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Smile Tourism

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Abstract: *Shinichi Nagata, at one time a world traveler, presents here Smile Tourism, the main purpose of which was to find smiles on the faces of local people. This article presents an example of Smile Tourism in Bangladesh and highlights the importance of being open to the local culture and language(s).*

Introduction

Globalization of economy and emerging Low Cost Carriers (LCCs) make it much easier to travel around the world. However, the prevailing cultures from developed world make the cities less unique than ever before. While I experienced a long backpacking trip around the world in 2010, I felt that tourism had become more and more like business, rather than pure leisure. For example, people around world heritage sites were so busy (and noisy) selling souvenirs, and package tour plans include “cultural experiences” that is specially modified or arranged for foreign tourists in which the purpose is making money and earning tips. In such sites, the context of cultural experiences differs from how the local people do. In the worst case scenario, the smiles of the performers are often depended of the tips the audience pays. In my opinion, such smiles are less attractive than the smiles in natural contexts. The author suggests “Smile Tourism”. Smile Tourism is directed toward finding smiles on the faces of local people, and intending to support local community. The keys to success are to learn a few words in the local language, to be open minded to their culture, and to go places the most tourists would not go. The principles will be de-



scribed in detail in the next paragraph, with a memoir of the trip in Bangladesh in 2012.

An Example of Smile Tourism

It was a short trip to Bangladesh for my vacation in nine days. All I prepared before the trip were a travel guide book of Bangladesh in case I got lost and basic words in the local language (Bengali), to learn a few customs of Islam since it is the most popular religion in Bangladesh and to find destinations (mainly small towns). At that time, I did not plan to go any world heritages, since it was pure Smile Tourism! The entrance of Bangladesh was the capital city, Dhaka (population: 7,000,000). The city was full of energy. Streets were packed with people, bicycles, rickshaws, cars, and buses. The atmosphere is totally different from that of Tokyo, in which people may not always be energetic. People in Bangladesh live with full energy; otherwise they cannot survive in such ocean of people. People were nice, but I was not satisfied with it. Thus, I followed my plan to go to a small town.

I took a bus to Mymensingh (population: 400,000), a town by the river Brahmaputra. I went there because my ultimate destinations were the unique wetland called Haor and the border town of Haluagat. Both towns were not very far from Mymensingh. Arriving there, I felt very comfortable. The size of the town is very compact with definitely

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fewer people compared to Dhaka, and the accommodation was extremely cheap (it was about US\$7, I believe).

Haor is a unique geographical structure made by three major rivers in Bangladesh. Haor is a name for unique areas that are three to five meters above sea level and mostly under water in rainy season. It is a famous source of fish and birds. To go to see Haor, I needed to ride a large bus to Mohangonj for about four hours and transfer to a little jeep for another hour. After Mohangonj, the scenery became more and more lakes and rivers, and I realized that I had come to the wetland. Since it is far away from the city, I did not see any other tourists. The people in the little jeep were shy. No one, including the driver, responded to English. Passengers stared at me, but never really talked to me. I greeted the people in a manner respectful of Islam. Then the people looked surprised a bit but soon turned to me with smiles on their faces. Once the barrier was overcome, the psychological distance seemed to close a lot. I could see people smiling and laughing (I guess they were laughing at how different my clothing were, and probably my poor language). The local language and culture played an important role to induce smiles in this example. If I kept speaking English to them, I believe I could not break the barriers. At the same time, they were not used to seeing tourists. Smiles of such people are much natural than that of the people who are used to the foreign tourists in my impression.



A short bus ride north took me to Haluagat, near the border of India. At Haluagat, a few rickshaws came by offering a ride. I chose the youngest man, a boy who looked about 13 years old. He did not speak English. I negotiated the price to go to the border. We agreed and hit the road. Still he did not have a smile on his face. He got so sweaty, so I offered a bottle of water, but he declined. He did not seem to open his mind to me. Coming back from a short trip to the border, I invited him for a cup of tea. I finally noticed that the status of a rickshaw was very low. They were not welcomed by the owner of the tea shop, and the rickshaw boy was also awkward. I ignored such awkwardness, and brought a cup of tea to him (he still refused to sit inside the shop). “Dhonnobad” (“thank you” in Bengali) was the only word I had from him, but he also gave me the best smile I encountered. I was trying to be open-minded, but he did not respond for a while. If I had given up earlier, I could not have seen such a beautiful smile on his face. Keeping your mind open is another strong key for the success of Smile Tourism.

These two cases highlighted the importance of local languages and cultures, finding tourist-less place to go, and being open-minded. The essence of this all is to bring you to their eye level. For them, foreigners may seem like a visitor from outer space. They have nothing in common with you and find it hard to know how to interact with you. Even though you speak with poor pronunciation, even though it is a word or two, they take the effort and



willingness to communicate in a positive way. At last, Smile Tourism may be successful anywhere that few tourists go. Even in a big city that many tourists visit, you can find many places in which tourists almost never come. If the city has a subway system, just going to the last station can be fun.

Of course, Smile Tourism is not risk-free. You may find yourself cheated (but I assume such bad people are far less common in rural areas). Thus, if you want to try Smile Tourism, I recommend that you not look gorgeous (no famous brand handbags or no expensive-looking accessories, for example). Ultimately, minor cheating may be permissible range in Smile Tourism. If you are always careful, which means that you do not completely open your mind, the people you meet will not open your mind, ei-



ther. Allowing a bit of slack can be a significant key point to find smiles on people in front of you.

I would also recommend that women should travel with somebody. Especially in Islamic countries in which the men and women rules are so strict, foreign women sometimes become a target for the outlet of such stress.

Conclusion

The rapid lifestyle in developed countries stresses people. Finding smiles will help us realize what is important in life. However, we often forget about it. That was my motivation to travel to see smiles. My life became richer because I saw their smiles, and I hope more people will enjoy Smile Tourism.

About the author: Shinichi Nagata is currently a doctoral candidate and an associate instructor at the School of Public Health, Indiana University-Bloomington. His interests include therapeutic recreation, and he currently is studying leisure and its effect on mental health.