Tales from a
Tourism Geography Class

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Abstract
This paper summarizes the experiences of a tourism geography seminar taught at California State University, Northridge, in the fall 2004 semester. Students in this course were divided into two groups, choosing their locations and engaging in field research where they were responsible for all of the steps in undertaking such a project. They began with the selection of a research site, then raised funds, chose a topic and research questions, prepared the survey instrument, undertook the research, analyzed the results, and finally presented at a professional conference. This paper provides an overview of the pedagogy and logistics of the course and assignment, along with a summary of each project’s findings.

The Pedagogy and Logistical Issues of Taking Students in the Field
There are many valid reasons why university faculty are reluctant to take students into the field for course-related assignments. The logistics can be painstaking, costs prohibitive, the risk-management division of the university may throw up a series of red flags, and students may be reluctant or unable to partake in such an experience, due to family/work commitments and/or financial limitations. Also, class sizes may be too large to be manageable in the field. Despite these numerous and very real barriers to coordinating such an assignment, there are some invaluable learning experiences that can emanate from taking students into the field. Kent, et al. (1997) and many others have argued on behalf of the benefits of fieldwork as a means to integrate the theoretical and practical aspects of geography.
According to Dunn (2003), there are three important pedagogic benefits of fieldwork: 1) improved delivery and retention of content (see also Kent, et al. 1997); 2) a deeper form of learning where students can more fully understand the interconnected complexities of a locale; and 3) building of transferable or generic skills such as organizational skills of research planning, and group work and presentation (pp. 3–4).

To illustrate these benefits, I reflect on my experiences of taking a cross-listed (graduate and undergraduate students) seminar on tourism geography into the field, where students engaged in participatory fieldwork in which they gather and use the data themselves. This paper includes the logistics of designing and implementing a research component into the course as well as a summary of the research, with an elaboration on the educational benefits.

In fall 2004, while preparing to teach this seminar, knowing that it would be a relatively small class (ten to fifteen students), I wanted to design a course that would be of benefit to both graduate and undergraduate students. My main objective was to teach them research skills often not taught in other classes. The solution was to incorporate a group field project that would teach students the numerous stages involved in doing research, from formulating the idea to presenting in front of an audience. The limited time frame of one semester, along with the multiple demands of the students, made a group project the only practical way to achieve this goal.

On the first day of class, the idea of an in-the-field group project was presented to the class of twelve students. Of course, there was the usual student concern over doing a “dreaded group project.” I tried to alleviate this concern by allowing students to choose the study location, emphasizing the bounty of fun that would ensue and the interesting places nearby where they could potentially do their research. It is important to note that all of the students in the class were either from southern California or had lived here for some time, so I knew they were familiar with regional tourism locales. Of course, this scenario is not always the case, and many students may lack such extensive regional knowledge. As for the research site parameters, I suggested that the site must be within a four-hour driving radius of our campus, which presents many options including Baja, Mexico, Santa Barbara, Yosemite, Las Vegas, Palm Springs, etc. I asked students to suggest a place within these limits, and quickly we had fifteen or so suggestions listed on the board. Next, each student
was required to secretly choose his or her top three, and we would then tally the results and select our two research sites. The Danish village of Solvang, in Santa Barbara County, and Rosarito Beach, Mexico, were the selections. Fortunately, students self-selected into two manageable groups: five preferred Solvang and seven Rosarito. This process was effective in that it gave students a sense of ownership over the research and that it was “their idea.” Also, no students would be forced to do research in a place they did not choose. My sense was that some had trepidations about undertaking such an assignment south of the border, while others embraced the opportunity and challenge. So ultimately, all students were enthusiastic and comfortable with their study sites.

The class met once a week, and during every meeting, time was devoted for each group to provide progress reports to the class and discuss their objectives and tasks to be completed for the next meeting. This gave the projects a certain momentum and ensured that sufficient progress was made each week so that they would be able to complete the assignment in a timely manner. I gave each group time to meet by themselves during the class to answer any questions that emerged. This also forced a level of accountability among all the students, since they could not rightfully skip the meeting. The first tasks to be handled were getting money to support the trip and deciding the research topic for each place. Acquiring money to support research is a procedure that most students have very little familiarity with, but on our campus, the Associated Students organization often has funds to support such activities. I provided them with this lead, and two people from each group were assigned the task of getting the proper forms, writing up the (brief) proposal (including the budget), and attending the requisite meetings to get the funds. Fortunately, both groups were awarded the funds (to my knowledge, most student project requests are successful). In cases where funds are not available, instructors would have to be more creative, perhaps camping near the research site or selecting places closer to the campus so that no overnight stays would be necessary (see Harner 2003).

Deciding on a research theme was at least partially determined by the sites themselves. Tourism in Solvang focuses on the town’s Danish heritage, thus that group decided to find out whether or not heritage was indeed the draw, and if it was, what aspects of heritage were most easily and readily consumed. There is a rich literature on heritage tourism, which made this a very “doable” assignment...
by following existing literature and methodologies. Rosarito Beach, Mexico, is a relatively small Mexican beach community, but is easily subsumed under the sun, sea, and sand tourism literature. Within this context, this group chose to focus on the varying perceptions of tourism’s impact on this community by surveying locals, tourists, and business owners.

While some students were assigned to work on the grant proposals, others were gathering literature and devising specific research questions. Some of the course material was relevant to both projects and was used as part of the literature, but each group supplemented these with additional sources more closely linked to their respective research projects. The experience of the several graduate students in the class was helpful in the process of accessing the “right” journals and synthesizing the literature. Each group was required to have a “chief editor” who admittedly took on a large responsibility, but in most classes there are competent, motivated students willing to take on that task. In this situation, I nominated a graduate student to be the chief editor in one group, while a competent undergraduate volunteered for that role in the other. Over several class sessions, we discussed potential research angles and group members contributed to the construction of a survey instrument. The survey questions were discussed in class, with all students and myself offering comments and critiques to “fine tune” them before heading into the field.

By the time we went into the field (the eighth or ninth week of the semester), each group had a significant portion of its literature review completed and surveys ready to be implemented. The groups planned to be in the field on different weekends so that I could accompany them, offer suggestions, and reflect on the experience while it was happening. I set a target of 200 surveys for each group. The Rosarito group easily reached this goal, while Solvang fell a bit short. This was likely due to a combination of several factors. The Rosarito group had two more students than the Solvang group, and several of the group’s students were very assertive in approaching people. Indeed, one student in the Rosarito group completed seventy-five surveys by himself. Also, people in Rosarito seemed to be more receptive to participating in the research than did those in Solvang. The Solvang group received many more “No” responses than did the Rosarito group. The end result however, was that both groups completed a sufficient number of surveys to arrive at some interesting conclusions.
Once the data were collected and we returned to campus, students in each group coded the data and entered it into a spreadsheet. One issue that arose was that many students do not have the skills or comfort level to statistically analyze the data. However, it was easy enough to give a quick tutorial on cross-tabulations that allowed them to move beyond raw numbers and simple percentages and look for relationships among the data. Other students were responsible for putting together detailed maps of the study area to include in the final paper and presentation.

When the papers were completed, the students began to work on the presentation. I scheduled it for the end of the semester, held it in a larger classroom, and invited other faculty and students. This was effective in “upping the ante” for the presentation, since the students were now presenting to a wider audience. I felt that this put an added layer of pressure and responsibility on the students to perform. It also illustrated to them that the work they had done was of interest beyond the confines of our class and was something substantial. After the presentation experience, they were comfortable and eager to present at a professional conference (CGS 2005 in Yosemite).

Research Summaries
What follows is a brief overview of the two research projects, beginning with a short discussion of each locale and followed by a summary of the research methodology and results. A discussion of the learning objectives/benefits of each project is threaded through these summaries.

Heritage Tourism in Solvang, California
Solvang is a quaint Danish village located in Santa Barbara County, about two hours from our campus. The town was founded by Danish educators in 1911 and by mid-century had evolved into a regional tourist mecca. Many shops, restaurants, hotels, and art galleries, most with a Danish theme, sprang up to accommodate the visitors. More recently, numerous wine shops and tasting rooms have opened in the town. These have become even more popular with the success of the film “Sideways,” parts of which were filmed in Solvang. A large majority of the visitors are day-tourists from southern and central California who come to stroll the charming streets and to shop and eat, “consuming” the local heritage. These day-tourists were the target group for our team of researchers. The town is also compact, making it easy for the team of researchers to separate into
smaller groups, canvass the area, and reconvene, if necessary, in a short amount of time.

Heritage, or the prevalence and utilization of a locality’s heritage, stands as an ever-more-common approach to promoting tourism both in the United States and abroad. Exploring the different dimensions of heritage tourism has become increasingly relevant in an age when certain ways of life begin to disappear, prompting an inquisitive public to view various modes of living retrospectively (Shaw and Williams 2004). According to Waitt (2000), “the commodification of the past has provided a mechanism whereby city authorities can refashion sites and direct the tourist gaze towards a limited range of interpretations.” Solvang approaches tourism with a purposeful placement of heritage as the centerpiece of engagement and activity, making it the cornerstone of its success. The literature on this type of tourism provided the students with the necessary background literature to help formulate research questions and set their study in a broader conceptual framework.

Methodology and Approach
Because Solvang’s existence as a tourist destination is owed to the Danish heritage, this research team set out to determine to what extent heritage played a role in the tourist experience. To address this topic, the group decided to focus on the “user’s approach,” that is, from the perspective of the tourist rather than that of the host, or from a neutral perspective. Thus, the three main questions posed by the group were:

1) Who is visiting Solvang?
2) How are they consuming/experiencing certain elements of heritage?
3) What role does heritage play in their experience as a tourist?

By narrowing the research design to interviewing tourists and these three questions, the students had a manageable project that they could complete in a weekend’s worth of interviews. Over the weekend, 106 surveys (56 women/50 men) were completed. These were then coded and entered into a spreadsheet and cross-tabulated to identify key relationships among tourists and their behaviors.

Key Findings
• The majority of tourists are older adults. Of those surveyed, 61% were 46 years of age or older and 87% were above 31.
• Not surprisingly, the majority of visitors (64 percent) come from southern or central California.
• Most (60 percent) claim that the Danish heritage played little or no role in their decision to visit Solvang. Most important to them was that it was a nice place to walk around and spend the day. Indeed, nearly 30 percent of respondents were unaware that the culture on display is Danish. (Many said Dutch or Scandinavian—which of course is not entirely wrong.)
• When asked how they consumed/experienced the Danish culture in Solvang, the architecture and food were the most common responses, followed by souvenirs, history, and clothing. Many visitors commented on how they noticed and admired some of the unique architectural styles of the town.
• Respondents aged forty-six to fifty-five were the most frequent and abundant consumers of things Danish, which is not surprising given that they were also the largest population surveyed.

In this project, students developed some practical skills that they would not have obtained if they were simply writing a term paper. These included: conducting surveys (which for several required them to overcome some initial fears about approaching strangers), working with and as a team, and developing a functional proficiency in the statistical software package, SPSS. Perhaps most importantly, they learned to keep in mind the group’s original questions when collecting data, and they experienced first hand the bridge between theory and practice/reality. I felt that these goals were successfully accomplished; the students achieved what they set out to do.

Sun, Sea, and Sand Tourism in Rosarito Beach, Mexico

In Mexico, tourism has become a significant sector of the economy. Mexico now ranks eighth globally in international arrivals and tenth in worldwide tourism earnings (EFE World News Service, 10/01/04). Indeed, after agriculture, tourism provides the country with its second-largest source of employment (Clancy 2001). By situating the group’s research project within this broader context, an extra layer of importance was added to what they were doing.

Rosarito Beach is a region popular with southern Californians due to its close proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border. The resort area is essentially an extension of nearby Tijuana, a much larger city situated right on the border. While Tijuana is a popular destination with southern Californians as well, many tourists are increasingly
opting to bypass Tijuana and go straight into Rosarito, seeking an environment safer and cleaner than its much-maligned neighbor. Rosarito’s tourists are invited to fish, ride horses on the beach, eat lobster at Puerto Nuevo, visit the 20th Century Fox production studio where the 1997 movie Titanic was filmed, and frequent the bars and nightclubs, where the minimum drinking age is 18. This latter aspect renders Rosarito a popular weekend destination for southern California’s college students.

There is a substantive academic literature illustrating that the interaction between hosts and tourists and their perceptions of each other forms an interesting dynamic, underpinning successful tourist operations. This dynamic is paramount in terms of resort tourism vis-à-vis other types of tourism. With heritage tourism, for example, the tourist’s interaction with residents is intertwined with appreciation of the historical attraction at its center. With resort tourism, on the other hand, the tourist’s overall satisfaction with his or her experience hinges significantly on dealings with the residents encountered in the service sector. Studying host/tourist perceptions, especially in such a setting, can offer insight on how to better accommodate both residents and tourists, ensuring positive future growth. This study chose to pay attention to such perceptions instead of adding to the already vast library of tourism/economic data.

Methodology
Seven students administered surveys over one October weekend, primarily along Rosarito Beach’s main strip, Boulevard Benito Juárez, and along the nearby beach. Because the course was held during the fall semester, the tourism season was not at its peak, which runs from March through September. However, there were still plenty of people in town to talk with, and by the end of the weekend, the group had tallied 235 surveys. The breakdown of individuals surveyed is illustrated in Table 1. Of particular note is the disproportionate number of males in the study. For businesses and residents, we believe the gender lopsidedness reflects the preponderance of men among Rosarito Beach business owners, managers, and tourism industry workers. For tourists, it is representative of what we posit as the segment of the population that is most attracted to this coastal town: male college students who are of legal drinking age in Rosarito Beach but not in the U.S. Despite the presence of other attractions as noted earlier, it seems that the majority of visitors are lured by the local party scene.
Table 1. Description of Individuals Surveyed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Surveys</th>
<th>Number of Surveys (%)</th>
<th>Male Participants (%)</th>
<th>Female Participants (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>69.1%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourists</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business persons</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>77.7%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>235</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Each survey was written in both English and Spanish, which allowed students who did not speak Spanish to query those participants not fluent in English. Fortunately, several of the students in this group had at least a working knowledge of Spanish. Students did the surveys mostly in pairs with at least one Spanish speaker, so that they could communicate with all willing participants. Having students work in pairs is also preferable for safety reasons.

The aim of the survey was to measure respondents’ perceptions of tourist activity in Rosarito Beach and its effects on the environment, the economy, infrastructure, and level of safety. For purposes of the survey, business owners and managers were deemed businesspeople, while other employees of business establishments were considered residents. These designations were discussed prior to departing for Rosarito. We met as a group after the first hour of survey to ensure that we were all in agreement regarding all elements of the survey, including designation of respondents as residents and businesspersons.

Key Findings

- Most tourists in Rosarito are educated (70 percent attended college); the largest age cohort was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five (41 percent); most were staying in Rosarito Beach for a two- to three-day weekend (60 percent); most planned to spend between US $100 and $500 during their stay, excluding lodging; and 41.1 percent were experiencing Rosarito for the first time while 37.6 percent frequented Rosarito Beach more than once a year.
- 92.9 percent of tourists said they would come back and would recommend Rosarito Beach to others.
- 68.2 percent of the tourists came from southern California, while only one respondent was from another part of Mexico.
• All three groups (tourists, residents, and businesspersons) felt that tourism has had a positive effect on the economy. Businesspersons were less certain about this, however, as 32 percent felt that tourism has had a neutral effect.

• With regard to the impact that tourism had on safety, tourists said that they felt “very safe” there and that tourism played a role in safety. Nearly 50 percent of residents, however, felt that tourism had a negative influence on safety in Rosarito. In all categories, females felt less safe than males. Indeed, 68 percent of female residents felt that tourism had a negative impact on the safety in the town.

• When asked what they would like to see changed about Rosarito, police reform was the number one response by residents, while tourists prioritized environmental improvements.

• Most respondents in all three categories felt that tourism either had a positive or at least neutral effect on the infrastructure in Rosarito. Businesspersons, not surprisingly, would like to see stricter enforcement of business licenses, as many of the illegal vendors cut into their market share.

Similar to the Solvang group, several students commented on how they overcame some inhibitions about approaching strangers to ask them questions. They also improved on their group skills, and in fact a strong sense of camaraderie emerged among the group. The field experience also exposed them to some of the pitfalls that may arise during a project, such as language barriers. Another interesting aspect of this group’s work was that they often found themselves interviewing other college students who were there for a weekend vacation. The students from other universities were intrigued by and perhaps envious of the Northridge students, “who got to go to Rosarito for a class project.” I also think this made them feel good about what they were doing.

In both groups, students had to confront group members who were less than enthusiastic about the project or were not delivering on their respective assignments. This also is part of the learning experience and could be of benefit to those who will become teachers at any level. Lastly, we cannot emphasize enough the value of bridging in-class discussions with in-the-field activities that allow students to experience first hand the connectivity between theory and practice. The engagement of students in fieldwork is an important step in demystifying our discipline.
Conclusion
While fieldwork remains an integral requirement to a geographic education outside the U.S., it is still mostly peripheral to the education mission of many U.S. geography undergraduate programs. As a learning experience, this assignment was designed to teach students about the multiple aspects of putting together a research project. This is a skill that seems to be sorely needed and should be integral to undergraduate curriculums. Of course, the research itself is bound by certain limitations, but that does not lessen the educational mission. Students who engage in such activities are better prepared to mount their own research as a result. Feedback about this project from the students was overwhelmingly positive, including such comments as “I wish I had more classes like this” and “I feel much better prepared now to do my senior thesis.” My hope is that the increasingly rigid institutional barriers will not discourage like-minded colleagues from engaging in these valuable assignments.

Bibliography


