

Re-branding Athens and its culture through 'alternative' city tours: beyond an 'authorised heritage discourse' and towards an 'authorised crisis discourse'

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Abstract

The present paper explores the consequences of the current economic crisis for the heritage and tourism sector in Greece and more specifically for the image and the perception of Athens by visitors. This question is explored through a preliminary study of the new 'alternative' tours of the city that are offered by emerging key players in the tourism industry of Athens, i.e. communities formed by locals and start-ups. We examine the established tourism image of Greece and Athens that is centred on Classical heritage and is operated by the State, an image that prevailed for decades before the economic crisis emerged. The dominant role of the State and by extension this established tourism image have been challenged by the economic crisis. We then present some of the changes in the heritage and tourism sector outlining the new tourism image of Greece and Athens and tracing the increasing role of locals and start-ups.

The crisis is to be understood not simply as a condition that affects the viability of cultural organisations in Greece, but also as a phenomenon that is bending and shaping mentalities, structures and practices in the heritage and the tourism sector. The established Classicist stereotype that has operated for decades or even centuries in the context of an 'authorised heritage discourse' tends to be gradually replaced by a new framework of conceiving, protecting and experiencing heritage that involves many new players – an 'authorised crisis discourse.'

Keywords

Experience – heritage management – city tours – Athens – crisis.

Unpaved roads. Uncomfortable truths. Unchallenged limits. Unmeasured depths. Unfamiliar situations. Unmarked territories. Unexplored emotions. Unlimited possibilities. Have you ever found yourself in unknown circumstances? This year dive with us in uncharted waters. Unafraid. How far are you willing to go? – Uncharted Waters, TEDxAthens 2013.¹

Introduction

In the last few years, as the economic crisis has unfolded, Athens has been in the international spotlight, mostly portraying a very dark image, with soaring riots, poverty, denigration and unemployment. This image of ‘Athens in crisis’ seems to be in accordance with, and enhance, the city’s image propagated in the previous decades – with the brief intermission of the 2004 Olympics – i.e. that of an indifferent, chaotic, busy, noisy, polluted Balkan city that serves as an inevitable transit point for visitors to reach the most popular destinations in Greece, preferably a Greek island, and worth a visit only for the Acropolis and for a gyros (Greek dish) in the Plaka (the old city on the foot of the Acropolis).

The present paper explores the consequences of the current economic crisis for the heritage and tourism sector in Greece, and more specifically for the image and the perception of Athens by the visitors. This issue is explored through a study of the new ‘alternative’ tours of the city that are offered by an emerging key player in the tourism industry of Athens, i.e. a community comprised of locals and start-ups – the question is in what ways, for what reasons (beyond the obvious economic one) these tours are conducted, and whether they ultimately contribute to the rebranding of the city and its culture.

The first part of the paper (the first three sections) deals with the reality of the heritage and tourism sector in Greece before the appearance of the crisis. Emphasis is on the established, conventional tourism image of Greece and Athens, which for decades and even centuries has monopolised the imagination and the gaze of foreign visitors, and which is centred on Classicism: i.e. Athens as the quintessential example of Classical heritage and the cradle of Western civilisation. Special reference in these sections is made to the dominant role of the State, which leaves very little space for local community involvement. The second part (the remaining three sections) explores the changes in the heritage and tourism sector caused by the crisis, outlining the new tourism image of Greece and Athens. Special reference is made to the dramatically decreasing role of the State and to the increasing role the community of locals and start-ups that offer the ‘alternative’ city tours.

¹ Big Olive 2013.

The research for this article is mostly based on interviews with individuals offering these 'alternative' city tours (locals and start-ups), on articles in various foreign and Greek newspapers and websites, and also on participation in some of these city tours. During the interviews anonymity was respected (that is why no reference is made to those who made the personal comments incorporated in the text). It is important to note that in our analysis we do not attempt by any means to comment on the business initiatives of the professionals whom we interviewed or on the quality of their products / the city tours; this is irrelevant to the aim of this research. Also, we attempt to provide a preliminary report of the crisis and of up-to-date developments, and not present an overview of the crisis, since it is considered to be ongoing at the time of writing. Restrictions to the research were imposed by a lack of relevant studies in Greece.

The 'tourist gaze' at heritage

Tourism is not simply 'an aggregate of business activities,' but 'an ideological framing of history, nature, and tradition'² that is strongly based on self-perceptions projected on this dream factory of services, experiences and emotions that render meaning to this world.³ At the same time, cultural heritage makes available these experiences to tourist consumption, and has been hotly debated and criticised in recent literature as a commodified version of history and the past and even as a recent invention of the tourism industry.⁴ With the development of transportation means worldwide in the 19th and 20th centuries, this quest was transformed into mass tourism, with a 'tourist gaze' that consumes diversity⁵ and leads to a 'universal monoculture'⁶ and a new form of imperialism and colonialism.⁷

There is a multitude of players in the phenomenon of tourism. International tour operators, legislators, marketeers, curators as well as heritage interpreters or tourist guides play a significant role in the tourism industry. They all contribute to the creation and presentation of the desired image. Especially guides direct the 'tourist gaze' by interpreting heritage, producing and conveying identity, and ultimately popularising academic specialist knowledge.⁸ Therefore, it is important to examine what defines/creates tourist guides, and on what criteria.⁹

² MacCannell 1992, 1.

³ Hennig 1997; Touloupa 2010.

⁴ Ashworth 2014; Hewison 1987; Hewison 1991; Rowan & Baram 2004.

⁵ Urry 1990.

⁶ MacCannell 1992,1999.

⁷ Nash 1989.

⁸ See ICOMOS 2008; Clifford 1997.

⁹ Touloupa 2010.

The conventional tourism image of Greece: Classical Greece

The development of Classicism in Greece

Many scholars have commented on the birth and construction of the modern Greek nation-state on the basis of an imagined and Europeanised version of the ancient Classical past.¹⁰ This past and its remains comprised the ideological framework, the ‘symbolic’¹¹ and tangible capital that boosted the Greek Enlightenment, justified the claim to sovereignty and formation of the modern Greek State, and ultimately forged a national identity. The past was successfully internalised and used for the creation of a common national narrative that legitimised the existence of modern Greece and its privileged participation in European modernity.¹² In this way, Classicism ‘became an authoritative resource in modern Greek society through an externally originated mechanism of valuation,’¹³ which was then crystallised and exported abroad.

On this basis, the protection of tangible remains of a very selective past, i.e. the Classical one – frequently at the expense of other periods of the Greek history and also at the expense of contemporary culture – became a priority in the new state and integral to the Greek identity: very strict archaeological legislation about the ownership, protection and operation of archaeological sites and museums was passed¹⁴ and very selective preservation activities were conducted,¹⁵ operating in the broader context of an ‘authorised heritage discourse.’¹⁶

The aforementioned national imagination centred on Classicism also enveloped tourism in its narrative. Considering the 16th century Grand Tour as the precursor of touring, Greece already attracted Western travellers’ attention in this context. This ‘elite social group organised around the quest for knowledge, culture and cross-cultural intermingling’¹⁷ – a quest that also extended to romantic sites of an ancient, intact and ‘authentic’ past, and reaffirmed at the same time the superiority of Western colonial tastes and practices.

Finally, in the 20th century, as the novel and economically promising tourism industry emerged, culture and antiquities were incorporated in an organised scheme. More specifically, in 1914 the Office of Foreigners and Exhibitions was

¹⁰ Herzfeld 1986; Lowenthal 1988; Shanks 1996; Kotsakis 1998; Calotychos 2003; Hamilakis & Yalouri 1996; Yalouri 2001; Hamilakis 2007; Hamilakis 2003; Mouliou 1996.

¹¹ Hamilakis & Yalouri 1996.

¹² Hamilakis 2003.

¹³ Hamilakis & Yalouri 1996, 121.

¹⁴ For a review see Yalouri 2001, 34-48.

¹⁵ See Kaftantzoglou 2001; Gratziou 2008; Nikolakakis 2013.

¹⁶ Smith 2006.

¹⁷ Craik 2002, 119.

established, and in the 1930s planning and funding of infrastructure necessary to present antiquities in an easily accessible and educational manner took shape: new roads, guarded sites, new museums, official tourist guides and the formation of tourist police supervising the implementation of tourist regulations. The Greek National Tourism Organisation (henceforth cited as the GNTO) was also founded, to become the overarching institution that was to define tourism policymaking and strategy for the decades to come and primarily in the post-War era. The activities of the GNTO were multifaceted, including the following: regulation of tourism activity through licensing and overseeing, construction of luxurious accommodation (the Xenia chain of hotels) in major tourist attractions, operation of casinos, landscaping and opening of offices abroad for tourism promotion and public relations. In the 1960s, transportation and travel were greatly facilitated with the formation of a national air carrier, i.e. Olympic Airways, and the introduction of chartered flights and subsequently mass tourism.¹⁸

Heritage constituted the cornerstone of these early efforts to create a public tourism image and product of Greece, exploiting the romantic Western imagination and gaze at Greece as the continuation of a glorious past as well as the solid Classical education of the tourists to Greece who came primarily from the West. The Greek landscape, sea, sun, islands, and local customs also came to contribute significantly to the creation of this unique image and product of Greece that was centred on heritage. However, as mass tourism became an essential part of the Greek economy in the 1980s, Greece came to be perceived primarily as the ideal summer destination product comprised of the so-called '4 S's: Sea, Sun, Sand and Sex,' with a grain of heritage.¹⁹ A powerful stereotype was born, which was to last until the present day.

The dominant role of the State

The Greek State has had a dominant role both in the heritage and tourism sector. As far as the heritage sector is concerned, the role of the State is well illustrated in the constitution and the archaeological legislation. The State, through the Ministry of Culture, is the exclusive owner and guardian of antiquities and conducts and supervises the process of their excavation, conservation, protection, interpretation, and funding. The Ministry of Culture is centrally administrated and decisions are hardly ever made on a local level – nor do they include the involvement of local communities in the decision-making process. The authoritative role of the State is projected through the authorised voice of the archaeologists (the 'experts') and the

¹⁸ See Vlachos 2016.

¹⁹ Bonarou 2012, 294.

Central Archaeological Council in the Ministry of Culture.²⁰ However, there is still strong political involvement in the decision-making process, given the fact that any decision made by the archaeologists and the Central Archaeological Council is ultimately subject to approval from the Minister of Culture, who is usually a short-term political appointee.²¹

Tourism today constitutes 15-20% of the Greek Gross National Product; it has contributed 12 times as much in the last 20 years to the country's economic development compared to the industrial sector and it has also had a protagonistic role in the even distribution of income in the periphery, more than any other activity of the Greek economy.²² Tourism activity is regulated by the Ministry of Tourism, which operates independently or occasionally as part of other Ministries. The GNTO was eventually incorporated in the Ministry of Tourism and was responsible for promoting Greece as a tourist destination with dozens of offices abroad, licensing accommodation businesses and Greek tour agencies, but also training tourism professionals in this important service industry. Regarding the interpretation of heritage, strict legislation determined the required training and licensing by the GNTO of official tourist guides to interpret Greek heritage.²³ All this was regulated and supervised by a robust and centralised state authority that used state resources (e.g. archaeologists, historians, or other university professors, public funding and buildings). There was also a special tourist police, supervising the implementation of tourist regulations. In this way, the Greek state legislated and validated the truly authentic and legally valid heritage interpretation.

In the last two decades, however, the State presented an ambivalent attitude towards tourism. As new competitive markets – such as Turkey, Spain, and Croatia – appeared and globalisation marched on, the Ministry of Tourism made an effort to redefine itself and the Greek tourist product in a shifting world. These administrative and structural changes in the Ministry also resulted to an impressive number of changes in logos, inconsistent marketing strategy, advertising and branding of Greece and a remarkable inconsistency of statistical data collection.²⁴

The conventional tourism image of Athens: Classical Athens

Athens was among the first areas to be developed within the framework of the Classicist model. Being the capital of Greece, having the crown jewel of Greek antiquities, i.e. the Acropolis, serving as a transit point to the islands and equipped

²⁰ Hamilakis 2007, 35-56.

²¹ For museums, see Poullos & Touloupa in print.

²² Bonarou 2012, 288.

²³ Greek Government Law 710/1977.

²⁴ Bonarou 2012, 281-292.

with a coastline of beaches, the area of Athens became a priority in the state planning of tourism as early as the 1950s.²⁵

In this context, an orchestrated series of excavations, landscaping interventions, as well as cultural events in the area surrounding the Acropolis, formed the official tourism façade of Athens: on the one hand, the Acropolis, the Agora, the Roman Forum, the Philopappos and Pnyx Hills, the Roman Herodeion, and, on the other hand, the Plaka (i.e. the old city of Athens at the foot of the Acropolis) with flea markets, tavernas, Greek folk music, neoclassical architecture and narrow streets, and the Athens Festival (soon to become the definitive cultural event for the city). This developed into a successful mix of the following elements: high culture, i.e. Athens as the cradle of Western civilisation and ancient theatre; and entertainment, i.e. food and music, accompanied by the habit of breaking plates and having fun, as portrayed in a number of films such as 'Never on Sunday' and 'Zorba the Greek,' which defined the Greek psyche for the foreign visitor.

This mixture made for a successful tourist product to be sold for the decades to come. The standard and exclusive sightseeing tour offered to tourists since the 1950s consisted of the following elements: a visit to the Acropolis and the National Archaeological Museum, a walking tour to the tourist souvenir shops and the restaurants of the Plaka, a bus sightseeing city tour of neoclassical-style buildings, Roman ruins, a fully restored ancient marble stadium and the House of Parliament and, until 2002, a 'Sound and Light' show about the Persian Wars of the Classical era. The alternative to this was a drive along the coast of Athens to Cape Sounio, for a romantic view by yet another Classical temple. The area of the Plaka was at that time supposed to offer an alternative tour, presenting a well-curated window to the modern city and lifestyle and an opportunity to interact with the locals – i.e. shop-owners and waiters well-versed in foreign languages.

Even in recent years, when the Greek state was preparing to welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors for the 2004 Olympics, the most definitive urban interventions were realised in the immediate vicinity of the Acropolis. The most significant project was the construction of the (New) Acropolis Museum (opened in 2009), i.e. another public archaeological museum to be added to the several existing ones, while still in 2015 the city does not operate a public museum of contemporary/modern art. The second major project was the realisation of a pedestrian way that circles the foot of the Acropolis hill, connects the two ends of the Plaka and leads to Gazi (i.e. a former industrial area currently operating as an alternative nightlife spot). This was part of a larger urban project that aimed at the unification of the archaeological sites in Athens and the revitalisation of the city centre, a project that has now been abandoned following the dissolution of

²⁵ See Nikolakakis in this volume.

the relevant state service as part of the recent austerity measures. The tourist image of Athens was always centred at and around the Acropolis on a spatial, temporal as well as imaginative level. This classical stereotype of Athens, inextricably linked to the birth of the modern Greek nation state and the construction of the national past, monopolised for decades, or even for centuries, the imagination and the gaze of tourists. It also operated in the broader context of ‘authorised heritage discourse’:²⁶ Athens as the quintessential example of Classical heritage and the cradle of the Western civilisation (see Figures 1 and 2).

Towards a new approach to tourism: the quest for individual genuine ‘experiences’

Tourist preferences have evolved over time, from mass tourism trends towards a quest for individual, ‘alternative,’ genuine ‘experiences,’ in a broader post-modern context (see Figure 3).²⁷

Locality plays a remarkable role in this quest for individual genuine everyday-life ‘experience.’ Locality is perceived as lacking the pretentiousness of the authoritative mainstream narrative and places the tourist in a more interactive and genuine position – the ‘local’ represents the personal and authentic voice. Locality also has the value of an intimate first-hand friendly encounter with people a tourist would have never met otherwise, especially in large groups. Finally, for a traveler who has a limited amount of time to spend, getting in touch with a local is also a valuable shortcut to the real life of a place (see Figure 4).

As tourist preferences diversified and many more tour options based on the above model started being offered abroad, Athens appeared more and more limited and uninteresting – attached to a familiar and mainstream glorious Classical past ‘frozen’ in time – especially to those visitors with limited or no interest in antiquities, or those with more sophisticated tastes. The conventional tourist image of Athens, centred on Classicism, seems to no longer be in the position to satisfy the tourist quest for authentic ‘experiences.’ The city needed a new image, but neither the state nor the city authorities had a consistent strategy on this.

The need for a new image became imperative especially after the violent events during demonstrations in late 2008 and the economic crisis turmoil that unfolded. During this period, the international media drew a very dark image of Athens and of Greece in general – an image that had to be reversed.

²⁶ Smith 2006.

²⁷ On the concept of ‘experiences’ and the ‘experience model,’ see Poullos 2015b; Poullos, Nastou & Kourgiannidis in this volume; Poullos & Senteri in this volume.



Figure 1. GNTA advertisement in 1967, featuring the temple of Athena Nike at the Acropolis (photo: © EOT archive)



GREECE A MASTERPIECE YOU CAN AFFORD




Poseidon Temple in Sounio, Athens.

5000 years of culture was all that was needed for the arts and the human mind's achievements to flourish. From the Minoan palaces and the Parthenon to Archimedes' "eureka" and the masterpieces of Byzantium... Greek civilisation has remained unchanged throughout the centuries.

www.visitgreece.gr

MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND TOURISM - GREEK NATIONAL TOURISM ORGANISATION



Figure 2. GNT0 advertisement in 2010, featuring the temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounio (photo: © GNT0 archive)



Figure 3. Tourists posing next to someone dressed as an ancient Spartan, who collects money for having his photo taken, on the main tourist path to the entrance of the Acropolis (photo: Smaragda Touloupa, 2014)



Figure 4. Dopios
(photo: screenshot from <http://www.welcomepickups.com>, 2015)

Towards a new tourism image of Greece at times of crisis

The current crisis is not exclusively a Greek but a global issue, rooted in socio-economic changes on an international level and having a much broader, international, relevance. Greece, however, has had the dramatic privilege of experiencing the crisis in a harsh and abrupt way. More specifically, the current crisis in Greece began in late 2008 – it was then that the Greek government started imposing austerity measures throughout the public sector. In April 2010, the then newly-elected government publicly announced the precise magnitude of the country's debt (over € 300 billion) and resorted to the financial support of the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank – the so-called 'troika.' These organisations decided to grant a loan of € 110 billion (which increased in subsequent years) on the condition that the Greek government would implement very strict austerity measures.

As a consequence, there were major cuts in the state budget funds, especially in the already underfunded cultural sector. Many sites and museums had to close or suppress their opening hours.²⁸ Strikes happened at great frequency, poverty and unemployment soared and so did social unrest. As a result, the numbers of visitors declined rapidly especially after 2010. Athens was considered unsafe and violent.²⁹

The economic crisis, the high level of unemployment and pressure by the troika to downsize the public sector and the expenditure, privatise, deregulate professions and create an uninhibited circulation of labour in order to lower cost, caused severe structural and administrative changes in the public sector. As a consequence, the role of the state was diminished³⁰. More specifically, in the heritage sector, the new law on the management of public museums and the organisation of museum activities leaves space for private companies to intervene.³¹ Private investment in new city planning proposals (e.g. 'Rethink Athens') or heritage management plans (e.g. the sites of Brauron and Kerameikos) developed by the funding sources were welcome by the State and were publicly announced without prior consultation with the relevant authorised services of the State/Ministries.³²

In the tourism sector, the Ministry of Tourism tried to pass a highly controversial bill for uninhibited real estate 'development' along the Greek coastline.³³ The services in the Ministry that authorised and supervised the implementation of the law gradually closed down or were downsized. For example, in the area of Athens,

²⁸ See Poullos & Touloupa in print.

²⁹ Pers. comm. travel agents.

³⁰ See Touloupa 2015.

³¹ Greek Government Presidential Decree 28-8-2014.

³² Both plans were stopped recently: pers. comm. Ministry of Culture.

³³ Ministry of Finance 2014.

i.e. a tourist hub for millions of people every year, there was a staff of only two tourist police in 2014 and only for the high season which lasts six months.³⁴ The role of the GNTTO was disputed because of corruption and a high budget and slowly receded. The licensing of tour agencies and tourist accommodation was simplified considerably and as a result these services were closed down and the licensing procedures became simplified and expedited.

The Professional Tourist Educational Organisation also closed down, as well as many of its schools, including the ones licensing tourist guides after two and a half years of studies. In the last case, an expedited two-month course replaced them. These training courses are offered by archaeological departments of Greek Universities to their own graduates (in history, art history, archaeology, and ethnography), giving the opportunity to graduates of faculties with high unemployment rate to work in tourism as guides. The courses do not focus on the operation, management and needs in the tourism industry, nor its developments (e.g. the quest for individual genuine experiences in the post-modern context: see above). Therefore, they prove rather short of meeting the new tourism trends and of distancing themselves from the Classicist and academic model.³⁵ A large number of graduates find it difficult to find a job; even though the emerging start-ups seek to hire them, in many cases they do not find them – nor the 'old-school' guides – sufficiently skilled to cover the new tourism needs.³⁶

Towards a new tourism image of Athens at times of crisis: the increasing role of the local community

As Athens has been undergoing fast changes during the crisis, many new initiatives developed by Non-Government Organisations and citizens' groups emerged. These initiatives aimed at discussing the social problems of the city, organising activities and being proactive in any way they could: cleaning dirty areas, helping homeless people, painting schools and walls, revitalising run-down areas, having street events and also giving free tours on the social history of the city and the everyday life of the Athenians. Architects, artists, activists, writers, art historians, journalists, historians and hobbyists were systematically involved in these initiatives and tours, in an effort to make the city known to its citizens, to raise awareness about social issues and achieve participation in community initiatives: e.g. 'Atenistas', 'Kathe Savvato stin Athina' (Every Saturday in Athens), 'Mamades sto dro' (Moms in the street), 'Schedia' (Raft) magazine (i.e. the equivalent of

³⁴ Pers. comm. Athens Tourist Guides Association.

³⁵ Pers. comm. teaching staff, University of Athens.

³⁶ Pers. comm. travel agent.



Figure 5. Taxi drivers outside the Temple of Olympian Zeus who – illegally – try to convince passing tourists to buy their tours by showing them photos from an Athens guidebook (photo: Smaragda Touloupa, 2015)

the Big Issue), tours led by former homeless people and ‘Alternative Tours of Athens’ comprised of activists. All these citizens’ groups and individuals became unofficial guides and reinterpreted the city in their own contemporary terms and with a completely different focus.

At the same time, as the crisis has caused a rapid increase of unemployment, reaching a record of 28% in early 2014 and 50% among young qualified people, many professionals were looking for ways out of stagnation. In this context, tourism presented a business opportunity, since it can entail the implementation of variable skills ranging from architecture, history, marketing and IT to driving a car, speaking a foreign language, cooking or even being a charismatic performer.

Taxi drivers were among the first to launch websites and offer private city tours to cruise-ship or large hotel clientele and individuals who visit on their own (see Figure 5). Another group that started offering city tours consisted of small travel agencies, mostly start-ups founded by young Greek professionals who did not necessarily have a background or experience in tourism. A wide range of tours emerged that offered the excitement of an activity (e.g. Segway and bicycle tours) or experience-based tours like food tours, walking tours, shopping tours, architecture tours, cooking tours, visiting families, gay tours, graffiti tours and finally

excavation tours emerged. It is important to note that the majority of these tours are modelled on similar trends and city tour products abroad. Also, some of these tours (such as food, walking, and shopping tours) had appeared in Greece already before the crisis but were the product of customised planning and were considered specialised in addressing a very selective and limited customer group; the difference now is that they are offered on a much larger scale as a standardised product and marketed under a philosophy and label of 'alternative,' 'new' and 'authentic' experience.

The birth of these start-ups was encouraged by a series of changes in the tourism industry networks. First, internet has fundamentally changed the conventional methods of booking tours and advertising, has created direct channels of communication with consumers and has rendered the latter more autonomous in their planning, as well as powerful – e.g. immediate feedback and tour reviews in websites like 'Trip Advisor.' Second, the emergence of 'city breaks' has allowed for urban spaces to become an attraction in their own right for shorter or longer periods of time. Third, the young professionals have been up to date with similar trends and city tour products abroad.

At the same time, these new professionals in tourism describe their need to actively portray a more positive image of Greece and Athens towards the foreigners/tourists – in connection to the current crisis, and in general – as a motivating force. Indicatively, a travel agent interviewed, said: 'I wish to debunk the negative image, also on a personal level; to convert the disadvantage into an advantage, the ugly block of apartments into historical information... We should have the No. 1 cultural product as a country.'³⁷ And: 'We want to show the good side of the country, natural attractions but also culture filtered through our eyes; bouzouki [a traditional Greek musical instrument] music is also culture.'³⁸ In a similar context, a taxi driver said he wishes to change visitors' opinion about the crisis, that 'we are not only capable of breaking plates, that we are very creative and intelligent,' viewing himself as part of a 'restart' movement in Greece.

These new travel agents tend to share certain characteristics. More specifically, they use brand names and slogans that attempt to distinguish them from the conventional tourism image and services and comply with the tourist quest for individual genuine 'experiences.' The brand names and logos are comprised of words such as 'experience', 'local', 'real', 'insider', 'off the beaten track' or 'off the tourist trail', 'alternative', 'new', 'discover', 'hands on' (see Figures 3 and 7). For example, some of the brand names are 'Athens Insiders', 'Alternative Tours of Athens', 'Discover Greek Culture' and 'Alternative Athens.' As characteristically

³⁷ Pers. comm. travel agent.

³⁸ Pers. comm. travel agent.

noted, ‘alternative’ means to step away from the tourist stereotypes’.³⁹ It is quite characteristic that the Greek word for local, ‘dopios,’ has become the brand name of a company that offers some kind of interaction with locals in the form of a tour – from a motorcycle ride to areas where Athenians hang out, to a personalised transfer from the airport to your hotel with a local’s car (see Figure 6). The branding was so successful that by now ‘Dopios’ is active in more than thirty countries and in dozens of cities and locations. Another characteristic example of a walking tour with a strong emphasis on the value of locality is called ‘This is My Athens,’ and it is offered for free by a local volunteer through a programme launched by the Municipality of Athens and its Conventions and Visitors Bureau and supported by the Ministry of Tourism (Figure 7). Ironically enough, the ‘locals’ who offer such walks are frequently foreigners who are here for personal or study reasons.

Moreover, the entrepreneurs of the new city tours challenge the dominant role of the State in the heritage and tourism industry. They view themselves as a substitute for the State in designing and offering innovative tourist products and bear no connection to the State, not even to the Municipality of Athens. ‘We are doing what the state claims to do’⁴⁰ and ‘institutions create barriers’.⁴¹ Moving further, the entrepreneurs challenge the interpretation of heritage provided by state-licensed tourist guides as a stereotypical narrative that is ‘canned’, impersonal, full of detailed and quite unnecessary information and rather expensive. Licensed guides are also viewed as interpreters who are specialised in archaeological and historical knowledge – fashioned after the Classicist model – which is not needed in a food or street art tour and for which the visitors do not care. The taxi driver whom we interviewed does the tour himself, because, as he said, ‘contrary to my tour, tourist guides do a urine chemical analysis [i.e. an extreme metaphor for an overload of dry over-specialised information].’⁴² A characteristic event also occurred during a graffiti tour: the guide was showing and commenting on the graffiti on the surrounding wall of the archaeological site of Kerameikos (i.e. a most important archaeological site in the centre of Athens) and did not even refer to the site itself; when we asked him about this, he gave an immediate response: ‘first, I am not interested in the site; second, the tourists-participants of the tour are not interested in the site either; third, I do not know the site, since I am not an archaeologist; and fourth, I focus exclusively on my job, i.e. the graffiti tour.’⁴³

³⁹ Pers. comm. travel agent.

⁴⁰ Pers. comm. travel agent.

⁴¹ Pers. comm. travel agent.

⁴² Pers. comm. taxi driver.

⁴³ Pers. comm. graffiti artist.



Figure 6. Advertisement 'Dopios'
(photo: screenshot from <https://www.dopios.com>, 2015)



Figure 7. Advertisement of the 'This is my Athens' tours offered by the municipality of Athens
(photo: Smaragda Touloupa, 2015)

There are even cases in which the operation of entrepreneurs tends to raise legal issues. First, they sometimes use unauthorised (i.e. illegal according to the current legislation in Greece) interpreters as guides and build their tours upon the interests and personality of these interpreters. Second, the concept of excavation tours offered by these entrepreneurs is problematic. Specifically, within the context of a well determined and guarded ‘authorised heritage narrative,’ the law states that no one else but archaeologists (the ‘experts’ or people carefully selected and trained in archaeology) should have access to an excavation. In a recent archaeological conference, a group of archaeologists reacted to the idea of having non-expert visitors walking into an excavation area by using the metaphor of non-doctors walking into a surgery room.⁴⁴ Another point is that heritage is defined in the Greek Constitution as a public good and therefore cannot be turned into a commodified good for people with privileged access, e.g. affluent tourists. The Association of Greek Archaeologists as well as Members of the Parliament reacted firmly to a case of an excavation tour. Even though the specific tour package was withdrawn, such tours are still sold by other travel agencies.⁴⁵

The business model of these entrepreneurs can be described in terms of ‘WHO’ (the customer), ‘WHAT’ (the services/products) and ‘HOW’ (the way the services/products are delivered to the customer) as follows:

‘WHO’ are tourists who seek individual genuine ‘experiences’ and are inquisitive. They are tired of listening to the history of Athens: they might do the archaeological tour of the city, but at the same time want to know about the present and ‘live it for themselves’;⁴⁶ they seek multiple interpretations, and at the same time ask for some fun. ‘They do not want to gain information; they want to see the city as we, the local citizens, live it on a daily basis... How the Athenians live, what they eat, how they are different, how they see the world... Curiosity is the common characteristic of our clientele.’⁴⁷ ‘They want a post-modern narrative, with multiple interpretations, in a form of dialogue.’⁴⁸ All of the travel agents made clear that they address both Greek and foreign visitors in the same way.

‘WHAT’ is not simply the knowledge about the city, but a hands-on experience led by locals. The start-ups in particular continually design new tours based on this local experience of the city: they started introducing tour models from abroad (such as food and bicycle tours), but then came up with completely new tours exploiting the city’s distinctive characteristics (such as graffiti tours, home-cooked meals at local houses, excavation sites, nightlife and smaller museums).

⁴⁴ Public discussion comment.

⁴⁵ Pers. comm. travel agent.

⁴⁶ Pers. comm. travel agent.

⁴⁷ Pers. comm. travel agent.

⁴⁸ Pers. comm. travel agent.

Places off the beaten track are the key to success. The taxi driver, besides some nice photogenic stops, takes his clients to where he eats 'so that they eat food like my mother's'.⁴⁹

'HOW': through a personal and informal connection with the tourists. Interaction is fundamental, as well as an extrovert friendly attitude. The taxi driver said 'I feel as if going out with friends and I keep them good company. I also have five thousand songs in my playlist and dance with them; it is as if I am not working'. And he adds: 'even if I make some mistakes [in terms of the accuracy of historical information], the clients would not really mind as long as they have good company and are happy'.⁵⁰ All the interviewees place an emphasis on the feeling of 'being with friends' and informal interaction. There is a paradox, however, to note: all interpreters follow a very specific, well-prepared and well-tested script in their tours – it may be informal, interactive and casual, but there is always one.⁵¹ In an attempt to comply with the script, the taxi driver has also tried to convince the hotel he collaborates with to allow him not to wear a tie to avoid being too formal and creating a distance with his clients.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that crisis can instigate change in trends in the tourism and heritage sector and can contribute to their evolution. More specifically, tourism industry is by definition a meeting ground where interactions take place and experiences are created and marketed to a lesser or a greater degree: a concept (e.g. ancient Athens) is no longer sufficient, but hands-on experiences have now become a must (e.g. men dressed as Spartan soldiers, see Figure 3). This trend has made its appearance in approximately the last two decades, as mass tourism consumes its product by enabling thousands of people to have the same 'unique' experience. In the context of designing and offering these 'unique' experiences in a fast-changing world of instant communication, reality shows and social media, personal life is exposed in variable ways, and the boundaries between private and public space are blurred. The crisis enhances this blurring of the boundaries between private and public space, by making people more willing to allow their personal life to become commercialised: the unemployed troubled citizens of Athens and present day tourism players admitted that 'we are surfing on the trends of time',⁵² and that 'we turn our hobby [i.e. having local interaction while travelling]

⁴⁹ Pers. comm. taxi driver.

⁵⁰ Pers. comm. taxi driver.

⁵¹ On the 'script' as part of the 'experience model', see Poullos, Nastou & Kourgiannidis in current volume.

⁵² Pers. comm. travel agent.

into a profession because of the crisis.⁵³ A series of examples from Athens illustrate this point: people rent out their personal space (e.g. Airbnb), use their private cars to offer taxi services (e.g. Uber) or transfer strangers/visitors from the airport to their hotels pretending to be their friends (e.g. Dopios welcome pick-ups). In this way, what until recently was private and intimate – be it a hobby, a passion or an utterly personal activity – has now acquired a market value and is out there for sale – not necessarily for the right fee.

The crisis contributes to the further consideration of the roles of the public and the private sector in the tourism industry. On the one hand, the role of the state is decreasing. The state-controlled conventional model based on Classicism has clearly become out-of-date, and thus the State could not adjust its tourist product to the changing trends and even lagged behind in adapting its legislation, leaving many gray and black areas (especially in taxation for independent professionals who are contracted in certain new types of tours and for whom there is no framework yet, leading to an important tax loss). The state-licensed guides, trained and still operating within this Classicist model, are considered out-of-date. On the other hand, the role of the private sector is increasing. A large part of society, almost everyone in fact, can potentially be an interpreter and seek a role in the tourism industry, as long as they are sociable and speak a language well: unemployed people, resident aliens, academics, fashionistas, artists, highly skilled people or simply charming performers. Moreover, major monopolies of gigantic tour operators have taken over the lucrative tourist market and control the tourist product globally moving tourists in the millions, while disenfranchising their destinations ('all-inclusive' hotels, eye-soaring cruise ships, pollution, overwhelming large scale hotel developments abandoned when trends change, etc.) and paying no dues.⁵⁴ On this basis, in the effort to use heritage for development should we let it be 'a hostage to the fortune of a fashion-driven demand?'⁵⁵ The analysis of crisis in Greece and Athens raises a series of issues: should the debunking of the state-controlled Classicist model lead to the debunking altogether of the need for central/state strategic long term planning? What is the new image of Athens to create and portray and who are the tourists we want to attract? More importantly, how do we secure a high and stable standard of quality, how do we truly benefit on a local level without a crisis-justified exploitation, and how or whether can the State regulate this?

The conclusions of this research tend to move even further. It is shown that the crisis is to be understood not simply as a condition that affects, even in a dramatic

⁵³ Pers. comm. travel agent.

⁵⁴ Jenkins 2014.

⁵⁵ Ashworth 2014, 15.

way, the survival of cultural organisations in Greece,⁵⁶ but as a phenomenon that is bending and shaping mentalities, structures and practices in the heritage and the tourism sector. The established Classicist stereotype, which has operated in the context of an 'authorised heritage discourse',⁵⁷ which has dominated the tourism and heritage sector throughout the history of Greece and which has managed to survive and thrive in spite of the strong changes and challenges that have taken place over time,⁵⁸ is now challenged for the first time and tends to be gradually replaced by a new framework of conceiving, protecting and experiencing heritage – an 'authorised crisis discourse.' This development in Greece seems to be compatible with certain current developments in the heritage sector on an international level, namely the increasing recognition of 'emerging modes and technologies for accessing and experiencing heritage' that embrace a much broader spectrum of heritage places and practices, including cases of re-enactment of heritage or fictitious heritage as well as commercial uses of heritage.⁵⁹ On this basis, and given that the crisis is not a Greek but an international issue, another question raised is whether the aforementioned 'authorised crisis discourse' could be of relevance also outside Greece and where can such a discourse lead us.

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⁵⁶ Poullos & Touloupa in print.

⁵⁷ Smith 2006.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Poullos 2014.

⁵⁹ Nara+20 Document: ICOMOS Japan 2014; see also Poullos 2015a.

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