“You can never cross the same river twice”: Climbers’ embodied quests for ‘original adventure’ in southern Thailand.

Abstract

This article presents ethnographic research into individual narratives of adventure in a small, undeveloped bay called Ton Sai in Southern Thailand’s Krabi Province. Ton Sai is extremely popular with Western rock climbers, and increasingly with other adventure-seekers and back-packers questing for ‘authentic’ Thailand, yet is subject to almost no representation in the commercial sense. It is an example of a destination that is not on the corporate ‘radar’, yet, as will be seen, is famed, desired and produced by ‘niche’ tourists seeking very specifically-valued tropical adventures. The research aims to interrogate how such a destination becomes, and remains, valued as adventurous by climbers, and therefore shed some light on individual, subjective production of adventure in specific Developing World contexts. Drawing on original interview and other ethnographic data collected during winter 2012/13, the article argues that even when third-party commercial mediators are absent, the powers of quest for authenticity and adventure are powerful enough to turn the wheels of mediation themselves. In the ‘elite circles’ in which this group manoeuvres, notions of ideal adventure space run deep and are reproduced discursively and through embodied performances in an exoticised environment that is valued for its ‘primitive timelessness’. The implications of this for locals are explored.

Key Words: Adventure; subjectivity; climbing tourism; distinction; the ‘primitive’.

Introduction

The cultural and commercial production of idealised places and their human inhabitants in tourism promotional literature is being well-explored. Visual representations of tourist destinations such as brochures, in-flight magazines, posters, websites, television programmes and postcards can reveal how places are viewed as objects of tourism (Jenkins, 1999 and 2003; Groves and Timothy, 2001; Edwards, 1996; Dann, 1996, Jaworski and Pritchard, 2005). Texts provide fantasy landscapes from which consumers can draw imaginations of their ideal holiday, and visual media are recognised as significant shapers not only of tourists’
expectations but of destinations themselves, as these ‘imaginary geographies’ (Sheller, 2003) are also the lived-in space of tourists and locals (Jenkins, 1999). Visual texts, therefore, constitute an important point of conceptualisation for the tourist, interconnected with the subsequent creation of ‘personal knowledge’ through lived experience of place (Meethan, 2001). ‘Authentic locals’ (Crick, 1989) are often crucial to this ‘commodification of difference’ and the production of tourist space often occurs through Orientalist, post-colonial or neo-colonial discourses and frameworks, often where the ‘exotic Other’ and the ‘authentic’ are sought at once (Cohen, 1989; Enloe, 1989; Sanchez-Taylor, 2000 and 2001; Wood, 1989; Morgan and Prichard, 1998).

The embodied consumption of tourism places (and their people) that have been historically idealised and imagined as ‘paradise islands’ has been well explored in relation to the powers of the ‘tropical tourist gaze’ and the potentially dangerous sense of ‘abandon’ experienced – and embodied – by visitors with cash to spend (Enloe, 1989; Sanchez-Taylor, 2001; Sheller, 2003). Consumption undertaken whilst on holiday, in a state of ‘fantasy’, carries different meanings; consumer ‘goods’ (including people) become imbued with the stereotypical, often mythical (mis)understandings of that place, creating what Sturma calls a ‘representational loop’, where fantasies and myths are repeatedly reinforced (Sturma 1999: 713). Sheller’s analysis of representations and consumption of the Caribbean conceptualises it as a set of ‘imaginary geographies’, which present the Caribbean as a site in which tourists can fulfil fantasies that fall under the quest for adventure – e.g. the hedonistic consumption of sex, illicit substances etc. (Sheller, 2003: 165). Indeed, the notion of ‘adventure’ is of increasing prominence on tourists’ agendas, as the frontiers of tourism are being pushed back and growing numbers of tourists seek new ways to differentiate their experiences and therefore themselves from the ‘masses’. Further, the ways in which ‘adventurous’ landscapes are being commodified and promoted in tourism contexts to feed a range of adventure tourism markets are being explored (Beedie, 2003; Varley, 2006; Bott, 2013).

Yet whilst tourism’s ‘biggest players’, i.e. its key mediators, are dependent on conceptual and rhetorical constructions of the appeals, attractions and qualities of tourist destinations, and have become acutely aware of the commercial value of ‘adventure’, not all places are represented by commercially powerful agents such as tour operators. Many destinations are too small, too ‘underground’ and/or under-developed to warrant such commercial attention, and are sought out and consumed despite, or even because of, this fact. ‘Adventuresome’ places are often remote and rugged, and therefore do not lend themselves to
large-scale or mass tourist development, attracting instead independent tourists seeking a small-scale experience in an underdeveloped context. Indeed, Mahadin and Burns argue that ‘true adventure’ is constructed as being only really possible in undeveloped regions (Mahadin and Burns, 2007). Whilst the subjective dimensions, narratives and motives driving adventure tourism are being, albeit scantily, empirically researched (Gyimo’thy and Mykletun, 2004; Arnould, Price and Tierney 1998; Bott 2009), connections between adventure tourists’ narratives and their embodied consumption and production of underdeveloped ‘spaces’ remains under-researched.

Rock climbing tourists require very specific ‘niche’ locations to practise their sport, but the experiences sought are differentiated among climbers, whose sport itself involves a wide range of ‘extremeness’, depending on the nature of the climbing (in-situ bolted protection or leader-placed ‘natural’ protection; multi-pitch or single-pitch routes; road-side or mountain environments for example), and the degree to which the life of the climber is climbing-oriented. Some climbers partake in their sport occasionally, or at weekends and during holidays. Others dedicate their entire life to climbing, often forsaking careers, family life, material gain and so on. These ‘lifestyle climbers’ are ‘a subculture of highly dedicated individuals who give up permanent residences for the full-time pursuit of this sport’ (Rickly-Boyd 2012: 85). Lifestyle climbers, or ‘dirt bags’ in climbing talk, value locations in terms of which tourism and infrastructural facilities are not offered.

There is a rich vein of literature on the identity-producing quality of tourism, where choices about types and locations of holidays allow for the assertion of positively evaluated, creative, independent identities Noveli 2005; Stebbins 2002; Douglas et al 2001, Meethan 2001). Special interest, or niche tourism in unusual places can signal richness in cultural capital, and this often involves the disavowal of the ‘self-as-tourist’. Meethan (2001) has discussed the ‘romanticised’ rejection of modernity by some tourists who rebuff and disassociate themselves from established visible symbols of mass tourism as a way of asserting an ‘alternative’ identity. In that sense, lifestyle climbers can be understood as ‘existential’ tourists who reject the normalised, controlled leisure of the masses (Cohen, 1988), and yet, as will be seen, lifestyle climbers differentiate themselves and their adventures specifically through their identification as climbers, and through a discourse of adventure, from other ‘existential tourists’ such as backpackers.

Mortlock argues that is the subjective nature of an adventure that is paramount and that this subjective experience stems from a combination of the objective physical task (including
environmental conditions) and the person’s capabilities and resources at the time. The adventure experience emerges from the intersection of past experiences and the surrounding circumstances of current adventures, and Mortlock conceptualises subjective adventures as occurring in four basic states, which include ‘frontier adventure’. This state is characterised by peak experience, which emerges from a person experiencing adventurous challenges very close to their limits. If the person succeeds, then generally a peak experience is had, but there is a risk of pushing too far and falling/failing, potentially leading to the state of ‘misadventure’ (Mortlock, 1984). The notion of ‘peak experience’ is developed in Priest’s ‘adventure experience paradigm’ or AEP. Like peak experience, The AEP is based on the relationship between personal skill level and situational challenge and is also conceptualised as distinct states, one of which, termed ‘peak adventure’, refers to the point at which personal competence and skill level equal the situational risk, and represents the ultimate goal of self-motivated individuals (Priest 1990). While theoretical critiques of these models include its over-simplification of human desires and motivations (Neill 2008) and failure to adequately consider social, cultural and economic factors (Neill 2008; Nerlich 1987), there is little foregrounding or investigation of the importance adventurers’ direct, embodied relationships with the setting. There remains a lack of empirical exploration into the significance of local people, customs, socio-cultural life and economies to the subjective and discursive production of adventures.

This article presents case-study research into narratives of lifestyle climbers in a small, undeveloped bay called Ton Sai in Southern Thailand’s Krabi Province. Ton Sai is popular with Western rock climbers, and, increasingly with other adventure-seekers and back-packers looking for ‘authentic’ Thailand. Except for half-page insertions in independent travel guides and several small-scale climbing guide books/websites produced by climbers and locals, Ton Sai is subject to almost no representation in the commercial sense. It is an example of a destination that is not on the corporate ‘radar’, yet, as will be seen, is famed, desired and produced by ‘niche’ tourists seeking very specifically-valued tropical adventures. The research aims to interrogate how such a destination becomes, and remains, valued as adventurous by climbing tourists. This article asks how the reproduction of this ‘adventure space’ can be understood and how and when the touristic idealisations surrounding it are mediated, and by whom. As a tropical destination, how important is the notion of ‘ethnic difference’ to the ‘adventure’ that underpins so much promotional literature in other exoticised contexts?
Methodology

Data were collected during a two-month ethnographic study in the peak tourism season of winter 2012/13. Techniques draw on the ethnographic tradition of close-up participant observation designed to gain detailed, in-depth, ‘thick description’ of everyday life and practice (Geertz, 1973). The research focused in on a very small geographical area – a strip of beach and its parallel back road – each measuring approximately 400m in length and one building plus land (approximately 20m) deep (see Fig. 1). Thus the study constitutes a ‘micro-ethnography’, principally interested in a close-up exploration of the complexities of the ‘webs of meaning’ (Ibid.) underpinning tourism in this specific localised setting. Data are drawn from my many encounters and conversations with tourists and locals, and from observations of their movements, habits, interactions, consumption patterns and use of physical space.

In addition, 34 semi-structured interviews were carried out; 24 with a convenience sample of lifestyle climbers ¹ from a range of national backgrounds including USA, Australia, Eastern Europe and UK. Interviews were all held in English and all participants were fluent English speakers. A further ten interviews were conducted with local Thai residents, again in English, albeit less fluently in the main, creating slight difficulty in communication at times although not sufficiently enough to warrant a translator. Interviews with climbers were designed to discover their main motivations for choosing to visit Ton Sai, and how they were experiencing it. I asked how they had come to hear of Ton Sai, and if it met their expectations. What was ‘special’ about Ton Sai? What were its main draws? If participants were repeat visitors, had the village changed and if so how did they feel about that? Interviews with locals enquired about their working lives and how these might have changed as a result of increased climbing tourism. I was interested in their views of tourists and tourism, their interactions with tourists, and how they perceived/experienced our quest for adventure. Interviews were carried out in public settings and were either recorded electronically or in detailed note form, depending on the noise-levels of the setting. I made detailed written notes instead in as much detail as possible, although I acknowledge the potential loss of detail implicit in this technique.

Ethical Concerns

The project represents a complex array of power relationships, arguably involving at different or indeed overlapping times researching ‘up’, ‘across’ and ‘down’. As a lone female moving
in a heavily masculinised ‘adventurescape’, for example, gender dynamics were sometimes intimidating, despite the fact that the positioning of male interviewees as data-givers rendered them potentially vulnerable to me at the level of what Stacey calls the ‘grinding power’ of the ‘ethnographic mill’ (1988: 23). At other times, I was significantly more powerful, socially and economically speaking, as a tourist asking questions of local people who were positioned as tourism ‘hosts’. Tourism’s key underlying principle is to meet the desires of its consumers, and when one of those desires is interview, or other forms of data, the power differentials implicit in the researcher/research process become enmeshed in the dynamics of commercial exchange that drive the service industry. There is always the danger in tourism research that information is given alongside other ‘goods’ in a ‘wish-granting’ culture of hospitality, a possibility that undermines the nature of consent and complicates the power relations already present in face-to-face qualitative research. Further, as a climber, I held some degree of ‘insider’ knowledge amongst other climbing participants. This was helpful on many levels in terms of gaining access, shared language, specialist knowledge, rapport and so on. However, to be an insider is not always unproblematic. It can lead to assumptions on both sides, meaning that points which might ordinarily be expressed or explained are not. ‘Insiderness’ can also affect the interpretations and extrapolations made by researchers and therefore impact the direction of data collection and writing-up (Yip, 2008; Twine, 2000). These complications called for an especially reflexive approach, with a watchful eye on how data are inevitably affected and produced in these differentiated circumstances. Researchers are, especially in the field, ‘always material bodies’, through whom ‘a narrative structure unfolds’ (Richardson, 1994: 523) and should, therefore, be concerned with ‘the workings of the world and insights on how that knowledge came about’ (Berg, 2007). In an ethnographic research context such as this, whose aim is to explore interpersonal actions between differently positioned groups at close quarters, these concerns are arguably magnified and particularly pertinent.

**Ton Sai**

Because of the focus here on tourists’ use of space, mapping the geographical and topographical dimensions is important. In the field, this was done visually, through note-taking and photography, the latter both my own and that of participants (credited accordingly below). There now follows a detailed description of Ton Sai based on these data, which is
necessary for locating and understanding the subsequent data sections that explore the ‘gaze’ on the village and the embodied experiences of tourists and locals.

Fig. 1: Photograph of Tonsai Development Committee map of Ton Sai (author’s own collection)
Ton Sai is situated on a peninsular and is naturally bound in three directions by thick jungle and limestone cliffs, and the Andaman Sea to the south. Therefore, although not actually an island, it is only accessible by boat from neighbouring ports. It is popular with backpackers, rock-climbers and base-jumpers and has a distinctly ‘alternative’ and ‘adventuresome’ atmosphere. It is without mains electricity, relying instead on oil-fuelled generators that run through the day and provide power between 6pm and 6am. There are no surfaced roads, medical facilities or police. Accommodation is mainly found in basic bungalows or ‘jungle-huts’ built from wood or bamboo, which usually contain a bed, a fan and bathroom with cold running water. A minimal amount of more luxurious accommodation has become available in recent years in the form of concrete bungalows, some of which offer air-conditioning and hot water, but the vast majority remains extremely basic and cheap, costing from as little as 200 Baht, or £4 per night. Sanitation is basic; most toilets are either non-flushing, or simple ‘squat-pits’. These are rarely cleaned and are normally without hand-basins. Sewage and other waste-water runs directly into Ton Sai bay. Rubbish builds up into large piles before being periodically transported away by long-tail boats. Flies and vermin are a problem and the coral reef on the shoreline is predominantly dead as a result of the 2004 tsunami, ongoing dynamite-fishing, long-tail boat taxis, pollution and underfoot damage.

Touristic Provisions
The entertainment in Ton Sai is situated mainly in the bars that line its 400m stretch of beach. There is a reggae theme running through the music and décor and, unusually for Thailand, cannabis is widely available and smoked openly by tourists and workers. Also on sale besides beers and cocktails are hallucinogenic ‘magic-mushroom’ shakes, LSD tabs, ‘space-cookies’, ready-rolled cannabis ‘joints’, pipes, ‘hash-cakes’ and ‘bongs’iii The most popular bar, ‘Chill-Out’ offers live music, predominantly dub-reggae, and nightly fire shows, which include fire-breathing and fire-throwing. These are performed by local Thai men wearing only shorts, whose job it is also to deliver drinks and interact and dance with female touristsiv.

There are numerous street-food outlets and restaurants serving shakes, and mainly Thai but also some Western food at a range of prices. By far the busiest and most popular is ‘Mamma’s Chicken’, a basic restaurant close to the beach that offers cheap food in large portions. The majority of climbers cluster between here and ‘Chill-Out’ during the evening, both serving as popular meeting-points.

The majority of tourists to Ton Sai are rock-climbers. Although day-trippers visit from nearby resorts, Ton Sai lacks the white sands, colourful coral reefs and clear waters that attract ‘mainstream’ tourists, and as a result provisions here remain basic. The village is flanked by high limestone cliffs which serve as a key draw for climbers and base-jumpers. The limestone cliffs have been developed for climbing purposes by teams of local and Western climbers over the past decade. In climbing circlesv, this part of Thailand is valued as a fun, exotic and cheap winter-sun holiday destination offering good-quality rock climbing at a range of difficulty levels.

**Railay Beach**

The adjacent bay is called Railay West, which is linked to a third beach, Railay East by a short walkway. Both are home to popular climbing cliffs. Although only a short boat-ride away, the atmosphere here contrasts sharply with that of Ton Sai. Railay is a significantly more expensive place to stay and eat, and has several 4-5 star hotels with swimming pools. It is served by mains electricity, broadband internet, has ATMs, pharmacies, and attracts predominantly short-term package-holiday tourists, most of whom are not there to partake in extreme sports. Drugs are not openly available. The upmarket, ‘pristine’, ‘touristy’ nature of Railay is, as shall be seen below, unattractive to visitors to Ton Sai.

**Quest for Adventure in the Developing World**
Claiming time and space

The principal and overarching draw of Ton Sai for the participants in this study is the perceived potential for adventure that it presents. The links between adventure and rock-climbing might seem obvious, but, as I have argued elsewhere, modernity and the rationalisation and popularisation of the sport and its locations can pose threats to individual climbers’ notions of adventure (Bott 2013). Lewis (2000) discusses the affirmation of human embodied agency brought about by climbing, distinguishing the climbing body from the metropolitan body, arguing that the former reaches a state of freedom through, in part, its flirtations with death and danger. But Lewis is referring specifically to ‘adventure climbing’, where the adventure lies in the uncontrolled and naturally protected of the routes. Ton Sai, on the other hand, is a ‘sport’ climbing location, with bolts for protection and lowering-off, so risk is greatly minimised by bolted protection. Affirmation is arguably found in a number of embodied ways, predominantly centring on lifestyle choices and the location of the self in rarefied spots. Also important is the climbers’ perceptions of the processes of commercial development. The climbers, not unlike other ‘niche’ tourists, seek locations that are distinguishable from ‘the rest’, and a sense of threat prevails when the ‘rest’ encroach on climbing territory. This quest was expressed in the data on many occasions. For example, Ed, a 26-year-old climber from California who was on a year-long trip around the world, lamented changes made to Ton Sai since his previous visit two year ago:

‘You know the saying you can never cross the same river twice? It’s like that when you come back to a place like this. I was here two years ago, and in my mind, when I decided to come back, you have an image of somewhere and then you come back and it’s never the same. This place has really changed, you know, it’s not the same place anymore. It’s really on the ‘tourist trail’ now; it’s even in Lonely-fucking-Planet now, which, you know, totally ruins the experience’.

I asked Ed if he could elaborate on how Ton Sai has changed and why he feels so disappointed. He replied:

‘So I was here last week in this restaurant and I wanted something that wasn’t on the menu, and the guy said that he wouldn’t make it for me! Can you believe that? Two years ago you could get anything you wanted, but now it’s getting, they’re getting greedy. It’s more expensive, more capitalist, but it’s
not good capitalism. When the travellers [i.e. non-climbing/jumping backpackers] come, you know, they’re coming anyway, in bigger and bigger numbers, so [local] people don’t have to try as hard. You don’t get the same warm welcome; they’re just chasing the baht or the dollar or whatever. It’s not got the same feeling as before’.

Eva, a 25-year-old Finnish woman, also a backpacking climber spoke along similar lines:

‘They’re really losing people every day from Ton Sai. People are leaving here unhappy and they are not coming back. It used to be perfect here, really cheap, but now they are cutting corners and raising prices, so they are really shooting themselves in the foot’.

And again, Natalie, aged 23 and on an extended holiday from the UK:

‘I think they really have the monopoly here, which they’re really exploiting. Just in Ao Nang [nearby beach resort] things are about a third cheaper than here; more even. It’s really getting bad. People come here because it’s got a reputation for being cheap, and people are getting pissed off with having to pay more for everything each time they visit. Like, it’s still cheap, but compared to other places in Thailand or South-East Asia it’s not and people won’t put up with it. I suppose people will always come here to climb but it’s, I think it’s really bad that they’re exploiting that’.

Two things stand out here. First, that return visits should, but never do, ‘feel’ the same, and when the ‘character’ of Ton Sai changes, even when the changes imply improved living conditions and autonomy for local people, they cause negative feelings and are blamed on ‘other’ tourists. Second, the fact that Ton Sai is not static or resilient to development is sensed as a loss of authenticity, related also to a sense of the elite ownership of tourist space by tourists who are there to climb rocks. The presence of high numbers of tourists in Ton Sai, an entity from which Ed and others feel personally removed, or above, is resented. This sentiment was recurrent in data collected from climbing tourists. Sam, a twenty-four year-old climber from New Zealand, who was on a four-week vacation to Ton Sai, expressed his anger towards ‘other’ tourists:

‘It is ridiculous how many people there are in Ton Sai right now. I came here for the adventure and those people [non-climbing tourists] don’t understand
how important and how special it really is. I feel like telling them “you don’t know where the fuck you are”. They bring something that’s not climbing or culture – they just don’t get it. People should come here to climb, not because it’s in Lonely Planet. Ko Phangan is where you go to party. Ton Sai is where you go to climb rocks. This used to be a closed place; a private place. NOT a backpacker place. These people are driving up the prices’.

Zoe, aged 24 and from Australia explained that although sad to be leaving, she feels that mid-December, the start of high season, is the best time to leave:

‘I really wish I wasn’t going home, but the one thing I’m glad about is that I’m leaving just as all the tourists arrive. I really hate it when it’s busy here. I don’t know why they don’t come in the rainy season; it’s not like they even really do anything’.

Another female Australian climber, aged 25, was surprised when I noted how the main tourism season begins during mid-December:

‘Oh so this is the tourist season? You’re making me feel like a tourist now. That’s depressing!’.

The sentiment of ownership of, or entitlement to, a ‘special’ space at a certain point in its development is repeated here, again alongside a personal disavowal of the self-as-tourist through identification instead with the ‘climbing’ or adventurous self. Sam echoes Ed’s despair at the price rises that he blames on growing numbers of backpackers but does not count himself in these numbers. I asked Sam how he had discovered Ton Sai. He replied:

‘That’s the thing: If you’re a climber you know about Ton Sai. You don’t need a Lonely Planet or a Rough Guide to tell you that. Ton Sai is just famous in the climbing community. It’s like Kalymnos, or El Chorro; It’s just, you know what I mean, known’.

And again, Jakub, a 26-year old male climber from Czech Republic who was in Ton Sai on a month-long climbing holiday:

‘How long do you think this place has got, realistically, before it is completely lost? I want to come back here next year but I am afraid to because I think it
will have been totally spoilt. In some way I would rather never come back and just remember it instead as it is now’.

I pursued this thought by asking Jakub what he felt was being lost. He explained:

‘You know, before it is all concrete and swimming pools. Before it’s the new Railay; clean and expensive and full of tourists wanting air-con’.

These quotes illustrate the well-circulated imperative to separate the ‘climber’ self from the ‘tourist’ other, where the ‘others’ were made up of non-climbing backpackers and the few short-stay holidaymakers in Ton Sai, many of whom come on day trips from other resorts. Distinctions were largely drawn around embodied difference, where the ‘tourist’ body signifies any combination of fatness, unfitness, excessive wealth, ignorance, poor taste. Even clothes and accessories, such as the use of suitcases by ‘tourists’ (rather than backpacks by climbers) were commented on. Al frequently noted the ‘fat’ and ‘useless’ tourist, with ‘more money than sense’. The above quote captures his hostility towards non-climbing backpackers and their reliance on travel guides, in contrast to the climber who ‘just knows’. Other adventurers, such as the few base-jumpers that travel to Ton Sai to jump off its high walls are valued and welcome. As Sam noted:

‘You should talk to the base-jumpers. Those guys are radical. They’ll tell you all about adventure’.

It is largely felt, on the other hand, that non-climbing backpackers and package-tourists, do not belong in Ton Sai but rather in neighbouring Railay, one of two discursive ‘blackspots’ that threaten to blight the ‘Ton Sai experience’ and that are connected to ‘tourists’. The other being a newly renovated and extended complex in Ton Sai called ‘Dream Valley’. This is one of only three hotels that provide 24-hour electricity and air-conditioning, and the only one with a swimming pool. Dream Valley is blamed for setting a new standard for development in Ton Sai and is largely unwelcome amongst (especially long-stay) climbers. Rachel, an Israeli climber in her thirties who is in Ton Sai for several months described her feelings towards staying in Dream Valley:

‘So I booked into the new place [Dream Valley] because my boyfriend is arriving tomorrow for a week, and I wanted to splurge. We just wanted a bit of luxury. You don’t get a clean room for 600 [£12] baht in Ton Sai – that’s Ton Sai; it’s part of the charm. I thought I’d spoil him, but I’m keeping it
quiet because I know how the climbers feel about *Dream Valley*. I feel like a traitor’.

Indeed, resentment towards *Dream Valley* was widespread amongst many. Al, for example:

‘I went to Syria for my last holiday. Iraq before that. I don’t want to come to a place where fat Americans wheel in their massive suitcases. That place [Dream Valley] is a bad idea for Ton Sai; it’s a slippery slope from here. It will turn Ton Sai into Railay. It’s not what this place is about’.

The claiming of Ton Sai as adventurous, then, involves rejecting others whom it is felt do not belong. This territorialism demands that adventurous space should remains uncrowded, but also on some level unpolluted by the vagaries of mainstream tourism and overdevelopment. Interestingly, this desire amongst tourists for Ton Sai to remain unchanged is known to local people. During an interview with Malee, a 50-year-old bungalow complex owner, originally from Krabi, she explained to me that the dirt track that runs parallel to the beach is owned by a businessman in Bangkok, whom the local businesspeople have approached about getting the road surfaced. The road becomes a muddy quagmire after rainfall, especially in the area outside *Dream Valley* that is churned up by diggers on a daily basis, yet the owner refuses to allow it to be surfaced for unknown reasons. When I asked Malee if she wanted the road surfaced she replied:

‘Yes. It will be easier for tourists and easier for us also to bring food and supplies to the village. But when we have concrete road, we will have to make other improvements too because tourists will expect it. For me, I will have to concrete my huts. Then we have to raise our prices to pay for it but the climbers want cheap bungalow, so if we concrete we need to leave some same for climbers. I have an idea with my brother to concrete the inside but leave outside natural for climbers to still feel at home’.

Implied here is the idea that local businesspeople who currently provide basic, low-impact accommodation are aware that their bamboo bungalows are valued for qualities that extend beyond their inexpensiveness; that the ‘natural’, ‘primitive’ way the accommodation looks and feels is important and something that Malee does not want to lose. It is interesting that she comments on how development and change might make her customers ‘feel’ – rather
than straightforwardly fearing the loss of their custom, although the two are clearly connected.

Daw, a 30-year-old bar owner from northern Thailand also discussed the need as he sees it to retain a ‘traditional’ style to building and development in Ton Sai. His original bar was destroyed by the 2004 tsunami and he received aid money to rebuild it. He explained how, although concrete would have been a more practical and hardwearing medium with which to rebuild, he chose bamboo and wood for similar reasons to those expressed by Malee above. Thus the ‘authentic’ or ‘primitive’ is being preserved and reconstituted by locals who are aware of the lure of these qualities in this particular niche market.

**Fried Chicken and Fruit Shakes**

In the heavily embodied everyday lives of climbing tourists in Ton Sai, consumption is very central. Alongside accommodation and transport, food and drinks are commodities that are expected to be cheap and readily available. Because there is a complete lack of self-catering accommodation, without even the facilities to make hot drinks inside bungalows, eating out plays a big part of the tourist’s day and was discussed widely. It is expected to be consistently and simultaneously cheap and plentiful, and is discussed as an important signifier of authenticity (or lack of). For example, Bede, a 29-year-old climber on a month-long trip from Poland captured both the centrality and significance of food to his experience:

‘A lot of people think about food when they think about Thailand; good, cheap, filling food. I just can’t, haven’t been able to think about anything else but food since I got here. I get up early, climb in the early morning cool, get breakfast. Then a shake, then climbing, then when the sun sets I go to Mamma’s for chicken. Then I go out to dinner and I always have a pancake on my way back to my bungalow [laughs].’

... ‘I don’t know why. I suppose because it is there – everywhere I mean. And there’s nothing much else to do if you’re not climbing. It’s always so available. I came here because it is affordable to be here eating out every meal for a month or two. Since two years ago it has become more expensive, which is a shame, but I think it is still cheap for Westerners. But I don’t think it will
stay this way for much longer. It’s only a matter of time before it becomes Railay’.

These quotes point to the reality that, despite the many protestations against rising prices, most tourists from the West can of course afford to eat out three or more times a day in Thailand. They also reveal the overtly embodied nature of leisure for these tourists, as is the case with tourists more generally. ‘Mamma’s Chicken’ not only serves food, but its reliable cheapness and simplicity also provide symbolic meaning for the anti-tourist climber seeking distinction. Interestingly, food-poisoning also carries meaning under the ‘gaze’ on underdevelopment and was an important discursive theme in the ‘Ton Sai experience’. Julie, a 24-year-old climber from the UK who was on, as she put it, an ‘endless holiday’, summed this up neatly:

‘You know, it’s funny, you have the same conversations every day: you talk about climbing, you talk about what you’re planning to eat, you talk about your mosquito bites, you talk about how your belly is’.

Bede described the 24-hour period of gastric illness suffered by most visitors to Ton Sai as ‘inevitable’ and every meal taken as ‘a game of Russian Roulette’. He added:

‘I think you have to get ill in Ton Sai. It’s part of the deal; it’s a rite of passage’.

Seemingly part of the exclusive ‘realm of experience’ is a sense of acceptance of the inevitable bout of illness as a result of poor food hygiene. This again illustrates a harking back to pre-modernity or the ‘primitive’. This was further echoed in the many appraisals of the nightly fire shows at Chill Out, as illustrated by Dan, a 25-year-old climbing back-packer from the USA. Dan commented quite explicitly on the ‘exotic’ and timeless nature of entertainment:

‘I’ve never been anywhere like this before; really nowhere remotely like Ton Sai. I mean, I know people who go off adventuring to Africa or Alaska looking for virgin rock – like real adventurers – and they come here for adventure because it’s real; it’s the real deal. It’s not just the climbing either; it’s the fact that after climbing you can come down here and you can buy magic mushrooms and joints that are like, ready-rolled, and you can just sit at the bar and watch a fire show. Like, where in the world can you get that
combination? Nowhere in the West and in fact nowhere else in Asia. It’s like a climbing paradise from the past’.

Conclusions

This research illustrates that even when third-party mediators are absent, the powers of quest for ‘authenticity’ and adventure can be strong enough to turn the wheels of mediation themselves. In the ‘circles’ in which certain niche tourists manoeuvre, discursive notions of ideal spaces run deep and keep locations such as this on specific non-corporate ‘radars’. Knowledge of places with what might be called ‘underground’ appeal is produced and circulated in ‘elite’ circles, and when the valued location comes under threat from popularisation the dreams and desires are pushed into deeper significance.

Ton Sai is a rare example of a climbing destination that is well-developed in climbing terms (with in-situ bolts, belay stations and guide books), yet underdeveloped in terms of tourism infrastructure. It is valued as special for this reason; for the potential to live out ‘authentic adventures’. Despite the climbing itself not being especially adventurous, the embodiment of agency and freedom occurs through the context and environment. It offers scope for what might be termed ‘layered adventure’ where before and after climbing takes place, adventurous fantasies about the ‘primitive’, ‘exotic’ and Other can be performed. Notions of time and place are crucial to this fantasy discourse. Tension between the temporal nature of visits and expected/desired permanence of experiential qualities creates a paradox wherein visitors expect their own tourism to have no impacting qualities. The experience is embodied and real – through consumption and the body ‘coming to life’ through interaction with the environment, but at the same time disowned and disembodied at the psychic level of the tourists themselves. ‘They’ (not ‘we’) are driving up prices and taking up space.

Sharp argues that tourists with ‘romanticised’ desire to visit unspoilt environments and primitive societies want only to experience superficial, visual difference before returning to their technologically-advanced and culturally familiar (Westernised) hotels (Sharp 2009: 94-96). This study suggests, however, that this is not entirely the case for all tourist groups. The central quest for adventure of some tourists leads them to seek to experience ‘difference’ on a longer-term and more deeply-embodied level. Whilst it is true that eventually most climbers visiting Ton Sai will return to the West, thus rendering their experience ultimately
superficial, their investments in the ‘unspoilt’, however paradoxical, are rooted in more than the notion of authenticity-as-performance. Indeed, many engaged with this notion and expressed their concerns for the homogenising impacts of tourism development. Their ‘blame’ rhetoric rests on the fact that they were not like ‘most’ tourists in this sense; that their pleasure and satisfaction emanated from embodied experience of poverty, poor sanitation, basic food, low-impact accommodation and so on.

As tourism to the Developing World increases, the tourist gaze increasingly turns poverty into a commodity, and commercial mediations can serve to maintain the aesthetic of poverty. The ‘spatialisation’ of poverty means that there are certain places where poverty is expected and ‘enjoyed’, as in the case of ‘slum tourism’ (Steinbrink 2012), a phenomenon that is on the rise. This often leads to situations where development occurs because of increased demand, thus changing the nature of the place, and poverty becomes something that is performed or deliberately reconstituted in certain areas. Further, Third World tourism often has very little benefit for locals because profits go to wealthy owners. Businesses in Ton Sai, however, remain, at least for the time being, small-scale, independent, unregulated and almost entirely locally-owned. These factors are valued by this set of niche tourists as part of their discourse around entitlement to access an ‘unspoiled’ adventure paradise, often in connection with practices of hedonism and abandon that constitute and maintain the appeal of the Developing World to tourists more broadly.

The market for ‘authenticity’ is acting to suppress development to some degree. The desire for unique and low-impact, minority experiences reproduces Simmel’s (1911) analogy of the adventure as fleeting love affair, whose very nature is necessarily brief and ephemeral. The idea that it is impossible to cross the same river twice suggests that the magic of an experience cannot be repeated or sustained; that the existential meaning is that of a moment in time that inevitably passes. This moment is completely tied to the self, and cannot be shared with others past or future, so once somewhere becomes populated it ceases to exist. This is in ideological contrast to more traditional forms of tourism, which is captured forever in holiday photographs, and different also from other forms of niche tourism, because the rocks specifically are a point of existential territorialism. The moment that the experience ceases to be unique and ephemeral, it is resented and rendered worthless; as Ton Sai has undergone a degree of progress and rationalisation, so it has lost some of its potential for ‘original adventure’.
Climbers staying in Ton Sai for two months or longer.

Base-jumping is a relatively recent sport, derived from skydiving from aircraft. Instead of aircraft, jumps are made from high cliffs and buildings. Because the drop is much shorter, base-jumping is considerably more risky than skydiving, and participants push the boundaries by making ever-shorter jumps.

Space-cakes and hash cookies are sweet confectionaries made with cannabis. A bong is an implement for smoking cannabis through water, thus cooling the smoke before it is inhaled.

There is a small-scale female sex-tourism trade with these entertainers, with whom lone female tourists ‘partner up’ for the duration of their holiday.

The author is a climber and is drawing from personal or ‘insider’ knowledge here.

References


Simmel – adventures, like love affairs because as soon as they begin they are over, because very nature of adventure is its fleetingness
Never cross the same river twice so once somewhere is visited it ceases to exist. In ideological contrast to more traditional forms of tourism, which is captured forever in holiday photographs. The experience is ephemeral transitory, otherwise worthless. As soon as area becomes trodden by ‘mainstream tourists’, the ‘existential travellers’ lose interest.