

WANT TO SEE A BETTER WORLD?

Geotourism is a new movement that shows travellers how to improve the places they visit. Jay Walljasper tours Santiago, Chile, with Jonathan Tourtellot, the dedicated globetrotter who founded the movement

'GET READY,' JONATHAN TOURTELLOT warns a crowd of US travel writers, 'for tourism on steroids.'

A hush falls over the hotel conference room as he explains that international tourism almost doubled between 1990 and 2005. People are expected to take a billion trips outside their own countries in 2010; a billion and a half by 2015 as many Chinese join the travelling throngs. Multiply that by four or five, he calculates, to include people taking domestic vacations. In less than a decade, we could see seven billion tourists roaming the planet.

'Another way to look at it,' he says, 'is to realise that if four billion people decide to see the Mona Lisa, it would take 309 years, even with groups of 25 viewing it for one minute, 24 hours a day.'

Tourism on this scale threatens what's special in the world. The Galápagos Islands are straining under the weight of invading tourist boats, he reports. The famous beaches of the Spain's Costa del Sol might better be called the Costa del Concrete. 'More ridiculously, a casino was proposed for Easter Island. Thankfully, I understand, that idea is dead.'

Yet Tourtellot is no Cassandra, fanning fears of a global tourist apocalypse. To reassure the nervous faces in the audience, he adds: 'Vermont and Tuscany handle a lot of tourists, yet score well. It's because the people who live there care about keeping the integrity of these places.'

This 'score' is the ranking of travel destinations that he compiles with the help of 400 experts in fields such as history, economics and wildlife biology for *National Geographic Traveler*, where he is geotourism editor. Geotourism is his own term, which he defines as: 'Tourism that

sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place: the environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture and well-being of its residents. It's about building a relationship with the place you are visiting – with the local culture, with the natural environment and with the people who live there.'

A SENSE OF PLACE

Tourtellot believes that geotourism provides the antidote to tourism on steroids. He thinks geotravellers can improve social conditions, ecological problems and the unique character of the places they visit.

'A geotourist doesn't have to be rich or overly virtuous,' he explains. 'Everyone who goes to a convention and hangs around for a couple more days to see the place – at that point, they're geotourists. Anyone who gets off a cruise ship and discovers an interesting town, then decides to come back and explore it another time, that's a geotourist. Anyone who wants to experience a sense of place.'

'With the rise of mass tourism today, it's easy not to experience much of a place besides the beach, or the golf course, or the resort hotel,' he continues. 'But I can assure you, it's a lot more fun to get to know the place and meet the people.'

Tourtellot urges everyone attending the Society of American Travel Writers' Conference in Santiago, Chile, to pay attention to the impact – positive as well as negative – that tourists can make on a place and the people who live there. 'We have six billion people on the Earth,' he says, 'and they all deserve a vacation. But we need to be thoughtful about how we are going to do it.'

'We're looking for geotourism heroes,'

The bohemian barrio of Bellavista in Santiago, Chile, at dusk. The community has been revived through grassroots activity that promotes the neighbourhood to visitors

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Above: Como Agua para Chocolate, a popular restaurant in Santiago's Bellavista district; centre: typical hotels on the Costa del Sol, Spain – the



antithesis of geotourism; Above: local men congregate in the historic Portuguese city of Évora, a UNESCO World Heritage site

he announces – individuals dedicated to harnessing the economic and cultural power of tourism to sustain and improve their communities. They can be small-scale entrepreneurs such as Liz Perdomo, a local woman in the town of Gracias, Honduras, who opened a restaurant specialising in Maya-inspired dishes served on Maya pottery. Or well-connected civic leaders such as Julie Packard, who helped to turn a rusting cannery in Monterey, California, into the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which celebrates the area's unique coastal ecology and culture.

THE REAL SANTIAGO

Inspired by Tourtellot's talk, I step into the corridor of Santiago's Four Points Sheraton and am instantly confronted by the challenges geotourism faces. You could wander around this hotel for hours and never get a clue that you're in South America. Outside, the city feels like a slavish imitation of Los Angeles with a few high-rises surrounded by broad expanses of freeways and big box-like stores. The skies are thick with vehicle exhaust.

I'm ready to get out of town to search for the real Chile, but Tourtellot suggests we go to dinner in a neighbourhood he has heard about. I reluctantly agree, and after a short bus ride, find that I am utterly charmed – thrilled, actually – by Barrio Bellavista, an arty enclave wedged between the Río Mapocho and the upscale hilltop suburb of Providencia.

The Calle Antonia López de Bello is lined with pavement tables full of talking, laughing people. Jazz, R&B and updated versions of Chile's once-famous Nueva Canción ('New Song') music stream out of cafés. We snag an empty table, order some local wine and *empanadas*, and Tourtellot, who often displays a serious

lost-in-thought expression, sports a big grin. 'Now this is geotourism,' he says.

People think of sustainable tourist destinations as untouched spots in the countryside, but Tourtellot is just as likely to explore city streets as mountain roads. 'New York is a great geotourist destination,' he explains, 'because you go to New York to see New York. It's the whole feel of

TRAVEL TRENDS

'Space tourism isn't a trend and won't be anything other than a yardstick by which the rich and stupid measure each other'

Tom Hall,
TRAVEL EDITOR, LONELY PLANET

the place that attracts you. And cities can usually absorb a lot of tourists without sacrificing their essential character.' Off the top of his head, he lists Kyoto, Krakow, Évora and Quebec City, as other prime spots for urban adventure. Indeed, as we're discovering in Bellavista, even seemingly drab cities offer geotourist hotspots.

REVIVING NEIGHBOURHOODS

Bellavista fits well with Tourtellot's mission to save the world's threatened travel destinations. If people can find inspiring travel experiences all around them, there will be less urge to flock to overcrowded places such as the pyramids in Egypt, the Grand Canyon or Kathmandu. 'One of the best things about geotourism is how it reinforces the idea that you don't have to go the ends of the Earth to find an unspoiled place,' notes François Bédard,

director of the Center of Excellence on Tourist Destinations, which is affiliated with the UN World Tourism Organization. 'It's about the character of a place – and almost any place can be of interest if it draws on its qualities.'

Tourtellot heard about Bellavista from Lake Sagaris, a Canadian journalist and activist who has lived here for many years. When I talk to her, I realise this area offers evidence for another key geotourism goal: that visitors can bring improvements to a struggling community. Bellavista, she says, has long been a raffish, rough-at-the-edges place where poor people, bohemians and other outsiders congregate – a rare occurrence in a society still feeling the lingering effects of the Pinochet era.

A few years ago, plans to plough a new highway through the neighbourhood seemed to doom this experiment in social diversity. No-one believed the project could be stopped, but the rebellious residents rose up anyway – and, to their surprise, won an agreement from government officials that the road would run underground, beneath Bellavista.

'We saved the neighbourhood,' Sagaris says, and set the stage for Ciudad Viva ('Living City'), a grassroots coalition dedicated to revitalising Bellavista and other Santiago neighbourhoods. The group helps launch micro-businesses, renovates old buildings, turned a busy street into a pedestrian zone, encourages bicycle use and implements recycling programmes – all fuelled by the group's sustainable urban tourism initiative, which promotes Bellavista as a lively, pedestrian-friendly place.

'We're glad that people want to see what we've done,' Sagaris says. 'They can come here to learn, have fun and be inspired. That's the kind of tourism we are interested in.'

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