

Tour Guiding in COVID-19 Era; A Pilot Case Study in Syros Island

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Abstract

As one of the essential variables of mass tourism, tour guiding suffered a significant hit in the context of the COVID-19 conjuncture. The pandemic revealed pathologies of the field spanning over decades, highlighting at the same time an essential structural issue: the tour guiding has never been treated as a methodological tool-object for the documentation and the evaluation of the "oral management" of the cultural reserve, and therefore as part of a more extensive interdisciplinary discussion. In a broader context, the dynamics that are inherent in guided tours, as a vigorous activity inextricably linked to cultural and tourist development, especially in our country, have not yet been highlighted to anticipated extents. The causes are many and varied. What is worth noting is the opportunity of guided tours to improve its tools and dynamics in the context of a situation that seems to threaten it -as a practice- dramatically. Although the process of designing tourist packages is usually limited to commercial terms, the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the guiding practice remains more urgent than ever. Given that mass travel is threatened - perhaps for the first time in its history - with extinction, how could one imagine the "next day" of the tour guiding, the tour guide and the tourism itself, in terms of demand and supply? What ideas, actions, tools, and methods can be used in this situation, for the visitor's interest to remain alive, but also refuelled continuously, for their destinations and narratives? This text introduces a new action that aims at maintaining, optimising, and evolving the tour guide as a primary tool for stimulating the visitor. With the help of technology, a new version of the touring process is proposed. Its key element is the presence of the tour guide, as a moderator of the experience, which is shared live on a digital platform. The experience is enriched with actions and events (interviews, music, videos, etc.), which are integrated as an organic part of it, in a single narrative. The island of Syros is proposed as a place for pilot implementation of the action (case study), for which a route narrative has already been designed, however, the possibilities of planning and implementation are unlimited.

Keywords: *Mass Tourism, Health Crisis, Tour Guiding, Digital Tools, Syros, COVID19*

JEL Classification:

1. Introduction

The article attempts to map the "next day" and the prospects of adaptation and development of the touring act, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. References to the pre-COVID19 tour period describe the context for the creation of new products and services, which prove necessary in the current treaty. The design, documentation, potentially systematic implementation, and availability to the public of a pilot action are presented in detail and

combined with the contribution of flexible technology tools, update the tour guiding, as we knew it until March 2020. The action proposes a new service for culture and tourism of the "next day", both for the domestic and for the international experience.

2. Brief Description of the Current Situation

Recent reports on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry can be summarised in a statement issued by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) in May 2020: "The coronavirus pandemic and the measures to halt its spreading had caused the worst international tourism crisis in the past seventy years - when the recording of the corresponding data began (UNWTO, 2020)". 2018 and 2019 were two exceptional years for Greek tourism with similar forecasts for 2020. "Revenues are expected to exceed 18 billion euros and arrivals to exceed 31 million tourists", noted "Naftemporiki" in December 2019.

Indeed, last year, 2019 concluded with peak performances and optimistic forecasts (SETE, 2020) for the international tourism market. This was the climate on an international level, until December 2019. According to the UNWTO, for 2020 a decrease in international arrivals is expected - fluctuating, depending on the developments in the health crisis - which can nevertheless reach up to 80% ("Naftemporiki", 2019). With specific tourism agents expressing their reservations about the consequences of Brexit and -later on, in September 2019- the bankruptcy of Thomas Cook as well as the dynamic return of the competitive markets in Greece, Turkey, and Egypt, any other prediction with a negative sign, would seem, just a few months ago, excessive. The upheaval - for the world treaty and not only in the tourism sector - was reduced to an almost coded phrase: COVID-19.

3. The Guided Tour as a Variable of Mass Tourism in Greece before and after the Pandemic

As early as the beginning of March 2020, in a hall of the School of Philosophy of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, a group of students with their Professor and experts involved, gather to discuss the prospect of upgrading studies and touring respectively in Greece (Georgaki, 2013), (Scaltsa, Nitsiou, Georgaki, 2016), (Kathimerini, 2019). The origin, the studies, and the training of guided tour professionals are all in their nature excluded from research perspectives and scientifically substantiated proposals on the subject. This exclusion of the guiding tour from interdisciplinary discussions is one of the reasons for the lack of substantiated planning and proposals for its future and the "next day". The processes and context of the production of the touring narrative, the dynamics, the impact on the public-consumer, the evaluation of the touring process and many more aspects related to it, as an act of producing public speech on monuments and culture, are research fields which up to today have not yet been discussed to the extent and depth that they deserve. The field of touring, as a self-evident process of travel, remains more or less out of the academic agenda. It seems, however, that we are going through the most appropriate period to overturn this observation (Niewiadomski, 2020, 4). All along, the guided tour, a key variable of mass tourism, confined to a "trampled process" in the best-selling programs of tour operators -with everything that this may mean for its dynamics- was anticipated to receive a strong and unavoidable blow from the health crisis we are going through. In principle, requiring interaction and being entirely a group and social activity, in the context of mass travel, the guided tour was left unwanted overnight, going through perhaps the worst moment in its -immensely long- history.

The example of the guiding tour as a travelling experience is perhaps the most representative when trying to understand the following statement: "The tourism as we knew it just a few months ago, has ceased to exist" (Niewiadomski, 2020, 3). The complete undermining of tour guiding by the pandemic reveals significant pre-existing deficits, for which though even in this "conjuncture-opportunity", the necessary reflexes do not seem to exist (Jones, P. & Comfort D., 2020, 82-83). Identified mainly with organised mass travel, in the context of tour operators' programs, the guiding tour served the massive scale of the tourism industry without its dynamics in the design and production of autonomous, flexible, updated products. If the health crisis is an opportunity for a more diligent, carefully planned, less "greedy", and ultimately quality tourism (Niewiadomski, 2020, 4) then we are going through an exciting period for the development of the tour guiding as such. The skepticism that

has emerged on the occasion of COVID-19 about the possibilities, the practice, the methodology, the evaluation tools, the ethics, and other parameters that determine the touring process, remains pending, although -from March 2020 onwards- was born automatically in almost every affected field of similar activities. It is certainly no coincidence that the discussion about the "next day" of the guiding tour is limited to mandatory mask-wearing and other protective measures issued -continuously updated - by the health protocols (Voria.gr, 2020), (euro.news, 2020).

However, is the slogan "Health First" enough for the protection, the survival and most importantly, the evolution of the guiding tour in the post-COVID era of tourism? In the current international literature, the health crisis has already been documented as an unprecedented opportunity for redefining, restarting, redeveloping (Niewiadomski, 2020, 2) the tourism industry in general. Nevertheless, none of those involved - especially professional tour guides due to the dependent employment relationship with large offices, in the context of the above- seem ready to respond to planning for the "next day". The reactions of tour guides to media (newspapers and television) and social media, regarding the absolute impasse of touring in the post-COVID era, are indicative of an unprecedented puzzlement. With a watchful eye awaiting solely for the return of "normality" -a reaction with psychodynamic interpretations (Kathimerini, 2020)- protests of the industry are exhausted in financial demands and compensations, as formulated in the pre-COVID period, without any hint of the profound, structural changes required by the tour guide - tour guiding framework.

Even though the discussion is long and exciting, one could pose a single question here: what will the "next day" for the guiding tour look like, regardless of the context in which it was practised until the onset of the pandemic, if the so longed for "normality" never returns as we knew it until March 2020 or if it partly returns? If the tourists that we are waiting for are not able to come, in what ways is it possible to keep their interest alive, as a quality investment for their guaranteed physical return to the destinations? There is no doubt that the answers have a research starting point, even if they refer to the need for a (re) designed strategy and implemented policies for culture and tourism.

4. Suggestions for the Past-COVID Era: The Most Awkward Period in the History of the Guided Tour

According to the UNWTO (UNWTO Digital Transformation, 2020) and the European Commission (European Commission, 2020), the availability of digital media has been -in recent years- a means for a dramatic increase in tourism indicators. Parallel to that, throughout the quarantine period, as a measure of curbing the spread of the epidemic, users have taken advantage of their opportunities for entertainment, telework, meetings with friends or various realisations of their civic duties. The debate on digital reality is now more intense and more relevant than ever; one wonders what would look like the synergy of ICT with the guided tour activity?

Recently, there has been overproduction and overconsumption of online products and services of culture and tourism: online discussions, seminars, video productions of museums and archaeological sites, augmented reality tours and online tours (Virtual Tours, 2020), some already existing from the pre-COVID period. However, there is obvious discomfiture of official tourism operators, travel agencies and tour guides themselves, when being faced with the possibility of using digital media - as briefly mentioned above. It is characteristic that, just a short time ago, online booking services for tours to museums, cities, places, showed in principle no update in relation to the post-COVID, new reality. Even though such a reaction is justified in the context of the global conjuncture, the debate on the "next day" should have already started, and in any case, it should have started on a completely different basis from what has been recorded up until the drafting of these lines (Panhellenic Federation of Tourist Guides, 2020). The need to design new tools and tour methods is primordial to the launch of the COVID-19 (Weiler, Black, 2015). A whole new approach to this field of interest will emerge not only as a means of addressing needs, which arise in times of crisis -health or otherwise- but as a debt both to the monuments and the people who have always been associated with them, so as with other people.

5. A Tool for the Next Day's Guided Tour:

I. Description-Methodology-Tools

The idea and planning of the pilot action presented here concern the possibility of a guided tour process, the essential and primary elements of which remain present and usable: the tour guide, the object (place-monuments-museums), the touring audience (public). These three elements come together and meet each other on a digital platform, in real-time. The product-service design process is no different from the conventional, standard process: the guide assembles the body of information, which she/he incorporates and adapts to a "scenario narrative" with specific duration and predetermined stops (spotting). The meeting is determined in real-time of the action and real place for the tour guide, while the audience tunes in and prepares to watch it from different locations, via live streaming. The process is recorded and broadcasted online while participants watch on a common digital platform with the ability to intervene. The tour guide manages the interventions of the public using the same methodological tools that are used in the formal process of the guided tour with a "physical audience".

A first, preparatory meeting of the guide and the public is introduced at an earlier time, on a digital platform. In this environment, which now has become familiar to millions of users worldwide, participants have the opportunity to get to know the tour guide as well as each other, to be introduced to their destination, to the procedure, method and browsing tools, to preview material from the site or monument that they will visit, to express personal wishes and ideas about the activity e.t.c. This is a preparatory stage, which -in a typical tour process- would not be possible. Further, this intervening period between the first meeting and the in situ live internet streaming, offers the participants the possibility and the personal time to be inspired and to research on their own, from a variety of sources, information about the destination and its subject matter.

The availing of additional material could support the process to participants who have the time, interest and intention of using them, such as videos or podcasts, specifically designed for the destination or theme of the tour. This complementary material is essentially a feeding or re-feeding tool, depending on whether it precedes or follows the live action.

II. Advantages

Both in literature and media publications throughout the COVID-19 crisis, various digital applications have been recorded, which treat the new landscape in culture and tourism -as a consequence of the health crisis- as "temporary". The goal of most of these applications, as it seems, is to fill the void, awkward space, regarding the intake and consumption of culture and tourism products during the pandemic, bearing with the thought of returning to what was, until recently, familiar. The described action is a proposal for the "next day", although it should already be a proposal of the "previous day", in the sense of alternative methods/tools aimed at specific categories of the public, excluded -for various reasons- from the standard tour process, regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed action can be deployed for sensitive groups or individuals, who for several reasons, cannot move or participate in group or private tourism requiring a physical presence and endurance. Also, it maintains the advantages of the standard tour, in an environment (digital platform) familiar to most and in this case not that far from the real one, as a result of the live streaming of the action (live streaming).

One of the main advantages of the action is that it does not lag the dynamics of the impressions and experience created from the tour, as we knew it until today. This element proves to be extremely important at this juncture as the experience of the action fuels and inspires potential future visits to a real place and time.

An essential goal of the action is to increase and optimise the tour process, in the following areas:

- Development of socialising & the possibility of providing feedback in a digital or real environment
- Communication-interaction & possibility of feedback in the digital or real environment

- Creating experiences and impressions that can become potential tools for future visits
- Challenge and exchange of thoughts, feelings
- Variety that creates an attractive experience
- The experience, depending on each case, is interactive (questions, interventions, audience comments) with the managerial contribution of the tour guide-animator
- Possibility of feedback for the same or similar actions
- Comfortable & familiar space for the participants
- Possibility to read and promote monuments-places through different media and from various aspects that would not be possible on a standard route
- Fuelling the interest for the destination, which is presented live and not statically, only as a landscape image
- Low cost of implementation and participation in the action
- Possibility of implementation yearly in all seasons
- Flexibility in places and destinations
- Inexhaustible possibilities of themes depending on the audience (tailor-made)
- Possibility of cooperation with institutions and individuals for the promotion of History or local stories (Microhistory)
- Action planning with the participation of specialised staff and the curation of a licensed tour guide (Ministry of Tourism)
- Deployment of various and different people in the process of the tour: expert scientists, narrators, performers, artists, e.t.c. to highlight the different aspects of the monuments/places/destinations.
- Use of the background of HERitage Management e-System (HERMeS), which is available in Ermoupolis (Syros) [Figure 1]

It is important to emphasise, once more, the importance of the preparatory phase of the action with the participation of the public, a possibility that, in principle, is absent from the formal "physical" tour process. The meeting of the participants before the action creates bonds of teamwork and stimulates the interest and the expectation for the experience as a collective, pleasant goal of quality time. It is generally accepted that travelling, guided tours, visiting of sites and places of cultural interest (galleries, museums, archaeological sites), are in fact pretexts for extroversion, socialising and interaction. Offering the possibility of social interaction, even on a digital platform, meets a critical need, which in the period of crisis proves to be crucial. The role of the tour guide as an animator should also be emphasised (Veleni, Georgaki, Xanthopoulou, 2010), (Rabotić, 2010a). The tour guide in this action becomes an animator not only of the monuments and places of cultural interest (Chen-Hua Min, 2017), (Čampelj, 2020) but also of the tour guiding as a crucial touristic service.

In the harsh condition of the pandemic, where the needs for rapid change were deemed urgent, the presence of the guide-animator acquires symbolic dimensions as it highlights the importance of the human factor in the imminent dominance of the digital medium. Moreover, it has already been widely acclaimed that the COVID-19 crisis is mainly a humanitarian crisis (Athens Journal of Tourism, 2020, 5), which is a rather exciting aspect in the case of tourism, as noted above. The mediating role of the animator-guide between the real and the digital environment underscores an ongoing historical transition to this very instant. In the context of the scientific discussion -which in our country has not even been considered yet- for the evolution of the oral management of culture in the 21st century, one could say that this is a tool that ultimately aims at upgrading and optimising the touring act itself, as one of the most important variables of the tourist and cultural product.

Figure 1. The “HERitage Management e-System (HERMeS) in Syros, is a massive digital documentation of 1.290 historic buildings; “HERMeS” will provide the content and the design of different scenarios



III. Enrichment

The proposed action sets another vital goal of qualitative reporting: not to be limited merely to historical information, since the touring experience is part of a much broader and more complex aspect of human activity, aptly described with the terms "edutainment", "culturetainment" (Moss, 2010). By employing the use of condensed images, in the form of an interactive television or film script, set in a natural plateau of the place and the monuments of interest, the action can include much more than just a narrative. It is actually becoming a palpable experience. This palimpsest unlocks the various and different ways of perceiving for the individuals in the group (multiple intelligence). Also, it underlines the role of two fundamental concepts in current literature, related to the tour guiding practice: the emotional intelligence (Koroglou, 2012) and its key role for the procedure to prove a unique experience.

Thus, the tour guide narrative is enriched with a variety of surprises. For instance:

- Acquaintance-interviews with residents or tourists, in real-time
- Local events-rituals-activities in real-time
- Real-time music in situ
- In situ theatre in real-time

The action can also be enriched with video or audio files (podcasts), adapted to its theme. Such applications -video, audio files- were common practice during the lockdown, while they are still produced and followed by millions of viewers and listeners worldwide (ICOM, 2020). Finally, the action offers a potential promotion service (marketing) for the tourist product (place, site, monument). Without substituting, it highlights the destination in the participant's next touristic destination, in real-time, acting as the "preview" of a great movie that should not be missed.

IV. Challenges

There are a few practical challenges in the proposed action:

- Various disturbances, which may occur during the action (noise, weather conditions, people passing by) that cannot be predicted in advanced planning (e.g., time selection)
- Problems related to the quality and performance of technological means, network connection.
- Management requirements of the participants, regarding the questions, their desire for interventions.
- The need to achieve interaction between the participants and the tour guide without losing interest, clarity of narration, and adherence to the program.

These challenges, some of which may also come up during a regular tour, are placed at the managerial discretion and experience of the tour guide-animator and her/his associates, who can turn them into opportunities to raise interest by using humour (Zhang-Pearce, 2016), composure, imagination, synthetic ability and integration in the narrative. Depending on the case, they are potential "opportunities" for a more lively process through the element of surprise that any human experience in an urban, semi-urban, outdoor environment or even in a museum room, holds.

The following technological means are required for the implementation of the action:

- External film crew with high technology equipment
- Selection of digital platforms for online live-streaming
- Laptop-P.C. with high quality wi-fi access by the participants
- The physical presence of a tour guide and associates at the place of action

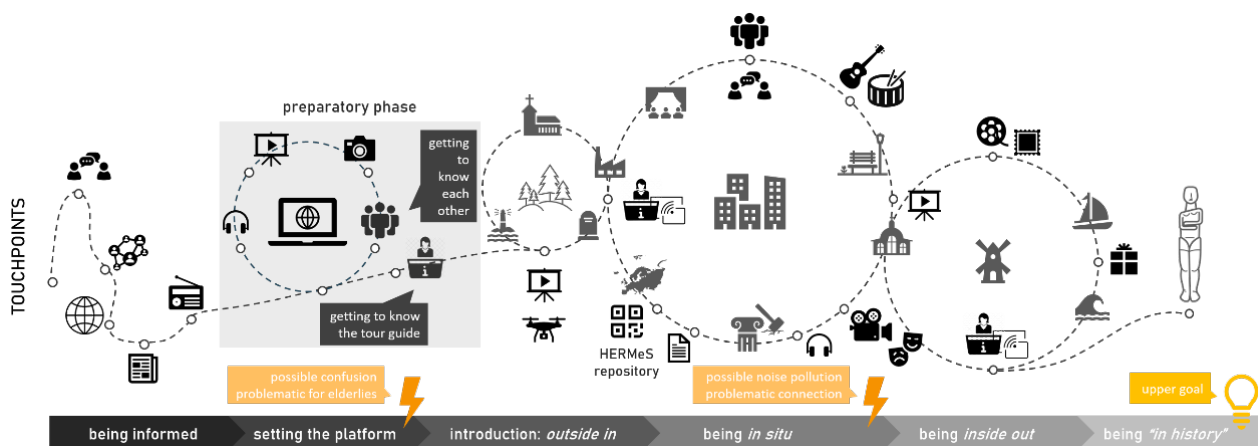
V. Sustainability

This action suggests a new medium. The creation and implementation of new tools for tourism development is essentially a request that rises from the complexity and conditions of our era, as they are formed at an unpredictably fast pace (Niewiadomski, 2020, 4-5). In the current context of the global health crisis and the mostly unknown consequences that it may bear, the development of new tools for tourism is the primary responsibility of the experts involved and a definite tourist-consumer right. The return to growth is linked to active tourism, this time more rationalised and adapted to the human scale. The rediscovery of tourism, as well as other areas of human activity, is inevitable. In this context, the planning of the action aspires to be the starting point of a new standard / moral for the touring activity.

VI. Case Study in Syros Island

Syros, an island of the Aegean bearing exceptional traits of multiculturalism and rich history from the Bronze Age until today, unlike other neighbouring islands, was not a classic touristic destination. Without officially certified tour guiding services, which -among other reasons- deprive the island of the ability to create and support branding, Syros, as the point of sustainability (Rabotić, 2010b), is an ideal place to implement such action. The case of Syros and Ermoupolis incorporates all the traits required for the planning of the "next day" guided tour. As a representative example of the possibility of implementing subtle but quality actions, it holds inexhaustible cultural wealth bearing local, Mediterranean, European, global characteristics in an impressive intertemporal built up. Moreover, the background provided with the documentation and digitisation of the architectural stock of Ermoupolis in the HERMeS online database is an excellent tool for the design of content and routes [Figure 2] (<https://hermoupolis.omeka.net/>).

Figure 2. Visitor's journey map showing the various touchpoints throughout the experience of the guided tour.



VII. Application

The promotion of the action as research and methodological tool to the community of experts and tourism professionals is a priority. At the same time, it is vital to promote the action on touristic services and social networking platforms, as an alternative tool for optimising and updating tourism services both domestically and internationally. Further, the action is intended to be a potential starting point for a debate on the future of culture and tourism in the new treaty -hence its planning followed the opening of tourism in Greece amid a health crisis.

6. Conclusions

Normality or new reality?

A country like Greece, with notable performances in the field of tourism, cannot be left out of developments in this catalytically critical period. Pioneering the creation and implementation of new methods and tools, based on products, for the "next day" of the tourism market, should be a priority of business planning for tourism and culture. The crisis, among other things, revealed pathologies of decades of mass tourism, which seemed to lack the necessary reflexes to deal with it. The "next day" for culture and tourism requires ideas and actions that will result from synergies and collaborations, on a different level, prioritising the high quality of products and services. The need for a temporary even de-globalisation of the tourism phenomenon -after the conjuncture of COVID-19- has already been pointed out in the international literature (Niewiadomski, 2020).

In this context, the starting point of the proposed action could not but based on a research frame. In any case, it is an attempt to respond to the challenge of this unprecedented conjuncture and to the new, emerging reality where flexibility will prove to be the only option. The new reality in the post-COVID era is already a regularity, in which the desire of people to visit places, to associate and communicate with other people in any way, cannot be absent.

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Eleni Chatzigrigoriou is a professional musician with MSc in Media & Film Studies. She has performed in numerous of stages and has produced awarded soundscapes for theatrical plays. She is active in international productions and worked as a venue manager in the renowned Apollon Theatre in Syros. She is a member of ‘HERMeS’ NGO, a non-profit organization that works on saving Cultural Heritage with the help of innovative ICT tools.