

TOURISM AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

Did you hear that during the entire summer of 2003 Via Via had a regular customer who was almost daily being signaled around the place? It was neither a new expat living and working in the neighborhood nor one of those tourists who seem to be stuck in Jogja for a longer period of time. No, it was simply a socio-cultural anthropologist, one of these social scientists who studies humans, human behavior, and human activities in their socio-cultural context.

It's certainly not the first time that an anthropologist frequents Via Via. Many international students and scholars doing research in Jogja like to take a break from their work and soon discover that Via Via is an excellent place to have a relaxing time, meet cool people, and have interesting discussions. This time, however, the anthropologist was after something different. He came all the way from the U.S.A. in order to study the dynamics of Via Via itself.

Thousands of researchers worldwide study tourism. Unfortunately, the stress is all too often on statistics and charts. Usually, there is no time to listen to the people involved in and affected by tourism activities. Anthropology, with its methodology of long-term fieldwork, provides an excellent way to fill the gap. An anthropologist who studies tourism takes his or her time to listen to the stories of everybody involved in or affected by tourism, trying to understand and make sense of the different points of view. This also involves joining tours, being a tourist among other tourists, and observing the many interactions that take place between tourists, guides, and other people.

But why study Via Via in particular? Because Via Via is trying to bring certain changes to the world of tourism, and change always invites anthropologists to ask many questions. How has Via Via grown over the years? What is left over from the early idealism? What have the people involved in the project learned? How well is Via Via embedded in its local socio-cultural context? What does it mean to be part of a transnational network of traveler bars? How well is the network used to support and inform one another?

The team of Via Via in Jogja in particular is trying to develop an alternative view on and practice of tourism and it is worthwhile researching what this alternative is based on and how well it fits the Jogja context. As most of you know, that context is extremely fragile. The Bali bomb blast in 2002 and the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003 have had major negative impacts on the region's tourism. The Bali bomb indirectly affected Jogja because Bali is one of the main entry gates for in-bound tourism. The other entry gate, the international airport of Solo, was affected by SARS, as many flights coming from SARS-infected Singapore the major regional connection hub were cancelled. Several other incidents stimulated tourists to keep away from Indonesia.

It's interesting to see how Via Via is trying to use tourism as a tool to combat false information and stereotyping. For example, in response to the increasingly negative Western imaging of Islam after September 11 and the Bali bomb blast, the Via Via team consisting of both Muslims and Christians developed a religious

tour, showing tourists Jogja's religious plurality and ethnic diversity. The tour, unique in the city, includes visits to different places which have a religious meaning for Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists and Kejawen (Javanese spiritualists).

Thanks to connections with the local art scene, Via Via regularly hosts art exhibitions of young artists and financially supports modern art projects. In the summer of 2003, for example, Via Via was actively involved in organizing an international art exchange between a group of American mural painters and a group of young artists from Jogja. The bar recently also started offering a mural tour, visiting various mural paintings around the city and explaining their socio-political significance. These initiatives help to counter the image among tourists that everything in Jogja is about heritage and tradition.

Another interesting phenomenon for an anthropologist to study is the popularity of the so-called village tours. These tours give tourists a chance to experience several aspects of the traditional Javanese daily life in the villages around Jogja: the cycle of a padi (rice field); the making of clay bricks; the working of a village school; home-industries producing local food such as tempe (fried fermented soybean cakes) and krupuk (shrimp wafers) or jamu (medicinal drinks); and craftsmen creating batik (textile designs), silverware, wayang (puppets), or other souvenirs.

Why are these tours so popular? Although certainly not all tourists visiting Jogja actually want to meet local people, often it is the human contact, the close encounter with those people, which remains strongly etched in a tourist's mind and keeps surfacing in anecdotes of their trip. Helping old village women plant rice, standing barefoot in thick mud, for example, is often reported to be one of the highlights of such a tour. Apparently, the feeling that one is actively participating in the lived local life makes these tours so exciting. But how are these tours perceived by the villagers themselves? What do they mean to them?

As you can see, anthropologists never run out of questions. It is still too early to come up with conclusions or suggestions. After all, this was only a preliminary research in order to prepare the ground for a more extensive research, planned to take place throughout 2006. If the right questions have been asked, the next visit may serve to find some of the answers...

See you all then,

Noel Salazar

Noel Salazar is a Belgian socio-cultural anthropologist, currently affiliated with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania (U.S.A.). His preliminary research in Yogyakarta is part of a larger, multi-sited project involving a similar study at the Via Via in Arusha, Tanzania, in the summer of 2004.