

# A sociological comparative reading on the aspects of the tourist phenomenon through the book *The Tourist Attraction* by Sarah Morgenthaler and the book *Letters from Lima* by Shaun Randall

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, Travel Literature has become a popular research object and functions sometimes as a historical source, sometimes as evidence of early anthropology and sometimes as a cultural testimony for the reception of the other, of the foreigner. At the same time, travel is a primordial act and has always been a source of knowledge acquisition. Thus, touring other places forms a two-way relationship between travelers and locals that operates on the forces of tourism demand and tourism supply. However, changes in life values, environmental awareness and the development of technology have created new consumption patterns. This alienated tourist wants to experience original tourist experiences and is interested in alternative forms of tourism. On the tourism supply side, the quantity of products and the quality of environmental resources are among the most critical factors in choosing a holiday destination. Capturing tourism experiences within the new context succeeding mass tourism is a challenge for comparative study. This paper attempts to study two books that comparatively capture travel experiences. The books "*The Tourist Attraction*" by Sarah Morgenthaler and "*Letters from Lima*" by Shaun Randall present, each in their own way, journeys that are part of a new and emerging form of tourism, slow tourism.

**Key-words:** Travel Literature, Alternative Forms of Tourism, Slow Tourism.

## **1. Introduction**

When survival ceased to be man's primary purpose, the need to explore the world around him and the need to escape from reality led him to travel. Travel experiences, whether they involve getting to know other places, other cultures or relaxation and entertainment, always offer long-term satisfaction and are related to one's identity. For the tourist, travel is always an escape from reality. On an individual level, it is an action that differs significantly from his actions in everyday life. While at the group level, the tourist travels with a group of people with different motivations and needs. The gained tourism experience can be related to education (learning something new), entertainment, aesthetics (environment, infrastructure) and escape, and can both influence and be influenced by the inhabitants of the destination. The satisfaction of tourists, if it goes hand in hand with the quality service provision by locals, will result in social, environmental, and economic balance because of this "transaction".

If these experiences are recorded and published, more people will have the opportunity to share them, and at the same time, a new communicative framework will be formed between people who, in their everyday lives, do not know each other but share experiences.



The journey will become knowledge or contain knowledge and, at the same time, lead to changes in attitudes and perceptions of others.

This paper is the result of a collaboration within the Sociology - Anthropology of Tourism course, in the master's degree Program in Tourism Business and Destination Management, Department of Tourism Management, University of Patras, and deals with the sociological comparison of two literary books whose main component of approach is the tourist experience. The book *The Tourist Attraction* by S. Morgenthauer is set in Alaska and highlights the experiences that the protagonists have around a particular resort. On the other hand, S. Randall's *Letters from Lima* has a more accessible spatial context and is set in several regions of Peru, creating a more complete experience for the protagonists and readers alike.

## 2. The tourism phenomenon

Tourism, as a global phenomenon, involves a complex interaction of social, economic, and environmental factors and is shaped by a multitude of factors, including individual motivations, industry practices and destination characteristics: As Crompton (1979) states, the motivations that drive tourists to travel range from seeking relaxation and escape to seeking cultural enrichment and adventure. At the same time, Leiper (1990) highlighted the complex system of relationships between tourists, host communities and the tourism industry that shapes destination experiences and sustainability efforts.

At the first level of study, tourism involves the movement of people to destinations outside their usual environment for leisure, business, or other purposes (UNWTO, 2018). This movement fuels economic growth and development and raises issues related to cultural authenticity, environmental conservation, and social equity (Hall, 2008).

Moreover, the rapid growth of mass tourism in recent decades has led to concerns about over-tourism and its detrimental effects on destination ecosystems and local communities (Gössling et al., 2020). During the tourism phenomenon over time, we can distinguish three different approaches to travel and leisure, each of which responds to different preferences and motivations of travelers. Thus, we first find mass tourism, then special interest tourism, and alternative tourism.

Mass tourism, characterized by large-scale, standardized travel experiences that meet the preferences of mainstream tourists, has been the dominant model for decades (UNWTO, 2020). It usually involves visiting popular destinations and attractions with little interaction with local culture or environment. However, its adverse impacts on destinations, such as overcrowding, environmental degradation and cultural homogenization, have led to growing interest in alternative forms of tourism (Gössling et al., 2020).

In contrast, special interest tourism focuses on niche interests, allowing travelers to delve into their passions and engage more meaningfully with destinations, promoting cultural exchange and sustainable development (Novelli et al., 2012). Alternative tourism emphasizes the principles of authenticity, community engagement and environmental stewardship (Hall, 2010). It encompasses a wide range of practices, such as ecotourism, cultural tourism, and adventure tourism, tailored to the interests of niche markets seeking immersive and meaningful experiences (Hall & Lew, 1998).

While mass tourism still dominates the global tourism industry, the rise of alternative tourism marks a shift towards more sustainable and responsible travel practices.



## 2.1. Slow Tourism

In the comparative analysis of the two travel books that will follow, slow tourism will be referenced since the authors' travels can -among other things- be included in this form of tourism.

Slow tourism, an emerging trend in the travel industry, embodies a deliberate and thoughtful approach to the destination experience that involves traveling for an extended period at a slow pace, providing the tourist with an immersive, authentic, and cultural experience (Hall & Richards, 2003). Based on sustainability principles, authenticity and connection, slow tourism encourages travelers to engage more deeply with local culture, heritage, and environment (Hall, 2010).

Slow tourism challenges the fast-paced nature of modern travel and emphasizes experiential authenticity, encouraging travelers to engage in activities that reflect the rhythms and traditions of local life (Maitland & Newman, 2019). At the same time, slow tourism supports a shift towards low-impact, immersive travel experiences that foster genuine connections between travelers and host communities (Hannam & Knox, 2010). By travelling at a slow pace, travelers can consciously connect with their places and people, understand their culture and form relationships.

Slow tourism, for example, is often thought to be related to the “slow food” movement (as is evident in the book *Letters from Lima*, where it is mentioned, for example, that 4000 different types of potatoes are produced in Peru), which emphasizes the enjoyment of local food and traditional recipes over 'fast food' and mass consumption.

As travelers increasingly seek meaningful and transformative experiences, slow tourism principles can potentially shape the future of travel in a more responsible and rewarding direction.

## 2.2. Travel Literature

In the introductory note of the book *Travel, Writing, Representation*, Chatzipanagioti-Sangmeister (2015) it is noted that “travel literature -as a historical source, as a set of thematically related but also ideologically different texts, as a field for the formation or projection of philosophical ideas, ideologies and discourses of power, as evidence of an early anthropology and as cultural evidence for the reception of the Stranger of the Other - is of considerable interest”.

Travel literature is a genre that includes narratives, essays and accounts of personal experiences related to travel. It provides a window into different cultures, landscapes, and historical periods, offering readers a virtual journey to distant lands. Travel literature often combines elements of adventure, exploration, and cultural exchange, providing insights into the human experience and the complexities of global interconnectedness.

From the travel journals of Marco Polo to the colonial accounts of explorers such as Captain James Cook, travel literature has provided valuable insights into unfamiliar regions and cultures (Pratt, 1992).

Travel literature has evolved to include various voices and perspectives in modern times. Thus, tourist or travel literature consists of books on travel impressions as well as novels. The former are written in first-person narrative as they depict actual events experienced by the author, while novels contain elements of fiction. The subjective way of writing the texts goes hand in hand with the author's knowledge and impressions of the place he or she is visiting. In each case, an authentic experience is formulated as the journey has occurred through the author's own experience or the accounts of previous travelers.



Travel books or travel texts are testimonies and historical sources. They contain the author's research and observations about the inhabitants, aspects of their daily life, customs and traditions in the places he or she has visited. They are narratives with a literary structure (illustration, dialogue, description) and aim to attract the audience's attention. It is essential to mention the journey's starting point, the experiences gained during the journey and the return home. Furthermore, a travel book differs from a travel guide in that a travel guide aims to present the place through maps, pictures, and general information. In contrast, a travel book focuses on the experiences of the author. In travel novels, the context of text development is more accessible, as the author can omit elements that do not fit the story's plot and misrepresent others. In other words, he represents the "foreign space" through his experiences and his perception of the elements that highlight or should disappear (Karagianni, 2014).

More thoroughly, the books *The Tourist Attraction* and *Letters from Lima* are both included in the travel literature as novels. As the two authors visited Alaska and Peru, respectively, they collected experiences and information about the places and their residents. Thus, they created a plot combining real and fictional elements through their own view of the world.

### 2.3. Tourism Experience

The modern tourism industry has made it a key concern to understand and enhance the tourism experience. According to Pine & Gilmore (1998), the tourism experience includes the various encounters, interactions and emotions experienced by travelers during their travels. It refers to a holistic engagement with destinations, cultures, and activities, shaping overall satisfaction and memories of the trip. At the same time, the concept of authenticity defines the tourism experience and acts as a competitive factor. Thus, authentic experiences allow travelers to connect with local communities, traditions, and landscapes, promoting a deeper appreciation and understanding of the destination (Stylidis et al., 2017).

Moreover, the tourism experience is inherently multisensory, engaging all five senses to create lasting impressions and emotions. From the aroma of local cuisine to the sounds of bustling markets and the feel of a soft sandy beach, sensory stimuli enrich and enhance the overall experience, leaving a lasting impact on travelers (Kim et al., 2017).

## 3. A synoptical reading-analysis of the books

### 3.1. *The Tourist Attraction* by Sarah Morgenthaler

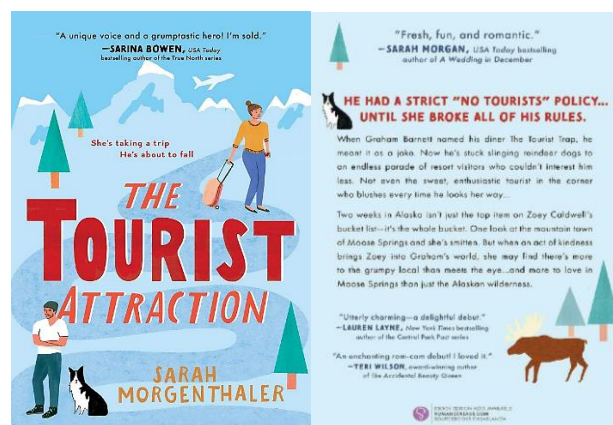


Figure 1. *The Tourist Attraction* by Sarah Morgenthaler



Through the reading of S. Morgenthaler's book, it is noted that alternative tourism (adventure, mountain and rural tourism) turns the destination into a tourist attraction providing to the host city economic prosperity. At the same time, however, a specific framework needs to be created to develop and control the number of inputs. The relationship between locals and tourists is traced through various incidents and opinions and is a point of concern for the reader-scholar.

Zoey as a tourist visits, along with her wealthy friend Lana, a tourist resort near the city of Anchorage, Alaska in order to enjoy nature and navigate the paths of its mountain ranges. While visiting the area's best-known restaurant, she meets its local owner, Graham, who has a biased view of tourists and the way they behave: "The place was one big playground for the rich, and they all seemed to find him, no matter how hard he tried to avoid them". The only reason he continues to serve them food is to make a living and to be able to practice his hobby in woodcarving.

On the other hand, as the days go by and Zoey talks to the hotel staff, she understands that the city tolerates the resort's existence because it brings a good income and adequate insurance, which local businesses cannot provide. No local is actually happy with the arrival of tourists, and even more so the economically superior. "We are a good town with good people," says the local baker, adding, "We try to be welcoming, but at some point, enough is enough".

Graham has divided locals and tourists along an imaginary line: "Us. Them". However, when Zoey enters his life, she changes his mind. He will follow her on all her excursions, even if he considers the boat that conducts the whale-watching tour insufficient in space and safety. Even if he doesn't agree with karaoke night in his shop. When Zoey says, "I'm a tourist. Oil and water, local boy", inwardly he will not agree with her opinion even though he was the first to dissociate himself. Finally, he understands through her words: "... You still take the money they put in your tip jar while spitting in their faces.", that although tourists are thorns, they are essential for the prosperity of his place. So, he agrees with the expansion of the resort that Lana bought. As long as he had Zoey by his side...

The Index of Tourism Irritation Model developed by Doxey (1975), which is based on social carrying capacity and in which predetermined feelings of locals are gradually reflected as tourism development increases, illustrates exactly the feelings of the protagonist-local in this book. According to this model, locals feel euphoric at the initial stage of forming the relationship between the local community and tourists. Then, as the number of tourists increases, the enthusiasm subsides, and the locals begin to feel apathy and irritation. At the last stage, the destination is at saturation point, locals are "annoyed" by a large number of tourists, manifesting negative behavior and opposition to tourism. The tourist is suddenly considered the main cause of all the problems faced by the destination, since more and more natural resources are used for its satisfaction (Tsartas et al., 2020).

Finally, the advertising is overrated, and the services provided (such as "special" towels, luxurious rooms, vacation packages, zip-line, ATV tours, whale or glacier tours) are in line with the demands of tourists in the resort. Horseback riding, whale watching, and extreme activities are well cared for by high-income tourists, while the rest are content with cheaper and unsafe solutions. In this particular case, the local community needs to develop adequate conditions for the reception of tourists. Lack of signage for trails outside the resort, faulty equipment, insufficient safety in forest activities. This fact alone reinforces the view that the tourist is treated only as a source of income for locals.



### 3.2. Letters from Lima by Shaun Randall

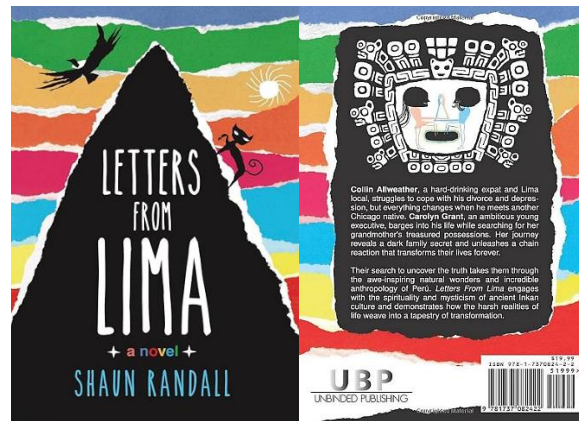


Figure 2. Letters from Lima by Shaun Randall

Through the reading of S. Randall's book, it is noted that alternative tourism (cultural, gastronomic) has not affected life in Peru, as the division of regions into rich and poor is maintained, regardless of its economic contribution to cities. The locals accept the tourist as something "new" and so the experience for both has a positive connotation. In any case, exchanging morals and perceptions makes the difference in this destination.

Carolyn visits Lima in search of her uncle, who has kept a family heirloom of her grandmother. She meets Collin at a bar, who moved to Lima years ago, and together they explore areas where Inca civilization flourished. The author presents in a realistic way, with dialogues also in Spanish, all the sights, traditional food and drinks, temples, prejudices and lifestyle of Peruvians, creating a well-structured tourist guide. At the same time, he captures both sides of the coin as an imaginary border separate developed cities from "third world countries, countless piles of rubble and garbage mixed with the densely populated apartment buildings, that in many cases were crumbling".

The most significant negative experiences suffered by tourists are criminal acts or terrorist attacks, as well as diseases that exist in less developed tourist destinations (Farmaki, 2017). This is confirmed in Randall's book, through an incident in which someone tries to steal the protagonist's bag through the open window of her car. However, her view remains this: "It's always important to enjoy the journey as much as the destination".

As the two protagonists travel in search of other relatives and secrets from Carolyn's past, Collin notices "big glass boxes—modern luxury homes" near coastal, uninhabited lands. This fact begs the following question: How can there be development in a city and a few kilometers away from it this development does not exist? And then all over again. As if a perpetual vicious circle appears wealth, poverty. The inhabitants, the infrastructure, the culture. All are different, and yet tourism affects each of them differently or not at all.

Finally, as the book is divided into two trips, one to areas around Lima and the other two areas towards Lake Titicaca, the author's love for Peru is evident, as Collin says: "This wasn't sightseeing. This was something different... It's seeing Peru's soul-stirring natural wonders... The locals call this Lima Love." Such was the author's love for this place that he decided to take up residence in Peru and document his experiences against the backdrop of Barranco. So, one last question arises for readers... Should we start planning our trip to Peru then?



### 3.3. Comparative analysis of the books

The writing style of the two authors is completely different. Morgenthaler, wanting to write down tourism in Alaska, in a small tourist resort, presents the perspective of a tourist and a local with a "romantic" approach, while Randall presents tourism in Peru, and specifically in Lima, in a "rawer" way through the perspective of a tourist who has lived many years as a local. *The Tourist Attraction* focuses on presenting the strong ideological distinction between tourists and locals, how they interact, and the economic relationship between the resort and the place. Locals are suspicious of the tourist, and the tourist, considering the trip an opportunity for entertainment, often goes too far over the edge. On the other hand, *Letters from Lima* presents life in a city dominated by drugs and crime. This reality carries away the tourist and follows the protagonist into the dark aspects of the city. Here, locals are more expressive in their relations with tourists and accept new perceptions without judging. In both books, the sociological approach focuses on the influence of tourism on interpersonal relationships. In both cases, the tourist positively influences the locals, and relationships of mutual self-improvement are created. Moreover, in the first book, rural tourism attracts the tourist of adventurous holidays, while in the second cultural tourism lures the tourist-lover of history and culture. The assimilation of the tourist in the host city is influenced in any case by the time, place, commercial dimension of the relationship and the socio-cultural characteristics of tourists (Tsartas et al., 2020).

### 4. A brief qualitative research

In order to understand both the motives of writing the two books and the creative framework of the authors regarding the tourist phenomenon and its social dimensions, semi-structured interviews were conducted through messages on the Instagram application. The questions were open-ended and the research that was carried out was qualitative. The analysis aims to present the data that will emerge from the interviews on a white paper, namely, how a traveler chooses to record the feelings and experiences gained from his trip. To what extent did this travel experience affect him/her, that created the need to share his/her thoughts and experiences with a broad audience - the readers of his/her novel?

This method of data collection was chosen because qualitative research focuses on describing and understanding the uniqueness of the tourist experience and is able to record the experiences of the two authors. The subjective response is a given, so gathering various information is necessary. Open-ended questions contribute to this direction, while statistical data are unnecessary in research results (Filia & Pourkos, 2015). This method corresponds to the nature of the phenomenon being studied – that is, relaxation is a quality experience for the individual. The qualitative approach of the research concerns words, images, and representations through the study of small sets of subjects and techniques derived from social psychology (Anthony, 2021). Finally, the security and confidentiality of the answers are always taken into account, and this was made clear to both authors before the interviews were conducted.

The first communication for the interview with author Sarah Morgenthaler took place via email with her agent Sara Megibow on 28/10/2023, who assured me that the author would be available in early 2024. On 9/11/2023 the author herself replied to my message on the Instagram application, that because she studied geology, she needed to learn more about the tourism sector. However, I pointed out to her that the research would be mainly focused on her book, so no special knowledge was needed about this particular industry. On 21/12/2023 the 6 questions were sent via messages and on 26/12/2023 the author replied that she will



look at them and answer me soon. On 10/1/2024 I received her replies. According to her, nature is the main motivation for making a trip, she chooses geologically beautiful destinations and considers that even the backyard of your house has secrets worth discovering. At the same time, the companionship and joy she feels when carrying out activities, such as climbing, with her friends is considered to be the best experience one gets from a trip.

The first communication for the interview with author Shaun Randall took place via messages on the Instagram app on 10/11/2023. He replied that he would happily answer my questions, which I sent him on 21/12/2023. On 10/01/2024, I sent a reminder to the author, and he replied that I would probably receive my answers the next day. On 16/01/2024, as the author did not contact me again, I sent him a message about whether he finally had time to answer my questions and if he did not have to simply not include his part of the interview in the research. Finally, on 17/01/2024 I received his answers. According to the author, although cultures differ, we all have the same hope, the same fears. Travel is a new way of seeing the world and a driving force for self-improvement. He believes that when you visit a destination you need to disconnect from your permanent residence and immerse yourself in this new reality. The universe, he writes, will give you what you need before it gives you what you want.

#### **4.1. Interview with Sarah Morgenthaler**

1) What was the source of inspiration-reason for writing the book *The Tourist Attraction*?

S.M.: I was actually in Anchorage, AK doing research for a different book. I'd brought a friend with me, and she wanted to do a lot of touristy type things. We kept having amusing mishaps during our adventures and it sparked an idea for a tourist-themed romcom set in Alaska. That's how *The Tourist Attraction* was born.

2) What does traveling mean to you?

S.M.: Like so many people, I love to travel. I love to see new places, especially places that are geologically beautiful. Mountains, rivers, lakes, and desert areas are my favorite destinations. I find a lot of joy and peace in nature, so it's incredibly rejuvenating for me to travel to those kinds of places.

3) What is the message you want to convey to the readers?

S.M.: I'd love for someone to pick up one of my novels and experience what it's like to explore someplace new. To breathe in the smell of pine trees or listen to a rushing stream. To climb a mountain or feel the breeze of someplace beautiful on their face.

4) What was the most important travel experience for you?

S.M.: I took a climbing trip in the Rockies with some of my best friends. It felt like a dream come true, both in accomplishing a goal of climbing some incredible routes and the joy of doing so with such amazing people.

5) How does the concept of locality define the trip?

S.M.: I think for me personally, locality is less important than the nature experience of where I'm traveling to. There're gorgeous places all over the world, but also in our own backyards. I want to see them all.

6) Would you include your book in the Travel Literature?

S.M.: Oh, this is a hard one! I think *The Tourist Attraction* would be fun reading before a trip to Alaska. Or maybe on the plane ride. But definitely go for travel guides while there.

S.M.: Here you go! Good luck with your master's project!

- Thank you, thank you, thank you. Your help is invaluable. Can't wait to read the next books of the series. *The Tourist Attraction* is a book that I'll always keep in my heart. And definitely a reminder that I have to visit Alaska someday...





S.M.: You're very welcome!

#### **4.2. Interview with Shaun Randall**

1) What was the source of inspiration-reason for writing the book Letters from Lima?

S. R.: I was standing on top of a 1500-year-old pyramid at Huaca Pucllana surrounded by modern day Lima, Peru, and had an incredible spiritual/transformational experience. It was incredibly inspiring. I didn't have the plot or the characters yet, but I knew I had to write a book about this place.

2) What does traveling mean to you?

S. R.: Traveling is a chance to see the world with fresh eyes. Everywhere we go we end up learning that people despite outward cultural differences share the same hopes and aspirations and the same fears. So, traveling is a catalyst to live life with eyes wide open truly learning from those around us.

3) What is the message you want to convey to the readers?

S. R.: That they can only find purpose and joy for their lives by looking inward. There is nothing in the outer world that will bring lasting satisfaction. Look inside, figure out who you are and spend everyday becoming the best version of that person. The rewards will be immeasurable.

4) What was the most important travel experience for you?

S.R.: My first trip to Lima in February/March 2020. That was a completely transformational trip. I let go of what my expectations for life were and decided to just go for the ride and see where it took me. I learned that the Universe will give you what you need before it gives you what you want.

5) How does the concept of locality define the trip?

S. R.: I'm not sure I understand the question. If you mean locality as it relates to physics, I'm not sure I could apply it. But I'd say this, the more you can be completely present in your surroundings while traveling — to leave home behind and be completely immersed in where you are — the more rewarding the trip will be. Turn your phone off as much as possible.

6) Would you include your book in the Travel Literature?

S. R.: I think that is a good place to put it. My editor said that the way I wrote the setting in Peru it felt like a main character in the story. Peru has such incredible history, natural beauty, and anthropology. It's surprising to me how little has been written about it or like Letters from Lima a novel that takes place there. Letters From Lima is really only the tip of the ice burg when it comes to what Perú offers. I do hope the book inspires people to go see it for themselves!

S. R.: Thank you so much for reading Letters from Lima! Thank you for sharing it with others! Best of luck with your presentation and all that you do!

- Thank you, thank you, thank you. Your help is invaluable. Can't wait to read more books of yours. Letters from Lima is a book that I'll always keep in my heart. And definitely a reminder that i have to visit Lima someday...

#### **5. Conclusions**

Each culture has formed its insight into the world (Kalesis, 2006). For this reason, sociology scientists focus on interpreting the relationships between tourists and locals, investigating the effects of tourism development and the social characteristics of tourism in destinations where locality is a dominant element of their identity. According to sociologist Georg Simmel, the tourist is a "foreigner", however, depending on the evolution of his social relations, he can become a member of the local community (Tsartas et al., 2020). This fact becomes evident in



both books analyzed in this research as the two protagonists-tourists managed to gain a special place in the hearts of the protagonists-locals and gradually assimilate into the culture they visited.

Promoting locality is linked to sustainable models of tourism development. It requires the active participation of the local community in decision-making regarding the type, intensity and management of the destination's tourism development (Tsartas et al., 2020). In the book *The Tourist Attraction*, the luxury resort in Alaska laid the groundwork for the development of winter sports tourism and sea tourism (mammal watching). In order to better serve tourists, small catering and vehicle rental businesses were mobilized -even if they did not want to. While in the book *Letters from Lima*, the residents of Lima did not change their habits and welcomed tourists as if they were locals. Slow tourism is strongly developed, with the rich cultural heritage of the Incas attracting tourists of special interests and high incomes.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the authors of the books themselves were deeply influenced by the destinations they visited. Sarah made a trip to Anchorage with a friend in search of inspiration, as a nature lover she loved the place and so she wrote the book based on her experiences. At the same time, Shaun according to his bio made a trip to Lima in 2020, this was enough to change his life. He met the love of his life and decided to move to Peru. What started as a quick escape of relaxation for him became an adventure filled with years of intense self-discovery. And that's exactly what writing is, a way of expression and inner reflectivity. In fact, when travel is involved, then travel experiences and their narration become a way of escaping reality.

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