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Listening to the local voices of a destination - “Live like a local” experiences in Helsinki

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There is a trend in Western society for travelers to seek for authentic experiences in the places they visit. Although travelers in the past would have satisfied their thirst for authenticity with a dinner in a local restaurant or just a chat with a local person, nowadays they want to experience the whole destination like those who live there do. As Richards and Russo (2014) argue, travelers no longer want to follow the guide book; they try to avoid crowded tourist sites that characterize contemporary destinations. Travelers are looking for information about sites and events that offer access to the local culture and ways of life.

Several destinations in Europe have responded to this emerging trend through different initiatives. For example, the West Sweden Tourist Board has launched a community initiative called “Meet the Locals” which includes everything from an “MTB tour”, to “yoga lessons” and “party with local people”. Visit Copenhagen has started a publication series named “Do Like The Locals” where Copenhageners share their personal views about what they like about their city. In a time where destination experiences are becoming more dependent on the local socio-cultural fabrics, there is also a need to better understand what locals find extraordinary and unique about the places they live in. In this address, we first draw attention to the aspects stressed by locals when talking about their experiences within their own city. To that end, we look at blog posts written by Helsinki locals. Second, we discuss some recommendations for promoting more authentic “live like a local” destination experiences. The address is based on the Master’s thesis *Memorable Experiences of “Living Like a Local”: Content Analysis of Blogs about Helsinki* written by the first author.

Experiencing Helsinki as a local

The growing interest in local culture and ways of life among travelers puts certain pressure on destination managers. They not only need to know their customers, but also the people and local culture of the place they are selling. Indeed, there is a need to know more about how locals live

and experience their neighborhoods, what they feel is extraordinary about their places and what kind of aspects are highlighted in their experiences of locality. If a destination wants to succeed in promoting authentic “live like a local” tourism experiences, they need to better understand what it means to live like a local in that particular place. To shed light on the questions presented above, we explored seven blog posts written by people living in Helsinki. The posts were part of the original study this address is based on. The bloggers were both professional and amateur, represented both genders, and the age range was from 25 to 55 years. The blog posts were written in Finnish between the years 2014 and 2018. They highlighted three particular experience elements: urban ambience, being and spending time in a place, and hipster subculture.

The blog posts pointed out the urban ambience of particular sites in Helsinki. Urban ambience refers to the sensing and the feeling of a place, which is depicted on the built environment and is motivated by residents and visitors (Thibaud, 2011). The posts included words such as “ambience”, “atmosphere”, “atmospheric” and “feeling the vibe” when describing a particular space.

Market Square is mostly swarming with tourists, but in Hakaniemi market, you can enjoy the authentic working-class atmosphere of the Eastern downtown. Nothing really makes the summer feeling as the scent of fresh coffee, fingers meddled in sugar, street musicians playing summer tunes and the screeching of seagulls circling above the market.

The posts draw attention to the role of architecture, landscapes and food in stimulating sensorial experiences (see Thibaud, 2011). Another element reflected in the blog posts is the idea of being and spending time in a place. This finding is consistent with previous studies on tourism experience taking the perspective of locals (Knobloch, Robertson & Aitken, 2014; Richards & Russo, 2014). For example, Richards and Russo (2014) point out that experiencing a destination like a local is about mere spending time, sitting around and hanging out in spaces such as parks, bars and marketplaces.

You will never get bored with the seaside of Kaivopuisto Park, at least I won't! My friends and me, we have coffee on the terrace of Café Ursula every summer, and Café Carusel situated on the other end is a nice place for sitting around as well. Coffee with a sea view – a summer evening can't get much better than that.

Central to a “hipster culture” is the claim to authenticity, uniqueness and individuality (Maly & Varis, 2016). According to the blog posts, hipster subculture in Helsinki is situated in the eastern area of downtown. Places that were associated with hipster subculture include sites such as vintage shops, antiquarian bookshops, bars, cafés, music stores, and thrift shops. Building on the element of being and spending time in places, places with features of hipster culture were considered as appealing and interesting.

Bruno Workshop in the neighbourhood of Vallila – only a stone throw away from our home – is the city's own living room that resembles the hipster meccas in Berlin as well as the area of Telliskivi in Tallinn.

Co-creating "live like a local" experiences

The importance of locals in the co-creation of more authentic destination experiences has been highlighted in several studies (e.g. Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Knobloch et al., 2014; Paulauskaite, Powell, Coca-Stefaniak & Morrison, 2017). Nevertheless, little discussion has focused on how to promote "live like a local" experiences in a way that benefits both, locals and tourists. Most destination initiatives are offering tourists to step into the locality of the place, but tourism and locality are seen as detached from each other.

The blogs written by Helsinki residents show that locals are proud of their city and they want to share it with the visitors. From this perspective, tourism can be seen as a tool for supporting local identities existing in a particular destination. Nevertheless, there is a need for tourism planning that guarantees that the local cultural aspects are not damaged by an uncontrolled flow of tourists. This viewpoint is reflected in the quotation "Market Square is mostly swarming with tourists". Indeed, Helsinki's Market Square has turned into a tourism attraction, gradually losing its local fabric and meaning to the local people.

At the same time, destination management organizations could begin to approach tourism differently, by viewing both locals and tourists as their customers. By developing spaces where both locals and tourists feel relaxed and comfortable, they will be supporting the "live like a local" experiences tourists are so much searching for. Oodi, Helsinki's new city library, is an example of a place that can be appealing for both locals and tourists. It can become the next urban spot for tourists to be, spend time and meet the locals.

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