attention has been given to other aspects of the phenomenon (e.g. little data exist about the meaning of polar tourism, both as a term and as an experience – with the exception of Grenier 1998, 2004; Maher 2005). A discussion about the most appropriate way to refer to tourism in the Polar

Regions is both lacking and needed. This question is relatively significant since the growing importance of polar tourism requires a common understanding for its management.

One of the main problems in defining polar tourism is the use of the adjective 'polar', which may be interpreted differently depending on the disciplinary approach. Two trends in geographical literature are presented here.

First, a geography approach may understand 'polar' in relation to climatic conditions or latitude, as in 'within the polar circles'. If the Arctic or Antarctic Circle is the frontier that separates Polar Regions from rest of the globe, many parts of Northern Canada, Northern Quebec (including Nunavik), Central Alaska (USA), most of Siberia (Russia) and part of the Antarctic Peninsula and sub-Antarctic islands lie outside of it. Yet, all these areas present 'polar' features (e.g. fauna, flora, extreme climatic conditions). Therefore, one can ask why these regions should not be considered 'polar' simply because they lie geographically outside the polar circles.

Incorporating those polar features, geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin (1975) proposed the concept of 'nordicity'. Hamelin (1999) distinguishes between at least three circumpolar zones, stretching from the south to the pole: the Middle North, the Far North, and the Extreme North. In this approach, the polar circles are no longer the corner stone.

A second trend within the geographical approach is to refer to each region separately, e.g. Antarctic tourism or Arctic tourism (see Bauer 2001). This classification can also be misleading because in spite of the differences in the tourism activities offered in both regions, there are still enough similarities within the experience of the visitors (see Grenier 2004) to incorporate both destinations under the same 'term' – polar tourism. The same problem occurs with 'northern' (and 'southern') tourism because of the problem such a term creates in reference to each hemisphere. Thus, it is suggested that polar tourism contains more than just geographical elements.

Besides the geography and climatology approaches, one must also consider the social and cultural dimensions of the experience when trying to name and define tourism in the Polar Regions. A sociological approach might indeed understand 'polar' as a more abstract concept, in relation to an extreme experience, itself juxtaposed to the concept of normality. Based on previous studies (see Grenier 1998, 2004), this author argues that the main characteristic of polar tourism is the possibility to experience the unusual through the social and cultural conditions provided by the geographical remoteness of the Polar Regions/destinations. As such, the expression 'polar tourism' is arguably the most inclusive term, combining both sociological and geographical approaches.

As shown in figure 1, the sociological approach allows one to understand how people interact with the (polar) destination.¹ It must be stressed that polar tourism is first and foremost a term constructed to differentiate between a certain type of leisure travel from mainstream tourism (see Grenier 2004). As such, polar tourism aims at offering travellers a different travel experience, either by the means of travel (using

¹ See Grenier (2004) for visitors' concepts of 'nature' and 'wilderness' and their use of concepts to experience and relate to specific types of locations.

Polar Tourism			
Geographical approach	▪ (Physical) remoteness;	▪ Social and cultural seclusion;	Sociological approach
	▪ Physical barriers;	▪ Potential for self accomplishment (rite of passage);	
	▪ Polar environments as aesthetic locations (outer reflection).	▪ Polar environments as medium for intra-reflection (spiritual dimension).	

Figure 1. Geographical versus sociological perspectives on polar tourism.

reindeer or dog sleigh or icebreakers, for instance) or through the type of environment (the Boreal forest, the tundra or the polar deserts instead of temperate, tropical and sup-tropical environments). Therefore, it allows the tourist to express his or her taste and desires for something different. Yet what constitutes a difference?

‘Difference’ can be understood by a degree of exoticism perceived by the traveller about the destination sought. For an element to have a special meaning, it has to be experienced in opposition to the concept of normality. To appreciate the midnight sun, for instance, it has to be experienced (understood) in opposition to the normality of a moonlight evening (or day time sunshine). For non-local, the opposite of one’s sense of ‘normality’ can potentially become exotic.

Giddens (2001, p. 80) calls exotic experiences “those that violate our everyday expectations about how social interaction and interaction with the physical environment are supposed to proceed”. As such, a major component of tourism is the pleasure the visitor experiences in this strangeness (ibid). In a global world where daily experiences increasingly appear homogeneous, tourism is an important provider of alternative experiences. In return, these have the potential to become means of distinction.² The key element, here, is how people construct their images (and imaginary) about the destination they seek, based on reality and myths.³

Whether ship, air or land-based, polar tourism essentially covers four aspects:

1. Aesthetics of the (polar) worlds;
2. Spirituality;
3. Sciences (Antomarchi 2005, p. 46) combined with
4. A controlled degree of physical endurance.

It can, therefore, be argued that polar tourism is fixed in a mindset that requires and combines a romantic perception of a given type of location (e.g. nature as redefined by the Romantic Movement) with the need for an alternative and distinctive experience.⁴ In an increasingly global world, where people tend to blend and where experiences tend to homogenise, polar tourism allows the identity seeker present in every individual to establish or re-establish a part of that identity which one thinks is their own (Urbain 2000).

² For more on social distinction, see Bourdieu (1979).

³ See Dann (2006, p. 16) on ‘myths’.

⁴ The exclusivity of the polar destinations set by geographical remoteness (see Dann 2006, p. 18).

The socio-cultural tools for identity construction which polar tourism provides are built on the 19th century representations of the Polar Regions as both beautiful and horrible places, characterised by seclusion, extreme temperatures and the constant threat of death (Antomarchi 2005). The experience brings people to confront some (although well calculated) degrees of fear and risk in an environment that acknowledges death. These notions tend to be denied in current society (Le Scanff 2000). In this sense, polar tourism offers an environment to perform rites of passage (passage from one stage of life to another), which are meant to give meaning to life by providing the individual with a sense of accomplishment (Grenier 2004). Through the rite of passage, polar tourism becomes an opportunity to learn about one's abilities, capabilities, strengths and limits (*ibid*).

In short, polar tourism is more than the mere experience of extreme physical geography. It is also and perhaps foremost about the collective imaginary. In polar tourism, the degree of 'polarity' (Hamelin would use 'nordicity') of the destination is not found on a map, but rather in the traveller's mind. Hence, the study of polar tourism should integrate both geographical and sociological approaches.

Polar tourism, perhaps, can be a more effective term, used as an umbrella to refer to the many forms of expressions travel can take in polar environments. As illustrated in figure 2, the proposed concept of polar tourism includes both nature- and urban-based components, in their ecological and non-ecological forms.

As mentioned earlier, the numerous activities encompassed in polar tourism are attracting much interest. Indeed, numerous destinations, understanding how their characteristics appeal to many outsiders, are capitalising upon them to create economic activity. The city of Rovaniemi in the Province of Lapland (Finland)

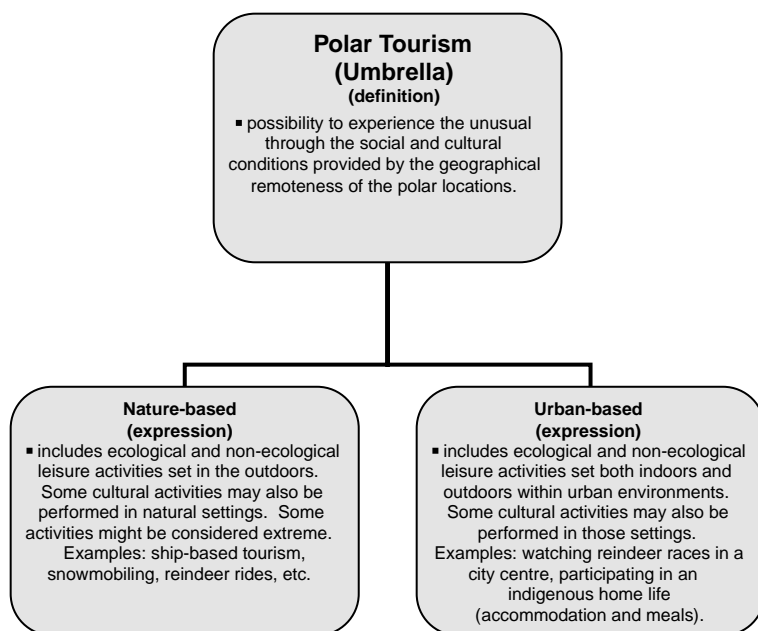


Figure 2. A proposed umbrella for polar tourism and the many types of products the concept may embrace.

provides a good example to illustrate the 'new' diversity of the polar tourism experience, both in nature and urban settings.

3. Portrait of a polar tourism destination: Rovaniemi, Lapland (Finland)

Rovaniemi (population 57 835 in 2005)⁵ is located on the Arctic Circle in Finnish Lapland some 830 km north of Helsinki. Tourism in this region dates back to the 16th and 17th centuries when, according to Lähteenmäki (2006, p. 118), "mainly adventurers or members of the European nobility. . . or government representatives" headed north by boat, through the Gulf of Bothnia, to reach settlements from which they could gather objects "for their collections of curiosities". Tourism on a larger scale, however, was developed during the second half of the 20th century. Over the years, Rovaniemi has become a leading centre for winter tourism in Northern Europe. It is known as the home town of Father Christmas (with Santa Claus Village and Santa Park), and as a city that has developed a variety of outdoor activities for its visitors. As a result, Rovaniemi has faced an increasing global demand from tourists who are looking for northern thrills in natural and urban surroundings.

The tourism industry has developed through various attractions and activities. The Santa Claus Village and Santa Park area started to develop in 1950 as a result of a visit by former First Lady of the US, Eleanor Roosevelt. A little log cabin was built in the Arctic Circle for her visit. The Santa Claus Village was later built in the same area. The first arrival of the Concorde at the Rovaniemi Airport in 1984 was another milestone that launched charter flights from Europe. In 1998, next to the Santa Claus Village, the underground theme park of Santa Park (built within a nuclear shelter) was opened to the public.

Today, with nearly 500 000 visitors annually, Rovaniemi remains not only the gateway to Finnish Lapland, but also among the leading tourism destinations in the Circumpolar North. With a weak provincial economy resting largely on the exploitation of natural resources (forestry, agriculture, and hydro-electricity), the social and economic vitality of the province is, more than any other region in Finland, connected to tourism (RCL 2003). The recent development of this industry has been remarkable. In the Rovaniemi region alone, tourism incomes increased by more than 45% between 1995 and 2005 (Rintala-Gardin 2005). In 2002, tourism brought a direct income of €116 millions to Rovaniemi, of which €20 million was attributed directly to the Christmas season (Rintala-Gardin 2005). The most profitable sectors (see figure 3) were:

1. Retail sales (28%);
2. Accommodation and restaurant services (21%);
3. Transportation and support businesses (17%); and
4. Travel agencies and related services (16%).

Many tourism operators are located in Rovaniemi, but offer products throughout Lapland (see figure 4 for main tourism resort locations). Among the cultural

⁵ Statistics Finland, Population. Available online at: www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vasto_en.html#Largestmunicipalities (accessed 2 February 2007).

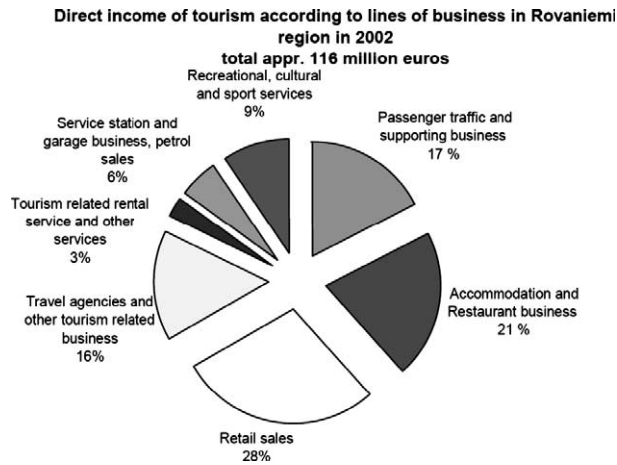


Figure 3. Tourism income for the Rovaniemi region.
(Source: Rintala-Gardin 2005, p. 4)

attractions of the city are the Rovaniemi Art Museums, Ethnographic Museum and Forestry Museum. The Arktikum House is home to permanent and changing exhibitions about the Circumpolar World as well as to the Provincial Museum of Lapland (administered by the city of Rovaniemi). The latter has a special focus on

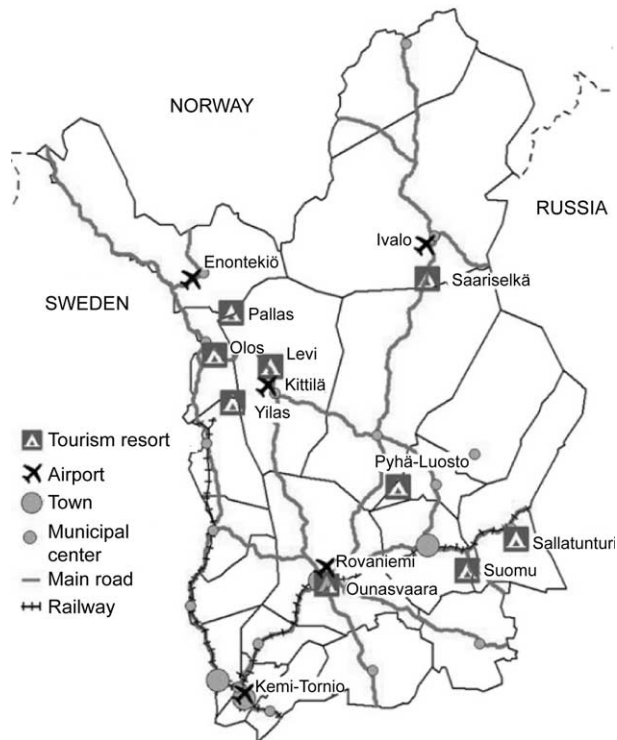


Figure 4. Airports and main tourism resorts in Finnish Lapland.
(Source: RCL 2006, p. 9)

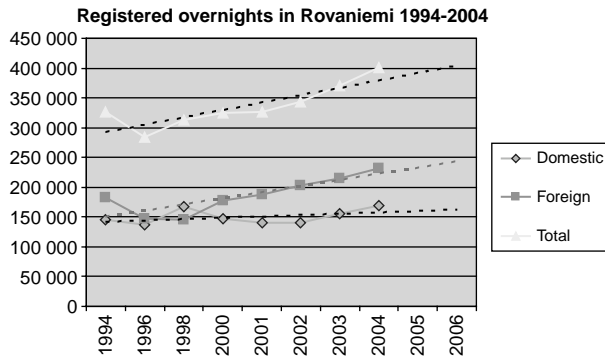


Figure 5. Registered overnights in Rovaniemi over the years (1994–2004). (Source: Rintala-Gardin 2005, p. 7)

the history of Rovaniemi, the Province of Lapland, and the indigenous people of Northern Finland, the Sami people. Rovaniemi also hosts special events, including a folklore festival, a rock music festival, annual fairs in the market place and various Christmas events. Outdoor activities include cross-country and downhill skiing, reindeer and dog sleigh rides, snowmobile safaris, fishing, hiking and a river cruise. The surroundings of Rovaniemi offer visitors additional attractions. The Ranua Wildlife Park (82 km from Rovaniemi) is dedicated to Arctic species. The Midnight Sun Film Festival takes place in early summer in Sodankylä (130 km from Rovaniemi), presenting both Finnish and international films. In Kemi (115 km south of Rovaniemi), the passenger icebreaker *Sampo* offers daily cruises in the icy waters of the Gulf of Bothnia.

Together with the activities offered, perhaps more important is the diversity of the accommodation experience Rovaniemi and Lapland provide, with facilities ranging from luxury hotels to forest cottages and tepees. There are also several restaurants, pubs and nightclubs for local people and tourists, as well as a shopping mall, shops and, particularly for tourists, souvenir shops.

In terms of visitors, Rovaniemi is dominated by two high seasons – summer and winter. The summer season begins at the start of June and ends in mid-August. The winter season begins in November and ends after the Russian Orthodox Christmas (January 7). However, it must be stated that a considerable amount of tourism exists outside these seasons, e.g. spring holidays in February–March, and a relatively short season of autumn colors in September (see occupancy rates of Rovaniemi hotels in figure 5). The main tourist markets are international. Based on overnights in registered accommodation businesses, with the exceptions of 1997–1998,⁶ Rovaniemi received more international tourists in total compared to domestic tourists (see figure 5).

The numbers of both domestic and foreign visitors to Rovaniemi are increasing over the years. Figure 6 shows their distribution within a twelve-month period.

⁶ In 1998, Rovaniemi was host to the Housing Fair (*Asuntomessut*, one of the major summer events in Finland). The Housing Fair was visited by 117 000 visitors (*Asuntomessut-Suomen* 2007).

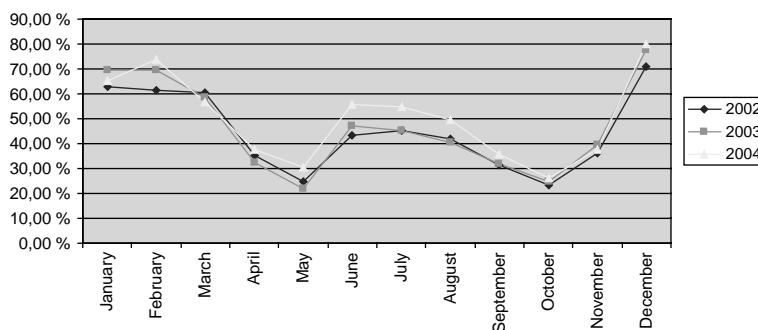


Figure 6. Monthly occupancy rates of Rovaniemi Hotels (2002–2004). (Source: Rintala-Gardin 2005, p. 10).

Figure 6 clearly illustrates that the strongest demand is being registered during winter and over the Christmas season (Rintala-Gardin 2005). Such data, however, does not give a true picture of the tourism situation in Rovaniemi because many short term visitors either do not overnight (e.g. six-hour visits by mainly British Christmas charter flight visitors during pre-Christmas weekends) or do not overnight in registered accommodation businesses (e.g. family visits). However, these tourists do use local tourism resources and inject income into the local economy through their use of transportation and restaurant services, as well as the services of tour operators and retail businesses.

Snowmobiles play an essential role in outdoor activities during winter season. A representative of one of the main tour operators in Rovaniemi points out that out of a dozen different products they offer to its international customers, nine to ten products involve snowmobiles. The demand leads to a good business, as another representative describe snowmobile safaris as their ‘most profitable product’.

Different factors appear to push people to choose activities involving snowmobiles perhaps even more than other products, like cross-country skiing or snowshoeing. According to the observation of the two operators interviewed, challenging their physical capabilities and endurance certainly play a role in the visitors’ selection of activities. One operator said he believes that prices also help tourists determine which activities they would take part in, stressing that there is a psychological limit to what one is willing to pay for a new experience. The operator stressed that people are more willing to pay a higher price when large mechanical technology is involved, such as snowmobiling, than for an activity involving smaller technology, such as snowshoeing, for instance. This apparently suits the operator as snowmobiles have the advantage of allowing a low ratio of guides per visitors (as opposed to cross-country skiing or snowshoeing, which require more assistance, and, therefore, become costly in human resources).

In two studies about polar cruises (Grenier 1998, 2004), including one conducted in Northern Finland, the author has noted that the travellers’ appreciation for big technology (icebreakers, and snowmobiles) scored very high in the top memories people listed at the end of their journey, with enjoyment of aesthetic features scoring slightly lower. In the field, the desire of the visitors to be in control of the technology by assuming the driver’s role and to reach high speeds is easily observable. It appears to be even more apparent in the case of male tourists, although quantitative data for this aspect of the experience is extremely difficult to collect. The guides and

operators interviewed tend to corroborate this hypothesis. The resulting activity is arguably one of domination of nature.

The summer season attracts its share of domestic visitors who migrate from their urban environment to cottages in the countryside. However, the foreign markets (German, Dutch, Spanish, Norwegian, Italians, Swiss and French) make up more than 50% of the total amount of tourists in Rovaniemi (Rintala-Gardin 2005). The activities these visitors pursue are quite different from winter tourism with safari operators claiming a lack of customers. According to Lähteenmäki (2006) and confirmed by the operators interviewed, summer tourism in Lapland (and Rovaniemi) suffers from the coolness of the climate and the midges. The summer season has been a target for development and marketing during recent years (some success might be found in figure 6 showing increased occupancy rates in Rovaniemi hotel rooms during the summer months).

While Santa's Workshop, during the winter months, allows adults to experience nostalgia for childhood fairytales and other memories (Lavia 2006), in summer, the small shopping centre takes advantage of its location on the geographical Arctic Circle, adding to the mystique of the place. In addition to large multi-lingual map signs posted on the site, a painted line on the ground with the words 'Arctic Circle' written in many languages, acts as a marker (MacCannell 1999) for tourists to immortalise their passage (figure 7). Indeed, crossing the Arctic Circle is an expected ritual when first visiting Rovaniemi.

In recognition of the importance tourism plays in the economy of Rovaniemi (and Northern Finland), especially in accommodation and restaurant services, an increasing number of educational institutions (e.g. University of Lapland, Rovaniemi University of Applied Sciences, School and Lapland Vocational College, all located in Rovaniemi) in the Province of Lapland are dedicating programmes to the hospitality



Figure 7. The crossing of the Arctic Circle at the Santa Claus Village is an inescapable ritual when visiting Rovaniemi. (Photo: Alain A. Grenier)

and management industry. Indeed, employment in the tourism industry has been regarded as a possibility for local students to stay in the area. Efforts to develop tourism are believed to provide much needed jobs, both in service and retail businesses, as well as management of cultural and natural resources.

The possibilities of education, and thus finding a job in the tourism business, may serve as a means to involve local people in tourism. Quite often the involvement of the local people in tourism can be a very complex entity or at the other extreme, not exist at all.

4. Sami people and tourism in Rovaniemi

With the exception of Iceland, both indigenous and non-indigenous people inhabit all Polar Regions. In Finnish Lapland, out of 185 000 people, some 5000 are Sami (indigenous people). Although the role of the Sami people in developing tourism in Rovaniemi may sometimes seem insignificant, features of their culture, however, are being used extensively. Whether it is the colours (blue and red) widely used in the handicrafts sold as souvenirs, as well as clothing, food, legends or songs ('joiku'), the Sami culture is omnipresent everywhere tourists go. Yet, little credit is given to the Sami people. For instance, rides in sleighs pulled by reindeers go back to the nomadic lifestyle of the Sami people, before the arrival of the snowmobile in the 1960s. Tourists, however, are not usually informed about the origins of the rides nor are they about the history of Sami people.

Similarly, the use of the Sami cultural symbols by non-indigenous people to 'stage' and commercialise a certain authenticity keeps raising controversy. Indeed, the colourful image of the Sami's traditional clothing is used extensively by non-Natives, to sell souvenirs (figure 8), both in Lapland and beyond.⁷

While their habitat and culture (in the form of handicrafts, most notably) certainly has the potential to attract the visitors' attention, perhaps their greatest asset is the equation between 'indigenous' and 'authenticity' many people tend to make when considering the native populations of the North (Pettersson 2005). This potential remains, for the most part, unexplored in the context of polar tourism.

5. The challenges facing tourism in Rovaniemi

There appears to be a general consensus from the interviewees about the vitality and success of the Rovaniemi tourism industry in the winter months (especially around the holidays), however, summer generates quite opposite reactions – at least from the tour operators' point of view. The Rovaniemi Tourism Board (RTB) also recognises the difficulties "large seasonal fluctuation" represents for their industry (RTI 2007, p. 4). In spite of its apparent success, Rovaniemi appears to be facing difficulties and challenges in the area of seasonality. In its development strategy, the Rovaniemi Tourism Board states that seasonality is "an obstacle to new investments", since "[t]here is a demand for new, high standard accommodation capacities for Rovaniemi in winter months, but the poor feasibility of summer slows investments" (RTI 2007, p. 4). The two operators interviewed identified the following as problems that may prevent the industry developing:

⁷ Even abroad, the Sami continue to be displayed to represent Lapland, as in a Finnish Lapland souvenir shop in Thunder Bay, Canada.



Figure 8. Sami dolls and other related items (Sami drums and costume) occupy a prominent place in Lapland souvenir shops. (Photo: Alain A. Grenier)

1. The saturation of the accommodation during the peak season;
2. The capacity-limit of the means of transportation (in the case of Finland, domestic air connections);
3. The maintenance over the year of infrastructures and equipment used only during a very short part of the year;
4. A high turnover of staff and constant training of newcomers; and
5. Maintaining the originality of the product (winter tourism products are relatively homogenous all over the circumpolar North).

All the identified problems concern the operators' views on logistics. Climate change is yet another concern, as the lack of snow in November and December is increasingly causing problems for activities requiring snow. The interviews also revealed that the operators observe changes in the quality and duration of the snow cover, required for most outdoor activities to occur. While negative tourism impacts on the environment constitute another area of caution, the most pressing problem appears to be that of seasonality: having only one (and often too short) period of the year to generate the revenues that will allow both staff and the operators to survive until the following year, and grow.

Both tour operators interviewed, who deal mostly with foreign customers, stated that December might represent not less than half of their annual income. This disproportional demand from the market generates consequences for them and the industry throughout the rest of the year. In short, this means additional expenditure to find, train and keep staff that currently faces a high turnover due to only part-time employment being available. Seasonality also means extra costs to maintain material and equipment (snowmobile and winter clothing, for instance) which is used for only three weeks and which must be divided up between different sites.

To relieve the congestion in the accommodation sector during the Christmas peak and spring break, many possibilities are being considered. The Regional Council of Lapland has developed a strategy to take full advantage of the network of tourism services that have been built over the years. In this system, the larger tourism centres

work as junctions in the network; the strategy aims at integrating “the enterprises and resorts of the surrounding areas into the growth of tourism centres” (RCL 2003, p. 52). Hence, with proper co-ordination between the operators, each of the main tour operators of Lapland (Rovaniemi and nearby ski resorts) could eventually become interchangeable gateways, with tourists directed toward the centre that best suits their expectations.

In addition, the Rovaniemi Tourism Board proposes that development “should focus intensely on spring, summer and autumn products” (RTI 2007, p. 5). Summer can be a challenging season for tourism in some areas of the North, as the Polar Regions can hardly guarantee continuous sunshine and heat – both qualities that are often sought by tourists. Hence, polar tourism being the possibility to experience the unusual must be imaginative. The originality of its entrepreneurs is the corner stone of any tourism operation. The midnight sun has not lost its century’s old magic. It still attracts tourists to Rovaniemi, but the attraction alone has little possibilities to compete against the diversity of large Mediterranean destinations. Rovaniemi, as many other polar destinations, is more difficult and/or costly to reach compared to Southern and Central European travel resorts which are geographically located closer to the markets (with most notably lower travel costs).

Developing tourism during the ‘in-between’ seasons (neither ‘green’ nor snowy times of the year) means developing conference and congress tourism, increasing recreational tourism, events and year-round wellbeing products (RTI 2007). Among them, silence tourism may perhaps bring some hope.

6. Silence tourism

The idea of silence tourism is to focus on the deep appreciation many (snowmobile) visitors express when invited to turn their engines off and to stop all activities, once in the middle of the ‘wilderness’. The operators interviewed say that the experience of ‘Lapland’s silence’ often constitutes one of the top memories the visitors will take home, as stated in the feedback forms. Hence, silence tourism is one of these new innovations sought to extend tourism during the low fall and late-spring/early summer seasons. The municipalities of Lapland, the European Union and participating operators have invested nearly €1.4 million (approximately CAD 2 millions) in this ‘silence tourism project’.

Silence can perhaps best be described not as the absence of sounds but rather as the absence of mechanic and human-made noises. There are two types of silence – the absence of outside sounds; and the ‘inner’ silence – the one that comes from the mind. Silence tends to make people become more introspective, turning toward their own thoughts and feelings – an experience ‘many people try to avoid’⁸ with different degrees of awareness. Arguably, silence tourism centres on the tourist’s non-aggressive experience of nature to allow the mind to rest. Silence tourism, arguably, may add a new dimension to polar tourism. Where technologically based activities, such as icebreaking cruises and snowmobiling, tend to promote the domination of nature (see Grenier 2004), other activities, such as canoeing, hiking and silence tourism, can stimulate a more harmonious approach to nature. In an interview, the

⁸ Personal communications with project director.

project director states that the aim is to get people “to feel the inner silence through outer silence”.⁹

The silence tourism experience will last from three to five days. Tourist groups will be kept small to prevent disturbing factors to occur. While silence tourism will be a small size operator product, larger operators (airlines, bus companies, travel agencies, etc.) will benefit by providing the logistics at times of the year when business is otherwise slow. The people behind silence tourism believe that cottage and cabin owners, as well as catering services, will benefit by finding a utility for infrastructures usually not in use after the peak of the tourism season. The operators will be providing guidance to help novices cope with potential fears and the feeling of disorientation in an environment deprived of human made and mechanic sounds.

For the first trials of the product, the main customers were domestic tourists from Southern and Central Finland with a few international visitors. A typical traveller to enjoy the silence product is described by the project manager as an urban, career woman, aged 40–65, who works in a very stressful environment, and who is constantly surrounded by other people. Gender stereotypes arguably remain even on holidays. The project manager believes women are more open to this type of experiment than men, who will require a more active product that includes hikes and canoeing.

The organisers believe that as urbanisation is increasing, the demand for silence tourism will grow. The project director believes the North, which has large areas almost free from human-built infrastructures, is the best place for such a tourism experience. The ultimate challenge for silence tourism, however, will come from selling it. At the time of writing this article, a marketing strategy was still being developed.

Will the polar tourists eventually get apathetic to the technology-oriented activities, such as snowmobiling and icebreaking cruises, and choose silence tourism? The answer has yet to come. The diversity in the tourism experiences offered in polar and sub-Polar Regions today, however, is perhaps the best indicator that in an industry very sensitive to economic, political, and cultural forces, polar tourism as a whole, flourishes.

7. Conclusion

Polar tourism continues to grow and increase in popularity. In the context of global warming and global economy, this article has addressed the necessity for academics of different fields to come to a common understanding of the concept of polar tourism, one that will integrate both its geographical and socio-cultural dimensions. This article stresses the importance of finding a definition that does not restrict tourism in the Polar Regions to a specific form of travel, whether ecological or not, or practiced on a mass or alternative scale.

Understanding the experience of polar tourism enables managers to adopt the proper strategies to manage the many challenges and difficulties facing this industry, using some of the most sensitive resources available at both ends of the Earth. This article has argued for a need to define the term ‘polar tourism’, combining both

⁹ Ibid.

geographical and sociological approaches, as an experience of the unusual, through specific geographical features.

On integrating the dimension of experience into the concept, this article took the case of Rovaniemi, capital of Finnish Lapland, to illustrate some of the challenges facing the polar tourism industry today. Seasonality, especially in times of climate change, is arguably the most pressing matter for operators and governments. Among the solutions brought forth by some operators to relieve some of the congestion over the peak season is the elaboration of new and original products. These would be aimed at expanding and stabilising the industry's development throughout the year, filling the gaps between seasons.

Polar tourism carries many promises, both for the visitors, their host communities and the operators. While a geographical approach has always been important to understand the polar tourism phenomenon, the arrival of silence tourism illustrates that a sociological approach is also required to fully understand polar tourism's social, cultural and psychological dimensions. When embarking on a polar journey, visitors may indeed be heading for the geographical Poles. What they experience, however, is at best, a place in their mind. As the tourism industry continues to be shaped by the travellers' constant need for novelty and distinction, on the one hand, and the challenges brought by the destinations' geographical and environmental features on the other, the success of polar tourism may just be its ability to tackle diversity.

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