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Why enter the church on holiday? Tourist encounters with the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome

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ABSTRACT

The tourist is constantly seeking out new experiences, and there is a growing interest in experiences at religious sites. This article examines tourists' church experience, and what meaning it gives, and what motivates tourists to visit a church on their holiday. With a particular focus on the individual's experience creation, the article looks into the tourist's personal experience inside a church, as manifested in a context characterized through religion and tourism. This study is based on data collected through interviews with 15 visitors to the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome. The findings demonstrate tourists' ability to block out the presence of other people, and their emphasis on finding inner peace. While the church is highlighted as a kind of sanctuary for reflection, where regaining harmony is mentioned as one of the most meaningful aspects of the experience, religion as a driving force is largely absent from the data. The findings of this study provide new knowledge with regard to tourists' church experiences, and provide insight into the individual meaning making involved. The findings also show the complexity of the tourists' motive to search for church experiences.

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Introduction

Experiences have steadily gained in importance in the Western world. Consumers want to be engaged and involved in experiences (Boswijk et al., 2012; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), and see a need to create meaning in experiences (Bosangit et al., 2015; Boswijk et al., 2012). Despite an apparently new interest in experiences as a burgeoning fields of research in consumerism, tourism research has focused on experiences since the 1960s and 1970s (Quan & Wang, 2004; Uriely, 2005), studies, for example, to a longing for change (Cohen, 1974), a need for authenticity (MacCannell, 1976), and an escape from everyday anomie (Dann, 1977). As part of a quest for experiences, the quest also includes those at various religious sites, and cathedrals, churches, mosques and temples are attracting ever more visitors (Griffiths, 2011; Hughes et al., 2013; Olsen & Timothy, 2006).

A central theme of this article is tourists' church experiences. The experience that takes place in a church or cathedral is often very complex, in terms of its intangible form and elements such as nostalgia, closeness to God, spirituality or the atmosphere itself (Eliade, 1987). The question is why churches are part of the tourist's search for experiences, and why churches can be of particular interest on a holiday? There have been few studies of experiences at religious sites (Hughes et al., 2013), and this applies especially to the individual psychological experience (Campos et al., 2016). There is

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also limited knowledge of tourists' motives for visiting religious sights, and what specific needs these visits are intended to meet (Gutic et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2013). Although several studies address tourist visits to religious sites (see Andriotis, 2009; Bond et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2008; Lupu et al., 2019; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014), there is a dearth of studies that closely examine the creation of personal meaning in the experience. With a focus on the church as an experiential space, this study therefore addresses the individual's psychological experience, the creation of meaning, and the motivation involved as part of church visits on holiday.

Tourist experiences, motives and religious sites

The tourist experience continues to enthuse and confuse researchers (Ingram et al., 2017), and despite a growing body of literature on tourism as an academic field, it is still unclear what constitutes a tourist experience (Ingram et al., 2017; Quan & Wang, 2004), or the meaning of the experience (Bosangit et al., 2015). An experience stems from the individual's cognitive and emotional processing of sensory impressions (Jantzen & Vetner, 2006; Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013), which implies that the individual actively contributes to the experience (Jantzen, 2013). Originally, the concept of experience mainly involved positive emotions, but the ambiguity about the definition of the concept may be seen in connection with two ways of understanding experiences. One rooted in a lay tradition where experience simply means that something has made an impression or impact on a person. While the other stems from philosophy of life, where experiences are seen as important aspects of an individual's life project (Jantzen & Vetner, 2006). In the latter tradition, based on nineteenth century romanticism, experiences are a form of privilege, almost as a reflection of who the individual is and his/her position in society. Here, experiences are emphasized as a kind of revelation or peak experience, based on the individual's self-realization at the upper level of Maslow's pyramid of needs (Jantzen & Vetner, 2006). Among the many different approaches to the tourist experience, the understanding of experiences as a peak experience is commonly used (Mossberg, 2007; Quan & Wang, 2004). A peak experience is one that stands out, often viewed as a contrast to everyday experiences. A peak experience can also be studied as a high point or optimal phenomenon that provide a sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), where typical features are being one with the situation, forgetting time and place, being completely immersed, or finding a balance between the challenge of the experience and one's own capabilities. However, defining tourist experiences as peak experiences alone, is complicated, since experiences are products of the specific circumstances there and then (Jantzen, 2013). A further point is that the same stimulus 'does not provoke an experience in all people and not even in the same person in different situations' (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013, p. 4).

Experiences are complex, based on the tension between here and now and the time before and after the experience (Jantzen, 2013). Experiences can also be viewed contextually, based on the background and entering position of a tourist (Smørvik, 2014). The tourist's entering position can be influenced by the four dimensions of motivation, expectations, cultural background and previous experience, all of which, separately and in combination, will affect how an experience 'happens' (Smørvik, 2014). The experience as it unfolds, thus depends on both the individual's presence and external stimuli (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013). The vast majority of human actions are directed towards something (Iso-Ahola, 1999). Consequently, one can assert that tourists do not seek experiences for no reason. In psychology, motivation describes why people act as they do, and the driving force behind their actions (Teigen, 1983). Tourism research has focused strongly on the push and pull factors in motivation (Bright, 2008; Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977). This also counts for religious tourism (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016; Hughes et al., 2013; Jackson & Hudman, 1995; Voase, 2007), and while the internal (push) factors may be linked to individuals' inner impulses and need to visit e.g. a church, the external (pull) factors are related to attributes of the specific locality or the church itself. With reference to psychology, many believe that motivated behaviour only exists when both components are present (Teigen, 1983), which clearly applies to motivation in religious tourism, as concluded by Terzidou et al. (2018).

Motivation has held a central position in leisure and tourism research for decades, with particular attention to what motivates people to travel (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977, 1981; Fodness, 1994; Pearce, 1982, 2011). In 1979, Crompton succinctly stated that the question of why people travel was problematic because motivation changes through different stages, depending on events and experiences during the holiday. The urge to visit a church may be based on quite different motives than the initial ones for visiting a location and or a predetermined sight. The motive for a certain experience may thus depend on other recent experiences and impressions, even on the same day or minutes before (Smørvik, 2014). Thus, the decision to enter a church need not be made in advance. It can be an urge that arises there and then.

Journeys to religious sites are among the oldest forms of tourism (Kaelber, 2006; Rinschede, 1992); however, while earlier visits had a central religious significance, today's tourism to religious sites is based on various motives, including architecture (Jackson & Hudman, 1995; Lupu et al., 2019), restoration (Bond et al., 2015), interest in history (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016; Gutic et al., 2010), art (Lupu et al., 2019), and other cultural dimensions (Shackley, 2002). Having been there can also be a motivating factor in itself (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016; Woodward, 2004), not least for some religious destinations such as St. Peter's Basilica or Notre Dame, which for many tourists are undoubtedly 'must-see attractions', like various other more commercial tourist attractions. While religious tourism is defined as a form of tourism 'whose participants are motivated in part or exclusively for religious reasons' (Rinschede, 1992, p. 52), tourism to religious sites today has many more facets (Hughes et al., 2013). Just as tourism research has been characterized by basic dichotomies such as holiday/everyday life, ordinary/extraordinary and tourist/non-tourist (Larsen, 2008), many studies of tourism to religious sites have categorized respondents as either pilgrims or tourists (Hughes et al., 2013), which implies that they are either religious visitors or not. This has resulted in a form of dichotomy in which the terms pilgrim and tourist end up in different ontological worlds, and such categorization has been criticized by a number of scholars for being too narrow or restrictive (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Eade, 1992; Olsen, 2010). Despite a kind of general consensus that such typologizing does not work, researchers continue to refer to the difference between the two categories (Hughes et al., 2013). It is challenging to study the tourist's motive to visit or search for an experience in a church, without taking into account the complexity of the choice. Visits and experiences at religious sites are undoubtedly both dynamic and multidimensional (Andriotis, 2009; Bond et al., 2015; Olsen, 2010). In order to provide deeper insight into why tourists' enter a church on holiday, this study deals with the individual's psychological experience and the meaning this gives, in addition to tourists' motivation for visiting churches.

Methodology and data

The most important source of data for this study is the interviews with 15 visitors to the Basilica of Santa Maria (7 women and 8 men). The data was collected over a period of twelve days, and the informants' ages ranged from 30 to 81 years. The informants were all tourists on holidays in Rome, coming from seven different nations: Australia (1), Denmark (1), France (1), Germany (1) Iceland (1), the UK (2), and the US (8). Interviews play an important part in qualitative methods (Cresswell, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Veal, 2011), and have a range of designs and applications. The most common type is the individual face-to-face interview between researcher and informant (Fontana & Frey, 1994). This type of interview is particularly useful to gain insight into how people understand and perceive their world (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), where to emphasize the importance of human experience is a goal in itself. Although there are various examples of how to structure and conduct interviews, there are no clear standard procedures or rules for how interviews should be implemented. The type of interview will therefore depend upon what is most appropriate for the study in question (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

A structure that is well thought out in advance can be a good argument to avoid collecting superfluous information (Ryen, 2002), but it is also important not to have too many questions or too rigid a

structure, as this may constrain the depth and breadth of the interview (Veal, 2011). Consequently, the interviews in this study, alternated between pre-determined structure and open and spontaneous dialogue. Human interaction is an essential part of the interview situation (Ryen, 2002), and in meeting visitors on their way out of the church, it was important making contact in a positive way. Tourists on holiday are perhaps not particularly interested in spending time on a research interview, so when approaching potential informants, it was made an effort to ensure optimal conditions for the interviews in terms of practicalities that suited the informants best. For example, some couples preferred to be interviewed together, and could do so. The interviews also took place outdoors, at the fountain in the middle of Santa Maria Square, which has several steps where one can sit down and relax. Being outdoor, the weather was an important factor, and to provide a pleasant backdrop to the interviews, all interviews took place when the weather was dry and warm enough to sit outdoors. Finding a section of the steps with as little disturbance as possible was also emphasized.

Qualitative studies may be seen as a situation-based activity, where the researcher enters into a specific context and visualizes this particular reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In addition to conducting interviews outside the church, time was set aside every day for observations inside the church. Observation is particularly suitable in combination with other methods (Adler & Adler, 1994), because it can help to add greater depth and breadth to the area under study (Patton, 2002). With the church as the experience arena, it was natural to study visitors' activities and behaviour from the moment they entered the church until the moment they left. The combination of interviews and observations gave a better basis for understanding the phenomenon of interest.

Rome and the Basilica of Santa Maria

It is difficult to imagine Rome without its churches. You find them around every corner. Small, narrow, seemingly unassuming buildings squeezed in between flats and shops. Or massive buildings on a hilltop, on a slope, or in the middle of an open square. The Basilica of Santa Maria (S. Maria) is neither small nor unassuming, but it is not particularly conspicuous, being located on Santa Maria Square in the heart of Trastevere. S. Maria is said to have been founded on the site of the oldest Christian church in Rome (Gulowsen & Steen, 2016). The original Basilica Iulia was built by Pope Julius I (337–352) in the same place as Pope Calixtus I (217–222) had established one of the earliest Christian meeting places, the *domus ecclesiae* (Basilica Santa Maria, 2018). In 1140 Pope Innocent II (1130–1143) wanted a larger place of worship, and the work began to build the church as we know it today (Basilica Santa Maria, 2018). S. Maria is a traditional titular church with eleven chapels. The mosaics of Pietro Cavallini (c. 1250–1330) are the most famous artworks in the church, included a façade of the Madonna and Child flanked by ten women holding lamps. The classically inspired interior from the 12th century has retained an original medieval style with antique granite columns, cornices and marble slabs (Gulowsen & Steen, 2016). S. Maria contains relics from several Roman catacombs and has original relics from the ancient basilica that stood on the site (Basilica Santa Maria, 2018). The church is open for visits every day. There is no entrance fee, but visitors may support the church by donating or buying items from a stall at the entrance. Holy Mass is held at fixed times every day, and visitors are allowed to visit the church during Mass.

The experience in focus

It is challenging studying how experiences occur without considering the fact that every individual is different. What local people are used to seeing and relating to, may be experienced quite differently by a first-time visitor. Rome has thousands of tourists. In some streets you move in queues. In fact, sometimes it is difficult to even move. In the midst of all this hustle and chaos, the church experience represents a break from the myriad of impressions, as some informants mentioned: 'It means a break from all the noise. A place for peace and quiet' (Informant 12). 'It gives you time to take the moment, without all the hustle and bustle around you' (Informant 3).

Peace and quiet

In the interviews with the informants, there was one recurring theme in particular about the church and being inside it: the calm atmosphere that shaped the experience.

The church is a quiet spot in the city. Quiet and cool always. So it's sort of a break from everything. (Informant 10)

I think the church gives you that peace and solace, and a quiet time in your life, because I think our lives are really hectic and busy, even though we're retired. Life seems to be on a roller coaster. (Informant 3)

Being inside S. Maria was referred to as captivating and out of the ordinary. Some used the word silence. Others used the word calm. One married couple stressed how peaceful it was to visit the church:

It's that calm atmosphere, that sense of devotion, how can I put it? (Informant 14)

Yes, when you're in there ... you calm down completely. (Informant 15)

Other visitors made similar statements when talking about the value of taking a break, without any interference or noise.

A slow experience

The church experience can be described as a slow experience: one that is not just about sightseeing in the traditional sense, but one that provides a kind of presence or state where a person can just sit and be. In the church there is no hustle and noise. On the contrary, tourists are asked to keep quiet, to respect the purpose of the building: religion and worshippers. Apart from a few pupils on school trips, visitors to S. Maria generally respect this way of relating to the church, and their encounter with the interior is characterized by dignity and devotion.

It's like everything's kind of sacred here, so it pulls you right down. (Informant 14)

It's actually a very pleasant experience, and it's a quiet place. So I can actually sit and look at things. (Informant 6)

And it's the feeling of the place when you walk inside there. The tranquil atmosphere. (Informant 15).

The experience of not experiencing anything, so to speak, was also highlighted by some informants:

I love to sit down and relax. It was beautiful. I sat there for maybe 30–40 min. It was just quiet and peaceful too. (Informant 10)

We enjoyed being there early in the morning, when there's nobody there. It's nice to be there nearly alone. It's so quiet. Yesterday, we went to visit Tivoli, it was a nightmare ... Chinese and Russian tourists everywhere. (Informant 13)

The informants described an atmosphere with a different kind of silence. A place to relax, someone said. Time to unwind, others commented.

Church and religion: what attracts people?

S. Maria does not stand out like many other churches in Rome, but the church has had its natural place, as the main church in the area for centuries. As perhaps the very oldest Roman church (Gulowsen & Steen, 2016).

A church 'on the way'

S. Maria is not a primary attraction in Rome, like St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican or the Colosseum. For many of the informants, S. Maria was not one of their main destinations on the day the

interviews took place, or during their stay in Rome. So why did they visit the church? What was it that attracted them? Did they know anything about S. Maria beforehand?

It was quite by chance that we went in ... I've always liked to go inside churches when I'm in southern Europe, they're often very beautiful. (Informant 15)

We didn't plan to come here, but we think it's nice to visit churches on holiday. Where we come from, you only go to church for weddings and so on. (Informant 12).

Several informants said that their visit to the church was not planned or decided in advance. Their visit to S. Maria, on the contrary, was the result of a sudden impulse there and then. It was almost like a church 'on the way', a stop determined by a whim or the need for a break.

I was just wandering, and I found it. (Informant 10)

It's awful to say this, but it was just on my way. (Informant 13)

It seems to be like a church in the centre of Trastevere, so I thought it would be a good way to kind of get to know the town, you know. (Informant 6).

One of the visitors (Informant 5) even said that her visit to the church was decided by the fact that she was on her way to meet someone who knew a lot about Rome 'I knew he would ask me if I came here, so I thought I'd be prepared'. However, some informants had planned their visit, such as these:

We planned to go here, because I read in a tourist guidebook that this was the oldest Christian church in Rome, I believe, and I just wanted to have a look, you know, what it was like. (Informant 3)

We came because of the gold mosaic work. We heard of this work when we were looking at Rome. (Informant 1)

When asking the informants to talk more of the reasons for visiting churches during their holiday or entering S. Maria, many mentioned the same aspects that they emphasized in their descriptions of the church experience: the desire to have a break, to calm down, to find peace and quiet or solace, and the longing for something beautiful and sublime.

The function of the church

Some of the visitors to a church like S. Maria will naturally also mention its function. On the one hand, this is connected to the cultural-religious history of the church, with its physical features such as the façade, the nave, the various chapels, the mosaic in the apse, the ornate gold ceiling, the marble floor and some of the other artwork. On the other hand, the function includes the more spiritual elements such as the visitors' relationship to religion, Christianity, Catholicism, and their own faith. For the person in these surroundings, inside a Catholic church, the church has a distinct function. It is not just any building. It is something bigger than itself. It is a house of God. Something that has a certain power and strength, whether one is a believer or not.

I find being in the presence of art that is from ancient times to be a sublime experience that transports me out of my habitual self and expands my appreciation of the world around me. (Informant 1)

I think it helps like orient us, you know, it's kind of like the centre from where we work our way out, at the heart of it. (Informant 7)

Although we aren't religious, it's important to respect the fact that many people find comfort in their religion ... And if there's one thing I dislike, it's people who condemn other people's beliefs. (Informant 12)

But questions about one's experience related to visiting the church could also provoke more negative statements, about the challenges of religion, about the role of the church, about feeling like an outsider, or being excluded.

I'm gay, so it's a world between them and people like me. It's maybe strong things to say, but they do anything they can against my people, so I'm not going to wait and do nothing, just fight them back, because I'm not going to do nothing ... It's bad that you're not allowed just to be happy on earth. (Informant 13)

But the same informant also admitted that religion gave him very ambivalent feelings, because he was also clearly enthusiastic about churches and church art:

I love Catholic art, and Christian art. It's not a wrong thing to me. I like the mix, it's a balance, you know. (Informant 13)

With the church as an experiential space, religion somehow becomes part of the tourist's experience, regardless of whether the person is religious or not. When the informants were asked about their motives for visiting S. Maria, and churches in general, they were often keen to talk about their attitude to religion and voiced different opinions about the subject. However, it was quite clear that a personal religious experience in the church was not the main motive for any of the tourists' interviewed, but rather the religious framework represented by the church.

Creating meaning in the church experience

What creates meaning? This question may seem simple or trivial, but in fact it is difficult, because what forms a basis for meaning there and then may change shape when talked about later. As one of the informants said: 'I haven't really thought much about what visits to churches have meant to me, but because of this conversation, I've been able to reflect more on the experience and how important it is' (Informant 12). Other informants also brought this up when they stated that they thought it was interesting to talk about their church experience after the event.

Reflection

There is something about a church that invites people to think about themselves and their lives. As if stepping over the threshold and sitting down inside makes a person shut out the rest of the world, as one informant said (Informant 11). The break enables one to reflect on life, and on one's current experience and previous experiences. Some informants were emotionally engaged or touched when describing this kind of meaning in the experience and the reflections they had made. Their emotions were evident. Their thoughts that arose in the church could feel overwhelming. You could be moved by something personal:

I've been thinking a lot of a friend, that lives back in the United States, who isn't very well, and I went in ... (pauses) – and I was thinking about him and his wife while I was there. And I'm not religious. If I was religious, I'd have been praying that he'd be ok. (Informant 5)

I visit the church out of respect for my father. I think of him ... (pause) and I feel guilt ... It's good to see the comfort faith gives. It must be good to believe in something. (Informant 11)

A few informants revealed personal and very private experiences. Sitting down in the church was not primarily to enjoy the art and architecture, but to get a moment to oneself. A quiet reflection on life. Perhaps a longing for religion. What is, or what could have been, as one informant commented (Informant 12).

It's very calming, very (pause) – it gives you time to think about life. I think of my parents who passed away (pause) – Being there means time to sit. To reflect. (Informant 3)

I feel very peaceful when I'm in the church, very comforted and plus I have a little tradition of lighting candles for my mother, because she's very Catholic. (Informant 9)

I really reflect about life, about you know, my long lost relationship with God, feeling a little bit of guilt. (Informant 7)

Having a moment to oneself inside the church building provides room for thoughts on essential questions, such as the meaning of life, life and death, even one's own weaknesses and inadequacies. One of the informants, who had actually imagined something much more touristy, said that the impression she was left with was quite different from what she expected and that she had had a powerful experience (Informant 5).

Gathering one's thoughts

To cross the threshold of the church, from the bright white light outside into the dim room, is a transition. Of all the informants, only one described herself as religious. But even though the others made it clear that they were not, they still emphasized that the church experience could encompass something existential or spiritual. The encounter with the interior of the church, the many lighted candles, the people praying at the front, the dark brown wooden benches, the sparse light from the high windows, and the low-pitched voices all invited visitors to rediscover their true self.

I was raised a Catholic, so I'm not Catholic anymore, but I can't escape, you know. I'm kind of going back to the tradition and it's kind of taking me back to my youth. So it's (the experience) spiritual in a way, but not really religious. (Informant 7)

It's quiet and I find that it kind of centres me, you know, from all the hub and bub, it's just nice to go in there to focus. (Informant 9)

One woman (Informant 12) said that she sat in the church for fifteen minutes. She felt it was easier to absorb everything that way. 'It's nice to see other people praying and the peace of the church, even though I'm an atheist myself,' she commented. She went on to talk about the importance of regaining peace of mind, amongst all the hustle and bustle.

It's more of an inner experience. I'm not so concerned with the external details (Informant 12).

This was also mentioned by another woman (Informant 11). She emphasized that the experience or meaning creation for her was not about architecture or history, but about the chance to sit down for a while, to get peace of mind.

Discussion and conclusion

This study deals with tourists' motives for visiting a church when on holiday, what the individual church experience consists of and what meaning it gives. The majority of visitors to religious sites do not seek a religious experience (Hughes et al., 2013; Lupu et al., 2019; Voase, 2007). To call this religious tourism is therefore not an adequate description. Tourists who visit S. Maria come for many reasons. They come because they seek a break from the world outside, they come because they seek a peaceful experience, and they come because they want to enter a church because of its status or position. Hughes et al. (2013) state that visitors to cathedrals may be looking for 'self-guided, contemplative and reflective individual experiences' (2013, p. 218). This is also evident in this study. In the conversations about the church visit, the individual experience is at the centre. Being able to shut out the rest of the world for a moment and gather one's thoughts are therefore important elements of the experience. While several previous studies have emphasized tourists' extrinsic motivational factors such as architecture, history and other cultural dimensions of religious sites (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016; Gutic et al., 2010; Jackson & Hudman, 1995; Lupu et al., 2019), this study shows that tourists' intrinsic drive is equally important. Finding space for oneself and getting a break from the hectic outdoors are highly appreciated. By emphasizing the tourist's own interpretation of the experience that takes place, the study also gives insight into the meaning of experiences that embrace just 'being', as one informant put it: 'I think it's nice just to sit there. It gives me the chance to reflect on life' (Informant 4). Although several informants stated that their visit was not planned in advance, as Hughes et al. (2013) also point out in their study, the psychological and personal experience is what the tourists emphasized most when describing their visit afterwards.

Experiences arise from a context (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The motivation for visiting a church during one's holiday, whether planned or not, is thus individual, dynamic and holistic (Olsen, 2010). Larsen (2008) shows how the differences between everyday life and holidays in today's mobility society are increasingly being erased. He further points out that 'tourists never just travel to places: their mindsets, routines and social relations travel with them' (Larsen, 2008, p. 27). This is also evident in the interviews with the informants, when they state how their view of religion in some way influences their thoughts about their experience in S. Maria, because their previous religious experiences have affected who they are or how they relate to religion. Terzidou et al. (2018) argue that a person's motivation to seek out experiences at religious sites develops both through the experience as such and through the everyday relationship the person has to religion. Therefore, in order to understand the individual's experience as a tourist, it is important to see the connection between the thoughts and motives the person brings into the experience and the tourist experience itself (Hughes et al., 2013; Smørvik, 2014; Terzidou et al., 2018).

It is problematic to study church experiences without touching upon the role and function of the church. Francis et al. (2008) point out how cathedrals, or other religious sites like churches, can create an atmosphere of 'solitary quiet introspection ... rather than engaged social interaction' (2008, p. 73), and that this distinct, almost powerful atmosphere can invite visitors to a kind of introspection about themselves and the contexts they are part of. This also includes visitors to S. Maria when they talked about their impressions when inside the church, and how the church could almost function as a kind of guideline (Informant 7) or a setting that 'transports me out of my habitual self and expands my appreciation of the world around me' (Informant 1). The findings show that the church as an experiential space provides visitors with a setting where religion plays a part, even though the personal religious experience is not in focus. This is also pointed out by Gutic et al. (2010), who state that even visitors who do not share the cultural values or beliefs of the church recognize the sacred aspect of the religious site. The church experience may thus embrace a search for a form of spirituality, where even those who do not consider the spiritual aspect to be part of their motivation to visit churches still have a 'sense of sanctity' after their visit (Gutic et al., 2010). This may be seen in connection with the strong cultural and historical influence of Christianity (Bond et al., 2015).

Bond et al. (2015) state that the strengthening, almost healing function of religious sites has been overlooked in research on religious tourism, and show how a breathing space may allow people to regain their energy. This is also seen in the data of this study. But while Bond et al. (2015) focus on relaxation and peace and quiet, the findings here show how the beneficial qualities of the church experience include the opportunity to regain harmony or peace of mind. Several studies have confirmed how nature is well-suited to increase mental well-being, lower stress levels, and lead to recovery (e.g. Kaplan, 1995; Laumann et al., 2001; Van den Berg et al., 2007). The findings here support that the church experience can be a similar source of recuperation. The encounter with the church involves a sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), where the tourist manages to shut out other visitors, and where immersion and contemplation dominate. Using the church to rediscover oneself or to find a space for reflection is thus important and meaningful for tourists.

This study sheds light on tourists' individual and psychological experiences at religious sites. It also provides insight into the interpretation and meaning creation that take place from the tourist's perspective. Tourists visit churches for many reasons, but the motive for some may be a kind of impulse, or an urge that arises there and then. This study thus supports the understanding of motivation as a dynamic phenomenon, as something that can arise on the spot in the given situation. By following an impulse to visit a church, tourists achieve a relaxing experience of getting away from what some describe as a roller coaster (Informant 3). To study tourists' church experiences is not necessarily a straightforward matter. One limitation is that the study was based on a few informants at a single church in Rome. Another limitation is the challenge of selecting a representative sample of visitors within the study period. However, it has never been an intention to generalize the findings; the aim was to focus on individual interpretations of the experience. Further research is needed to learn more about tourists' psychological experiences at religious sites. Such research can explore

tourists' experience creation in other churches than S. Maria. Another suggestion for future research is studies that examine co-creation between tourists and how this affects experiences at religious sites. Several aspects of the individual church experience still seem to be unclear. It is therefore important to continue with research that explores tourists' experience creation in greater depth.

Disclosure statement

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