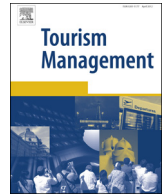




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Book Review

Marketing Rural Tourism Experience and Enterprise, Gunjan Saxena. Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham (2016). 178 pp (Pbk), £63.00 ISBN: 9781784710873

Gunjan Saxena's new work gives a fresh and subtle perspective on marketing in rural tourism. The book has been designed for academics in the area of tourism marketing and rural tourism, as well as for scholars working in the development studies field. In addition, the editor's website describes the book as being targeted to undergraduate and post-graduate students interested in the field of rural tourism marketing.

The book is generally easy to read. The first chapter, as well as some of the introductory sections in each chapter, are highly referenced while most of the book is based on the author's first-hand field experiences and on international rural tourism projects. The volume is well structured and its chapters follow a logical sequence, starting from the definition of rural tourism and the re-imagination of rurality through to the politics of place. The main actors in rural tourism are discussed (i.e. rural firms, travellers and residents). The book finishes with an evaluation and outlook for the future of rural tourism marketing.

From the very beginning of the book, it is possible to gauge Saxena's perspective on the subject, as she defines rural tourism marketing as *"a variegated phenomenon linked intricately with how rurality is experienced and shaped by actors' enterprises and a broad array of socio-cultural, political economic and material processes and practices"* (page 3). This instantly gives a feeling for the complexity of the issue at stake and of the author's approach to the topic. As the book progresses, this statement unfolds with a clear approach on the definition and/or re-definition of the concept of rurality and the associated experience, while an account of external forces influencing rurality is also explored to complete the landscape.

Of note, is the concept of actors (and actors' narratives) being at the core of Saxena's construction of argumentations within the whole book. In fact, the book moves from the author's previous work in the field and stems from her research in Integrated Rural Tourism; that is, *'tourism explicitly linked to economic, social, cultural, natural and human structures of localities in which it takes place'* (Preface, X). Moving from this concept, the author leverages multi-layered place narratives, actors' personal life stories, to generate an understanding of their role in tourism product creation and consumption at both community and operational levels. Therefore, thanks to a case-based discussion, this work develops an example to include contemporary representations of rurality in marketing literature, highlighting challenges and opportunities.

This is, in my opinion, what makes this book really interesting and innovative. If the reader is looking for a 'traditional' and mainstream marketing book with bold claims and pictorial models, representations or diagrams on every other page, this text is inappropriate. In clarification, there are nice pictorial

representations explaining complex concepts, such as the one for *"Rurality in Flux"* (page 31), with which the author explains a typology of rural regions/places available for niche and mass market tourist consumption. However, the focus of the book is not on the marketing and management system *per se*, but rather on the actors populating and animating the actual system (there is, of course, space to address the politics of place-making in Chapter Three and tourism in a rural setting in Chapter Five). In fact, Saxena started from a bottom-up perspective, shedding light on the importance of actors' narratives within collective stories, to highlight plural pathways to create encounters with rurality. I believe this is a brilliant idea and an original approach. Additionally, thanks to the large amount of personal and international experiences provided by the author, the execution is excellent and the reader feels fully immersed in the author's narration and in her explanation of complex concepts through actors' narratives.

Focusing on storytellers within the communities, the author aims at discovering everyday routines, values, histories and social knowledge with a threefold perspective. These are: (i) the rural firms' perspective, (ii) the travellers' perspective and (iii) the rural residents' perspective, providing the reader with a complete overview of the rural tourism system without really engaging in systemic and, in most of the cases, obvious discussions.

Regarding rural firms, Chapter Four discusses how they incarnate the actual rural place, creating and re-creating *"place-based meanings to scaffold and fuel travellers' imagination of authentic rurality"* (page 59). Within this context, the analysis proposed in the book looks at studying the values underpinning market orientation of rural firms (shaped in a rural context by the operators' socio-cultural and economic context, community relationship and entrepreneurs' peculiarities). These determine the dynamics of the local marketplace, which differs from community to community but where social change needs to overcome *touristification*, and the offered experiences.

Tourists (see Chapter Five) are seen by Saxena as active agents able to understand the meaning of a place and to make sense of their experience. Therefore, discussion of this chapter focuses on co-production or co-creation in rural contexts towards the creation of a real and personal meaning for rurality. Rural sites provide *"tourists with the materials and the settings to allow them to blend prevailing place myths with their living experience to generate a unique personal narrative via the co-construction process"* (page 91).

Even if the relationship among travellers and the community is asymmetrical in terms of power (as stated in Chapter Six), the author describes rural tourism hosts (i.e. community members) as active actors that cannot be acted upon. In fact, the host-guest encounter can be seen as a powerful means to create a series of narratives that deliberately and subconsciously shape the place as tourists and locals explore and understand personal connections enabling tourists to create emotional bonding with rural

communities. However, Saxena states traditional host-guest relationship models within the contemporary rural tourism context should be re-examined as rural landscapes become containers of fluid identities (i.e. due to the lack of identification as host and/or as natives) and shape the identity of those who live or visit there.

The author presents a discussion in the last chapter about the future of rural tourism markets. In her vision, as discussed throughout the book, actors' narratives are at the core of the concept of rurality and marketers need to act as facilitators by supplying discursive conditions and resources. The last part of the book introduces the use of digital technologies and digital storytelling as relevant tools to foster narration and interpretation.

In conclusion, I strongly recommend this book to academics considering investigation of rural tourism and rural tourism

marketing. Furthermore, I agree with the twofold academic readership proposed by the author and the publisher (i.e. academics working in the field of tourism studies and in the field of development studies). However, I am not persuaded that an undergraduate readership could grasp the complexity of the issue at stake, as proposed by Saxena; therefore, I believe this volume is more suited for postgraduate students approaching rural tourism from a tourism and/or developmental angle.

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