



Escaping the escape: a study among tourists' visiting Santa Cecilia in Trastevere

Kjersti Karijord Smørvik

To cite this article: Kjersti Karijord Smørvik (12 Sep 2024): Escaping the escape: a study among tourists' visiting Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, DOI: [10.1080/14766825.2024.2401843](https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2024.2401843)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2024.2401843>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 12 Sep 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 50



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Escaping the escape: a study among tourists' visiting Santa Cecilia in Trastevere

Kjersti Karijord Smørvik

UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, School of Business and Economics, Harstad

ABSTRACT

A number of tourists visit churches on their holiday without being religious or having any religious motivation. If religion is not important for the visit, what is then central to the tourist experience, and how do tourists describe their church visit? In this article, I examine tourists' church visits and the meaning it gives. In a setting characterized through tourism and religion, and with a special focus on the individual church experience, the personal perspective is prioritized. The data for this study have been collected at the church of Santa Cecilia in Rome, where I have interviewed 12 tourists. The findings show that the experience of escape is an important part of the church visit. Further the findings demonstrate tourists' need to find back to themselves, as a contrast to the busier tourist role. While previous studies of visits to religious sites often emphasize religious identity and holiness, this study indicates that religion is unimportant or subordinate to some extent. The findings therefore provide new knowledge about the significance for tourists of visiting churches.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 5 March 2024
Accepted 30 August 2024

KEYWORDS

Escapism; escape; tourist;
visitor experience; church;
non-religious

Introduction

Escapism has been a theme in tourism research ever since the 1970s (Cohen, 2010), and many articles have been written about tourists' motivation to escape from the monotony of everyday life by visiting destinations far and near (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977; Iso-Ahola, 1982). As Cohen (2010) points out, there is perhaps one particular aspect that has been strongly emphasized in the context of people escaping to holiday destinations, namely the need for authenticity and authentic experiences. However, through several years of research in the field, the use of authenticity as a discourse has been deconstructed and replaced by a vocabulary that encompasses identity and the self (Cohen, 2010). On this basis «experiences that can provide a temporary perception of escape as well as allow participants to work and play with identity should not be under-valued» (Cohen, 2010, p. 40). Despite the extensive use of escapism as an explanation for people's urge to travel, the concept of escape remains largely undertheorized (Cova

CONTACT Kjersti Karijord Smørvik  kjersti.k.smorvik@uit.no  UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, School of Business and Economics, UiT Campus Harstad, 9480 Harstad

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

et al., 2018). What lies in a person's escape, and what form of escape is represented by a holiday or by individual tourist experiences, is thus multifaceted.

There is little research that examines other forms of escape than the traditional search for out-of-the-ordinary experiences (Cova et al., 2018), and Chylińska (2022) discusses the need to understand what lies behind the tourist's urge to escape something, rather than focusing on the place one escapes to. In the context of visiting religious places, various notions of meaning and functions are involved (Francis et al., 2008; Liro et al., 2018; Voase, 2007), including the feeling of nostalgia and escape (Alvarado-Sizzo & Mínguez, 2023). Despite extensive research into tourists' motivation to visit religious sites, much remains unexplored (Iliev, 2020; Terzidou et al., 2018). This applies particularly to insight into the motivation of so-called non-religious tourists (Iliev, 2020). The uncritical use of the term religious tourism is also problematic (Hughes et al., 2013; Iliev, 2020; Smørvik, 2023), because many people visit religious attractions or destinations without being religious. Tourists' visits to religious places clearly cover a wide range of secular and/or religious practices (Hughes et al., 2013; Liro et al., 2018; Raj & Morpeth, 2007). There is thus a need for research that examines more closely non-religious tourist's subjective and personal experience in religious contexts (Albayrak et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020). With its focus on the church as an attraction and place to visit, this article contributes to research on the basis of its emphasis on the individual perspective of the tourist. Drawing on interviews and observations, this study deals with tourists' experiences of church visits, and what forms of meaning these may involve.

Escape, escape tourism and church experiences

The only term to describe tourists' main motivation for traveling is the word «escape», according to Dann (1977). Based on the original meaning of the word, escape implies a «departure from tangible sources of distress and disaster» (Heilman, 1975, p. 440). However, it is common to refer to escape in various contexts. One talks about escaping from a location or an environment, from a situation or a government, from destiny or trouble, and perhaps even from oneself (Heilman, 1975). The idea of escaping *from* something can hardly be understood without including what one is escaping *to* (Iso-Ahola, 1982). In tourism research, therefore, escape does not only apply to the notion of leaving or avoiding something, but also the desire to seek something different (Cohen, 2010; Iso-Ahola, 1982). Dann (1977) identifies anomie and self-satisfaction or self-assertion as two of the most important reasons for traveling. The former is derived from the individual's situation in society and the need to get away from it all, while the latter originates in the desire to go to a place that offers new opportunities to assert oneself and perhaps take on a different role from the habitual one (Dann, 1977).

Despite the pervasive use of the phenomenon of escape in consumer behavior research, the idea of escape is undertheorized, according to Cova et al. (2018). With its limited focus on the consumer's quest for out-of-the-ordinary experiences as a contrast to everyday boredom and anomie (see Arnould & Price, 1993; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Woermann & Rokka, 2015), previous consumer research has not only fallen into a «romantic fallacy», but also missed the opportunity to theorize the various forms of escape that can vitalize and explain consumer culture (Cova et al., 2018). In order to clarify different forms of escape, Cova et al. (2018) present an enlarged typology that

embraces the two dimensions of «distance from the self» and «distance from home». The latter is linked to the experiential context, from a common, habitual context (home) to places functioning as an extension of home, and finally extraordinary contexts away from home (see also Carù & Cova, 2007). The former, distance from self, on the other hand, is seen in connection of the need to forget oneself. The typology consists of four main types of escape: mundane escapes (1), restorative escapes (2), Turnerian escapes (3) and warlike escapes (4). The first, mundane escapes, describes various forms of everyday escape such as being absorbed by a TV programme, or into music or even a meal. The second, restorative escapes, describes escape zones where one can recharge one's batteries, cultivate an interest or have a kind of refuge between work and home, such as a coffee shop, a park or a shopping centre. The third type, Turnerian escapes, describes escaping from structure and everyday routines through extraordinary experiences or activities, such as those of a holiday. The fourth, warlike escapes, deals with examples of escaping by pushing oneself through physical challenges, pain and/or endurance (Cova et al., 2018). However, it should be noted that a single experience may include a mix of several escape forms.

Tourists can experience an «'outer' escape into some specific geographical environments» and an «'inner' escape from themselves» (Chylińska, 2022, p. 266). This can be termed a «double escape», according to Chylińska (2022). In tourism, the need to escape something or to look for change or novelty are proclaimed in many various ways, and Chylińska (2022) mentions a variety of escape forms such as participating in nature-based activities, traveling slowly, visiting remote or far-off destinations, or participating in extreme tourism. However, despite the desire to disconnect from everyday life in a place that is geographically and culturally distinct from one's home environment, it is difficult to disconnect from the realities that permeate everyday life (Chylińska, 2022). Cova et al. (2018) argue for emphasizing different and perhaps more mundane forms of escape, also within tourism. Seen in the context of tourism and visits to religious attractions and destinations, one encounter, as an alternative to escape, other terms such as restitution (Bond et al., 2015; Smørvik, 2021), relationship between the self and others (Francis et al., 2008), belonging (Casais & Sousa, 2020), a sense of sanctity (Gutic et al., 2010), nostalgia (Alvarado-Sizzo & Mínguez, 2023), and religious conviction (Casais & Sousa, 2020; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014). How or to what extent these involve an actual escape experience for the tourist naturally depends on the motivation prior to the experience, or even the situation the tourist finds oneself hours or minutes earlier.

Research has shown many examples of how the contrasts between everyday life and holiday life are becoming more and more blurred (Edensor, 2001, 2007; Larsen, 2008; McCabe, 2002; McCabe et al., 2014). When a church is a setting for tourist visits it is also evident that religious and secular practices effect the tourist experience, but while religion was previously the main motivation for visiting religious sites (Rinschede, 1992), such visits today are based on a range of interests. These include an interest of art (Lupu et al., 2019), or architecture (Jackson & Hudman, 1995; Lupu et al., 2019), or history (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016; Gutic et al., 2010), or tranquility (Smørvik, 2021, 2022), or even curiosity (Terzidou et al., 2018). A church as an attraction is not like any other tourist attraction. This is naturally related to the cultural and symbolic values that the church represents and the powerful objects that are found in abundance at religious sites (Shackley, 2002; Terzidou, 2020). The experience that takes place at a religious

destination or a church is therefore often manifold, in terms of elements such as spirituality, nostalgia, intangibility and closeness to God (Eliade, 1987). The encounter with the interior of a church may arouse unexpected and sometimes surprising emotional reactions, and these moments may be experienced different from encounters with other, more mundane surroundings. Around the tourist experience is a complex network that is affected by the holiday situation and by the tourist's life otherwise (Edensor, 2000; Kaaristo & Rhoden, 2017; Larsen, 2008; Larsen et al., 2019). This leads to an acknowledgement that the society or setting of which the individual is a part must be seen in relation to the individual's choice of actions and the way in which these are interpreted. Tourism, and especially mass tourism is governed by 'collective gazing, repetitive performances, guides and tour leaders, and the drama by photographing and moving en masse' (Edensor, 1998; Larsen & Urry, 2011). With the behavior of some groups of tourists, which in Rome seem more noticeable than in many other less visited destinations, a form of noise can spread, leading to different choices of maneuvers by other tourists. Most human actions are directed towards something (Iso-Ahola, 1982), and one can therefore assert that tourists do not go after experiences for no reason. When religion is not important for tourists' visiting churches, what is then central to their experience? Based on the context of a church and in order to get a deeper insight into the church experience, this study examines the forms of individual experiences tourist visits involve, and what meaning they give.

Method and data

This is a qualitative study, with observation and interviews as the main source of data. The study is empirically based on 12 focused interviews (Tjora, 2010, 2019), and periods of observation, of tourists' visiting the church of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome. The observation and the interviews were carried out during the Spring of 2023, in a period over nine days. All data were generated in the short opening hours of the church, between 10 and 12.30 am and from 16 to 18 pm, and all the interviewed visitors at the church were tourists on holiday in Rome. The 12 informants (six men and six women) came from seven different countries: the USA ($n = 1$), Germany ($n = 1$), France ($n = 3$), the UK ($n = 4$), the Netherlands ($n = 1$), Poland ($n = 1$) and Australia ($n = 1$). With ages ranged from 22 to 84 years.

Interviewing involves gaining insight into what cannot be observed (Patton, 2002), and interviews are a key aspect of qualitative research (Cresswell, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Veal, 2011). When a church is the site of data collection, it is self-evident that the researcher cannot contact visitors in the church itself, and I have therefore approached visitors on their way out of the church or shortly afterwards. In order to fit in with the tight schedules that tourists often have, the interviews have been conducted just outside Santa Cecilia, where there is an enclosed atrium garden well suited for the calm and concentration needed in a research interview. With the outdoors as the interview setting, it is important to take the weather into account. Thus, all interviews were consequently conducted when it was not raining, and the temperature was suitable for sitting outdoors. My recruitment of informants has been observation-based (Henriksen & Tøndel, 2017), focusing on approaching visitors who did not seem too busy and with whom I could make eye contact. Based on their suitability in this type of open environment, the interviews can be considered as spontaneous focused interviews (Tjora,

2010). Spontaneous focused interviews are short interviews carried out 'on the spot' (Henriksen & Tjora, 2018; Henriksen & Tøndel, 2017), conducted after a brief introduction (Tjora, 2010). All interviews were recorded, lasting from 6 to 34 min, and an interview guide was prepared on forehand. The interview guide included a couple of starter questions and an in-depth discussion of the topic. The informants were also asked to fill in some information on their visit, after the interview had taken place.

Observation is particularly suitable in combination with other methods (Adler & Adler, 1994). To complement the interviews, I have therefore also used observation and field notes. Inside the church, I have made my observations from the back of the church at various times each day during the opening hours, where I have inconspicuously followed the visitors' actions and activity. I have also walked around the church and observed visitors moving about. My observations have focused on the content and duration of the tourists' visits, in addition to tourists' body language and behavior, and the observations have been helpful in order to expand the meaning behind the words in the interviews, as Patton (2002) points out. Further it has been important to observe tourists to understand more of their church experiences. Tjora (2010) mentions how even a limited amount of observation can provide a great deal of useful additional data. The combination of observations and interviews have thus provided a better basis for understanding the phenomenon under study, and given the study a greater breadth and depth, which also is emphasized by Patton (2002).

When processing and analysing the observational and interview material, I have systematized and categorized the data into themes, using a stepwise-deductive-inductive approach (Tjora, 2010; 2019). As part of the process, I have applied and created categories and themes in proportion to existing theories and framework (Bingham, 2023). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state that it is difficult if not impossible to conduct independent, pure, objective studies, and emphasize that the qualitative researcher will inevitably be influenced by his or her background. It can thus be challenging to achieve true objectivity in the research. My subjective perceptions and my previous experiences may have influenced what I have noticed and seen. However, my interest in the topic has encouraged me to make every effort to collect and analyse the data as independently as possible from my pre-understandings and prejudices.

Findings

Santa Cecilia

The church of Santa Cecilia is dedicated to the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia, and is said to be located in the area where she lived, before she was martyred in the 3rd century (Gulowsen & Steen, 2016; Oliva, 2016). The church was restored during the papacy of Paschal I (817–824), and a monastery, founded next to the church, was later rebuilt by Pope Paschal II in the twelfth century (Roma, 1998). From 1527, the Benedictine nuns took up residence in the monastic complex, and the titular Cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrati took an initiative to transform the complex into one of the most important religious, spiritual, productive and economic centers in Rome (Vatican News, 2024). Over the centuries, the complex has been through extensive exterior and interior alterations (Oliva, 2016; Roma, 1998). Today's church interior is in rococo style with several works of art from

the late Middle Ages, and here the sculpture of St. Cecilia by the altar perhaps attracts the most interest (Gulowsen & Steen, 2016). Beneath the church is the crypt which contains St. Cecilia's sarcophagus and extensive remains of several Roman buildings (Roma, 1998). The church is open to visitors from 10.00 to 12.30 and from 16.00 to 18.00. As with most churches in Rome, there is no entrance fee to visit the church, but there is a small sales area a few steps away from the entrance where one can buy tickets to see the exhibits in the basement. Here one can also make a donation to the church or buy items from a very limited selection. The Benedictine nuns play an important part in preserving, managing and servicing Santa Cecilia. This also includes activities such as different courses held for those who are interested. Other activities, such as concerts and Holy Mass are held at fixed times during opening hours, and tourists are welcome to either listen, participate or just observe as a visitor.

An undisturbed experience

Santa Cecilia is one of the few churches that has preserved its original atrium garden (Gulowsen & Steen, 2016), and the large square forecourt is the first thing that meets visitors after passing through a massive entrance that partially conceals the church and the atrium garden. The large courtyard is surrounded by tall buildings, and in the middle of the courtyard is a fountain on a lawn surrounded by rose bushes. In these surroundings, some people take the time to sit down for a while or to walk around and look. Some are eating something. Some are enjoying the spring sunshine. One or two stop and smell the roses. Others just sit and take it easy. Sometimes no one is speaking, and all one can hear is the water trickling on the fountain. Above our heads, swallows fly between the houses, and occasionally the silence is broken by a couple of seagulls perched on an edge above the pillars, over the front door.

The church of Santa Cecilia is quite different from the hectic environment in other parts of Trastevere and Rome. It stands at some distance from any of the main attractions in Rome, such as the Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica, the Spanish Steps or the Trevi Fountain. It also stands at some distance from the far more visited church in Trastevere, the Basilica of Santa Maria. There are fewer visitors, fewer tour groups and much less noise. Many people appreciate having the church to themselves and finally finding a place where they can almost be alone in the experience.

«We were nearly alone and it's ideal», says one informant. (Informant 8)

«It was more for me. Just for me», another points out. (Informant 5)

A third one explains:

«I was actually saying, inside, we sat there and there's only a few people, and I said, there must be times where you'd like to go in the big churches in the centre of Rome, and it's like this, and you can just sit and look, but you can't, you know, you're sort of in someone's way or somebody's taking a photo or someone's having a picture taken in front of the altar to show the art or ... ». (Informant 12)

It is quiet and peaceful inside the church. Some people walk around looking at the adornments, while others sit either almost at the back or right at the front near the sculpture of St. Cecilia. They seem to be reflecting. Some speak quietly. People take photos and look

around, but without the usual buzzing from large tourist groups or loud tour guides. The visitors comment on these calm, undisturbed moments:

«Sometimes it's a matter of absorbing the atmosphere, listening to the quiet and the silence and that's really special about it», a woman tells me. (Informant 9)

«I like this peace and quiet», says another visitor, continuing: «It's kind of like time doesn't exist». (Informant 3)

She emphasizes that even the youngest visitors absorbed the peace and quiet. They were affected by the peaceful atmosphere, just like the adults:

«What was special for me was the silence. The silence and the total respect of the place. The children were quiet. And for once they weren't looking at their phones». (Informant 3)

Getting away from the crowds

One does not need to go far from Santa Cecilia to find the reality of tourism. Narrow streets packed with tourists, crowded pavement cafés and noisy groups. Some stand around their tour guide, others block passages and street corners while deciding whether to go left or right. On the street there are drivers in a hurry, horns honking and buses struggling to get through. The church of Santa Cecilia stands in contrast to this busy cityscape, and the interviews with the informants reveal an important recurring theme: the need for an escape from the swarms of tourists and the hustle and bustle of Rome.

«We've been to the churches in the middle of Rome, which are much more touristy. Then I just find that looking, you know, I don't feel it's a church, it's more like a museum or you know, for art and things, but then I come to somewhere like this. Here you get the best of both worlds, so it's so beautiful», says one informant. (Informant 12)

«In Rome there's so many churches, there comes a point when you say it's a church, I, wow, it's another church, yeah, it's another department store, it's just the same. But here I enjoyed the peace and the tranquility», says another. (Informant 5)

A third one underlines this:

«If you were for example in the Vatican there's a lot of crowds. Here when we were in the church, we were alone, there's nothing. There's nobody around us. It was very nice». (Informant 6)

The informants also mention how the many attractions and the huge numbers of tourists in other parts of Rome make them appreciate the break even more:

«I like how the rest of Rome is so busy right now and this is a quiet moment ... » says a woman, pausing for a moment before finishing her sentence: «... without people». (Informant 1)

«It was perfect here. But yesterday, the place we were. It was like the subway. Many, many people», another informant points out. (Informant 7)

Meeting the religion

A visit to a church includes architectural elements such as the interior and decoration, façade and style. However, it also involves an encounter with other elements: one's

relationship with religion, Christianity, faith and power, and something bigger than oneself. At Santa Cecilia Holy Mass is held at fixed times during the opening hours and at the same time as visitors are allowed to visit. Even though the religious experience is not in focus, Santa Cecilia is something more than merely a traditional attraction. The church as such arouses emotions. It calls for engagement. It makes one think about the missing place of religion in one's life.

«I guess I ... , when I'm in a church, I always wonder what I missed in my life not being – not having a religion. So it makes me feel a tiny bit envious of people who can go in a church and feel the ... , that connection they were brought up in», says one of the informants. (Informant 1)

Two others tell me:

«I was brought up a Catholic, and though I am not, I would not sort of say that is my faith now, but I still think it is Christian, and I still find churches very soothing and you know, I think that might be, you know, from being young and the past of my life». (Informant 12)

«I don't consider myself as religious, but I was brought up a Catholic so a lot of those images and so on are familiar, the saints and ... So that's familiar to me ... I do like that sense of peace that you often get [in a church]». (Informant 9)

An elderly couple also mentioned their lack of belief in religion:

«I don't have any religious feeling or ... But I like the atmosphere. It's a good experience», says the husband (Informant 7), before his wife adds:

«It's a moving experience. And it's more than just artistic, it's something else, but we don't know what». (Informant 8)

Santa Cecilia is brighter than several other churches in Rome, and there is only a simple glass door to separate the nave from the courtyard outside. There is a form of unpretentious decoration, more modest than in many other Catholic churches. Right at the front, by the altar, is the sculpture of St. Cecilia, in the form of a delicate, slender woman. On the marble floor are several rows of chairs, with enough space between the rows. The encounter with this almost spartan and, for many people, less symbolic and lavish church interior is appreciated by visitors:

«I had no idea whether it would be gold, glitzy, many times the decoration in churches is there to overpower you, to show you how small you are, how rich and powerful they are. This [Santa Cecilia] was actually understated and immediately welcoming and peaceful». (Informant 5)

Time to think

Although almost all the informants say that they would not describe themselves as religious or believers, the church still have a function as a place to gather one's thoughts or perhaps calm down for a moment. In their experience of the art, the decoration, the architecture, the lighted candles, and the slightly chilly interior, many of the visitors express more personal reflections. They feel that the atmosphere and the interior encourage them to be more aware of themselves and their perspective on life, as exemplified by

one of the oldest informants, when he notes that old age, things that change, friends that pass away all affect their experience in the church;

«You know, we used to be here with friends, and we have lost friends», he tells. (Informant 7)

«We went here many times», his wife adds. You see, we used to spend time in Rome many years ago, when we were very young. But it's not the same». (Informant 8)

«No, we are not the same», the husband interrupts. (Informant 7)

People's relationship to time and the broader context of their lives is also emphasized by others:

«I've been doing a lot of reflection», explains one woman. «My son, who's autistic as well, has just been diagnosed with diabetes. So I'm going back to my roots really. Praying for guidance or help or something ... But usually when I go [to a church], I think of my children mainly, and think oh please look after them or things like that». (Informant 12)

«I think about mortality, especially because, eh, we're getting older», says another woman. (Informant 11)

One of the informants also talk about how visiting a church is not just a matter of looking at the architecture or the religious symbols, but also the whole picture so to say:

«You're there because ... oh, my parents, my grandparents, my great great grandparents, you're there because ten centuries ago something happened and brought your civilization where it is. And that's what's interesting about churches. The buildings, the steeple ... it's like that. It's all those little bits put together. Not even on paper or chronologically, you know. But in your mind. Everything you've seen and reflected on and talked about. And it adds ... It makes a lifetime, you know». (Informant 4)

Discussion and conclusion

One can easily imagine that the role of a tourist is comfortable; the tourist is free from everyday demands and expectations, away from work and everyday chores, and can see and experience new things. However, the sphere of tourism can be unpredictable and challenging, dependent on the skill of the actors and the performances of those who visit (Edensor, 2001). Overtourism can be seen as a growing problem in many culture tourism cities (Rozmiarek et al., 2022), and is especially noticeable in Rome. Tourists who seek out the church of Santa Cecilia state that they are escaping tourism. In this way, visiting the church, free from the hordes of tourists, the noise and the rude tourist behavior that some mention, thus becomes a kind of escape from other tourists. The quote by informant 9, «The more other visitors there are, the less likely I am to stay», exemplifies how many of the informants felt about needing a break from the crowds of visitors at other attractions in Rome. Orazi et al. (2023) refer to three main reasons for wanting to escape. These are removing oneself from a present aversive reality, avoiding thinking about anything stressful, and feeling momentary relief from something (Orazi et al., 2023), which are all relevant to the present study. Mass tourism not only threatens the destination or the local population, as Rozmiarek et al. (2022) refers to, it also threatens the tourists themselves, according to Hjelseth (2019). When everyone seeks the same destination, they get in each other's way, and a repetitive pattern emerges, where everyone in the crowd or queue wishes the others were not there. Therefore, those who seek

the popular attractions do not constitute a group; they are just next to each other, as competitors or intrusive others.

«It would be nice to go into some of these churches first thing in the morning and just ... , so it's a church again, rather than an attraction», says one visitor (Informant 12), expressing displeasure at the number of tourists in the churches of Rome. Some of the informants find it challenging when the sites are too touristy and crowded, «like the subway», as Informant 7 puts it. It is important to understand the consumer's actions and experiences based on the individual's particular context (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), and focusing on what the person is escaping from is thus just as important as what the person is escaping to (Chylińska, 2022; Orazi et al., 2023). Based on the dimensions of «distance from the self» and «distance from home», Cova et al. (2018) describe four main types of escape: mundane, restorative, Turnerian and warlike escapes. Tourists in Rome have already escaped from their everyday life, as implied by a Turnerian or anti-structural escape. However, although they have a physical «distance from home», they are not free from their everyday life (Hall & Holdsworth, 2016; Kaaristo & Rhoden, 2017; Larsen et al., 2019) and many influences of the city, such as queues, traffic noise and gathering of people. Escaping from something is not necessarily a question of traveling a great geographical distance or experiencing something extraordinary; escape can also be a respite from something and a time-out, as mentioned by one of the tourists: «I think the nicest thing is when you just go in (the church) and it's very peaceful and you can think! Just take a bit of time out» (Informant 12). Visiting Santa Cecilia thus represents a restorative escape for several of the tourists.

In the church setting, most of the informants describe themselves as non-religious. The changed focus from sacred into secular uses of the church is in line with research on pilgrimage tourism, where people embarking on pilgrimage routes for a diversity of reasons including e.g. sporting and cultural interests (Morpeth, 2007). Only one of the informants says she visits churches for religious reasons, but even for her, religion is not the main focus of her visit to Santa Cecilia, but rather the atmosphere, the church itself and its surroundings, she tells (Informant 3). Tourists who come here talk about the calming atmosphere of the church. To visit Santa Cecilia gives a «good, peaceful, serene feeling», in the words of Informant 1. She adds, «I'm surprisingly moved by Christian churches and synagogues and other religious places, even though I'm not a religious person myself». Several informants touch on the significance of the relaxing, almost reassuring, effect of the church, using words such as «moving», «peaceful» and «welcoming» to describe their feelings. Chylińska (2022, p. 282) states: «Everyone has the right to their own private escape» and describes the complexity involved in gaining insight into tourists' escapes. A holiday consists of several different forms of escape, even with an overarching approach that escape in tourism is about geographical movement from one structure to another. Chylińska (2022) further discusses escape in connection with themes such as isolation or time alone, and shows how psychological isolation, outside organized forms of tourism or standard structures, can be called a form of escape tourism. At the same time, she finds it problematic to focus on the geographical aspect or the destination as such, because the experience of escape is not necessarily linked to the attributes of the destination or attraction, but rather how the place is perceived, which is also the impression from my findings. The tourists' experience of Santa Cecilia is referred to as a break in an otherwise hectic city. More precisely, the tourist's escape experience in Santa Cecilia can be seen as a kind of

circular movement where the person has first escaped from home and into the role of tourist, and then escapes from tourism and the role of tourist into the church and back to him- or herself again. This is not merely one form of escape, but a multifaceted escape where the tourist moves between the various social roles of everyday life and holiday life. It can also be defined as a «double escape», in the words of Chylińska (2022). Cova et al. (2018) argue that «escape is mainly realized through a feeling of enhanced protection of the self that does not integrate any notion of loss. Restorative experiences foster self-expression and self-regulation rather than self-suspension» (Cova et al., 2018, p. 457). This concurs with my findings. The restorative escape experienced by tourists in the church setting is described as getting closer to oneself, i.e. thinking about one's view on life or who one is or has become. Cohen (2010) points to experiences that provide a temporary feeling of escape, where one comes closer to oneself and one's identity. Visiting a church can be an example of this. However, while previous studies of visits to religious attractions and destinations most often focus on holiness and religious identity (Bond et al., 2015; Iliev, 2020), my findings show that the key aspect is not about worshipping God or one's religious identity, but rather is about finding back to one's own identity and self.

In this study, I have examined tourists' church visits and the forms of meaning these may involve. The study provides insight into tourists' individual experiences at a religious site as a church, and sheds light on several forms of meanings, of which escaping tourism and finding a quiet spot are the most prevalent. The study gives insight in both what tourists escape *from* and what they escape *to* and embraces the value of restorative escapes. A contribution of this study is therefore an enhanced knowledge of tourists' escape experiences at religious sites. Participating in consumer experiences or tourist experiences can provide a break and relief from an unpleasant and stressful situation (Orazi et al., 2023), e. g. provoked by huge numbers of visitors at other attractions. Visiting a church on holiday is consequently not just a matter of looking at the church as such, according to several of the informants, but is about the importance of a few minutes' time-out from one's general situation, and the opportunity to reflect in a calm and welcoming atmosphere. A further contribution of this study is thus a deeper understanding of the importance of churches for non-religious visitors.

There is still little knowledge of non-religious visitors' experiences at religious sites, especially with regard to escape experiences. A greater focus on non-religious tourists' experiences at religious places can enhance understanding of their motivation to visit churches on holiday, and the forms of escape that may be involved. Tourists' encounters with churches and themselves can paradoxically be seen as an «escape from an escape», or as Löfgren so subtly expressed it in 1999: «Getting away from it all might be an attempt to get it all back together again» (1999, p. 195).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Kjersti Karijord Smørvik (PhD) is an associate professor at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, School of Business and Economics, Campus Harstad. She has a PhD within business administration from the

Nord University in Bodø. Her research is mainly within subjects as marketing, experience economy, tourism and consumer behavior, with a special focus on consumer experiences. Smørvik has several years of management experience from positions within the tourism and cultural industry.

References

- Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1994). Observational techniques. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 377–392). Sage.
- Albayrak, T., Herstein, R., Caber, M., Drori, N., Bideci, M., Berger R. (2018). Exploring religious tourist experiences in Jerusalem: The intersection of Abrahamic religions. *Tourism Management*, 69, 285–296. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.06.022>
- Alvarado-Sizzo, I., & Mínguez, C. (2023). From religious tourism to nostalgic pilgrimages. Reflections from Mexico. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 21(4), 451–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2022.2073826>
- Arnould, E. J., & Price, L. (1993). River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(1), 24–45. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209331>
- Askegaard, S., & Linnet, J. T. (2011). Towards an epistemology of consumer culture theory. *Marketing Theory*, 11(4), 381–404. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593111418796>
- Bideci, M., & Albayrak, T. (2016). Motivations of the Russian and German tourists visiting pilgrimage site of Saint Nicholas Church. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 18, 10–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.12.022>
- Bingham, A. J. (2023). From data management to actionable findings: A five-phase process of qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231183620>
- Bond, N., Packer, J., & Ballantyne, R. (2015). Exploring visitor experiences, activities and benefits at three religious tourism sites. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 17(5), 471–481. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2014>
- Canniford, R., & Shankar, A. (2013). Purifying practices: How consumers assemble romantic experiences of nature. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(5), 1051–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1086/667202>
- Carù, A., & Cova, B. (2007). Consuming experiences. In A. Carù & B. Cova (Eds.), *Consuming experience* (pp. 34–47). Routledge.
- Casais, B., & Sousa, B. (2020). Heterogeneity of motivations and conflicts in pilgrim-to-pilgrim interaction: A research on the way of Saint James. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 36, 100748–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100748>
- Chylińska, D. (2022). Escape? But where? About 'escape tourism'. *Tourist Studies*, 22(3), 262–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687976221092220>
- Cohen, S. (2010). Searching for escape, authenticity and identity: Experiences of 'lifestyle travellers'. In P. Morgan, P. Lugosi, & J. R. B. Ritchie (Eds.), *The tourism and leisure experience: Consumer and managerial perspectives* (pp. 27–42). Channel View Publications.
- Cova, B., Carù, A., & Cayla, J. (2018). Re-conceptualizing escape in consumer research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 21(4), 445–464. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-01-2017-0030>
- Cresswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Sage.
- Crompton, J. L. (1979). Motivations for pleasure vacation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 6(4), 408–424. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(79\)90004-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(79)90004-5)
- Dann, G. M. S. (1977). Anomie, ego-enhancement and tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 4(4), 184–194. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(77\)90037-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(77)90037-8)
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed). Sage.
- Edensor, T. (1998). *Tourists at the Taj*. Routledge.
- Edensor, T. (2000). Staging tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 27(2), 322–344. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(99\)00082-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(99)00082-1)
- Edensor, T. (2001). Performing tourism, staging tourism. *Tourist Studies*, 1(1), 59–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879760100100104>

- Edensor, T. (2007). Mundane mobilities, performances and spaces of tourism. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 8(2), 199–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360701360089>
- Eliade, M. (1987). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion*. Harcourt Inc.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (1994). Interviewing: The art of science. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 361–376). Sage.
- Francis, L. J., Williams, E., Annis, J., Robbins, M. (2008). Understanding cathedral visitors: Psychological type and individual differences in experience and appreciation. *Tourism Analysis*, 13(1), 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.3727/108354208784548760>
- Gulowsen, K., & Steen, O. (2016). *Roma: Kunsten, arkitekturen, historien [Rome: Art, architecture, history]*. Dreyers Forlag.
- Gutic, J., Caie, E., & Clegg, A. (2010). In search of heterotopia? Motivations of visitors to an English cathedral. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 12(6), 750–760. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.790>
- Hall, S. M., & Holdsworth, C. (2016). Family practices, holiday and the everyday. *Mobilities*, 11(2), 284–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2014.970374>
- Heilman, R. B. (1975). Escape and escapism varieties of literary experience. *The Sewanee Review*, 83(3), 439–458.
- Henriksen, I. M., & Tjora, A. (2018). Situational domestication and the origin of the cafe worker species. *Sociology*, 52(2), 351–366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516674663>
- Henriksen, I. M., & Tøndel, G. (2017). Spontane dybdeintervjuer. *Norsk Sosiologisk Tidsskrift*, 1(3), 216–232. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2535-2512-2017-03-02>
- Hjelseth, A. (2019). Byen som museum: Turisme, autentisitet og byutvikling [Towns as museums: Tourism, authenticity and urban development]. In I. M. Henriksen & A. Tjora (Eds.), *Bysamfunn [urban societies]* (pp. 163–176). Universitetsforlaget.
- Hughes, K., Bond, N., & Ballantyne, R. (2013). Designing and managing interpretive experiences at religious sites: Visitors' perceptions of Canterbury Cathedral. *Tourism Management*, 36, 210–220. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2012.11.022>
- Iliev, D. (2020). The evolution of religious tourism: Concept, segmentation and development of new identities. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 45, 131–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2020.07.012>
- Iso-Ahola, S. E. (1982). Toward a social psychological theory of tourism motivation: A rejoinder. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 9(2), 256–262. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(82\)90049-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(82)90049-4)
- Jackson, R. H., & Hudman, L. (1995). Pilgrimage tourism and English cathedrals: The role of religion in travel. *The Tourist Review*, 50(4), 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb058206>
- Kaaristo, M., & Rhoden, S. (2017). Everyday life and water tourism mobilities: Mundane aspects of canal travel. *Tourism Geographies*, 19(1), 78–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2016.1230647>
- Kim, B., Seongseop, K. S., & King, B. (2020). Religious tourism studies: Evolution, progress, and future prospects. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 45(2), 185–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2019.1664084>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju [qualitative research interviews]*. Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.
- Larsen, J. (2008). De-exoticizing tourist travel: Everyday life and sociality on the move. *Leisure Studies*, 27(1), 21–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360701198030>
- Larsen, J., (2019). Ordinary tourism and extraordinary everyday life: Re-thinking tourism and cities. In T. Frisch, C. Sommer, & L. Stoltenberg (Eds.), *Tourism and everyday life in the contemporary city* (pp. 24–41). Routledge.
- Larsen, J., & Urry, J. (2011). Gazing and performing. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29(6), 1110–1125. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d21410>
- Liro, J., Soljan, I., & Biliska-Wodecka, E. (2018). Visitors' diversified motivations and behavior – The case of the pilgrimage center in Krakow (Poland). *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 16(4), 416–435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2017.1332068>
- Löfgren, O. (1999). *On holiday: A history of vacationing*. University of California Press.
- Lupu, C., Brochado, A., & Stoleriu, O. (2019). Visitor experiences at UNESCO monasteries in Northeast Romania. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 14(2), 150–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2018.1506458>

- McCabe, S. (2002). The tourist experience and everyday life. In G. M. S. Dann (Ed.), *The tourist as a metaphor of the social world* (pp. 61–75). Cabi.
- McCabe, S., (2014). Tourist. In P. Adey, D. Bissell, K. Hannam, P. Merriman, & M. Sheller (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of mobilities* (pp. 349–357). Routledge.
- Morpeth, N. D. (2007). Case study 3: Ancient and modern pilgrimage: El camino frances. In R. Raj & N. D. Morpeth (Eds.), *Religious tourism and pilgrimage festival management: An international perspective* (pp. 153–160). Cabi.
- Oliva, V. (2016). *The basilica of santa cecilia in Rome*. Basilica di Santa Cecilia.
- Orazi, D. C., Mah, K. Y., Derksen, T., Murray, K. B. (2023). Consumer escapism: Scale development, validation, and physiological associations. *Journal of Business Research*, 160, 113805–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113805>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Sage.
- Raj, R., & Morpeth, N. D. (2007). Introduction: Establishing linkages between religious travel and tourism. In R. Raj & N. D. Morpeth (Eds.), *Religious tourism and pilgrimage festivals management: An international perspective* (pp. 1–14). Cabi.
- Rinschede, G. (1992). Forms of religious tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(1), 51–67. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(92\)90106-Y](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(92)90106-Y)
- Rodrigues, S., & McIntosh, A. (2014). Motivations, experiences and perceived impacts of visitation at a Catholic monastery in New Zealand. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 9(4), 271–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2014.899602>
- Roma [Rome]. (1998). Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Rozmiarek, M., Malchrowicz-Moško, E., & Kazimierczak, M. (2022). Overtourism and the impact of tourist traffic on the daily life of city residents: A case study of Poznan. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 20(5), 718–734. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2022.2029463>
- Shackley, M. (2002). Space, sanctity and service; the English Cathedral as heterotopia. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 4(5), 345–352. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.388>
- Smørvik, K. K. (2021). Why enter the church on holiday? Tourist encounters with the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 16(3), 337–348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2020.1807557>
- Smørvik, K. K. (2022). Samskaping på bakerste benk: Om den tause turist-til-turist-interaksjonen i kirkerommet. *Norsk Sosiologisk Tidsskrift*, 6(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.18261/nost.6.2.3>
- Smørvik, K. K. (2023). Contagious behaviour or not? Tourists' skills and practices in a Norwegian church. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 18(6), 756–767. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2023.2250470>
- Terzidou, M. (2020). Re-materialising the religious tourism experience: A post-human perspective. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 83, 102924–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102924>
- Terzidou, M., Scarles, C., & Saunders, M. N. K. (2018). The complexities of religious tourism motivations: Sacred places, vows and visions. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 70, 54–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2018.02.011>
- Tjora, A. (2010). *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder i praksis [qualitative research methods in practice]*. Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.
- Tjora, A. (2019). *Qualitative research as stepwise-deductive induction*. Routledge.
- Vatican News. (2024, August 14). The Benedictine apothecary of the Pope's collections. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2023-11/segreti-musei-vaticani-antica-spezieria-santa-cecilia.html>
- Veal, A. J. (2011). *Research methods for leisure and tourism* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Voase, R. (2007). Visiting a cathedral: The consumer psychology of a 'rich experience'. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 13(1), 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250601010851>
- Woermann, N., & Rokka, J. (2015). Timeflow: How consumption practices shape consumers' temporal experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(6), 1486–1508. <https://doi.org/10.1086/680668>