

# Keeping up with the Joneses

## Tourists, travellers, and the quest for cultural authenticity in southern Thailand

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**abstract** This article explores the expectations, behaviour, and motivations of different groups of tourists in southern Thailand. Many studies have assumed that backpackers and other 'alternative' tourists represent a new, more sensitive and responsible form of traveller, but evidence from southern Thailand belies these assumptions and reveals many similarities in the behavioural patterns of tourists. Further, the very process of ordering tourists into hierarchical, normative categories based on objective measures of difference is misleading and ignores the importance of discrepant subjective approaches to authenticity. Based on interviews with three groups of tourists in southern Thailand – divided according to their degree of involvement with the mass, packaged tourism industry – this article offers a theoretical model of alternative tourism based on the desire for cultural authenticity, and concludes with a discussion of how the example of alternative tourism in southern Thailand relates to status and social differentiation among the new middle classes.

**keywords** *adventure alternative tourism authenticity backpackers new middle classes status Thailand*

## Introduction

In recent decades, a growing number of tourists have moved towards 'new' or 'alternative' modes of travel that counter the mass production, inflexibility, standardization, and insensitivity toward host populations associated with more conventional forms of tourism (McLaren, 1998; Buhalis, 2001). Tourism analysts such as Honey (1998), Wood and House (1991), and Zurick (1995) assume that mass and alternative tourists differ not only in their behavioural patterns, but also in the underlying motivations impelling them to travel. Travel writers (Theroux, 1992; Dispenza, 1999) and most self-identified alternative tourists

themselves perpetuate this discourse of 'good versus bad' tourism by positioning themselves and their experiences as culturally rewarding, environmentally friendly, and socially benign for host communities, especially in relation to the activities of what has become, in the popular imagination, the stereotypical, badly behaved mass tourist.

The assumption that alternative tourism offers a solution to the problems engendered by mass tourism is especially important when considering tourism and development in southern Thailand, where decades of rapid and unregulated growth in and around the island province of Phuket, the region's foremost resort destination, have transformed the area into a quintessential mass tourism zone featuring shopping arcades, crowded beaches, large multinational hotel chains, and entertainment complexes. International tourist arrivals in Phuket grew from approximately 20,000 in 1976 to over 530,000 by 1989 (Ludwig, 1976: 23; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 1997). Tourism arrivals continued to grow precipitously into the late 1990s and by 2001, international tourist arrivals in Phuket had reached 2.7 million (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2003).

Critics of tourism in Phuket (Rakkit, 1992; Wong, 1995) point out that such rapid growth in mass tourism has permanently altered the physical landscape and socio-economic character of the island, turning Phuket into an over-developed mass tourism enclave. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, several independent ecotourism operators in Phuket, and southern Thailand generally, began to offer activities best described as small-scale alternative tourism. Of course, backpackers had, since the 1970s, travelled to southern Thailand, but the past decade has seen the emergence of additional backpacking sites throughout the region, and alternative tourism companies, particularly 'adventure' tour operators, have joined with Phuket-based ecotourism companies to expand the availability of alternative tourism experiences (Dowling, 2000; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2000; Weaver, 2002). In light of the environmental damage and social change caused by mass tourism in southern Thailand, it is imperative to assess the potential benefits and costs associated with the growing presence of alternative tourists throughout the region.

This article compares the behavioural patterns and motivations of different categories of tourists in southern Thailand. Although stereotypical images of loud and obnoxious behaviour remain associated mostly with mass tourists, the daily activities in southern Thailand of both mass and alternative tourists demonstrate the ways in which behavioural similarities bring together many tourists travelling in this region. Further, contrary to tourist typologies that place mass and alternative tourists into fixed categories based on objective measures (Poon, 1993; Weaver, 1993), it is instead broad patterns of collective subjective approaches to authenticity that tend to partition tourists into broad 'clusters'. Tourists in southern Thailand share similar conceptions of authenticity, but differ not only in their perception of the feasibility of achieving authenticity, but also in the importance placed on authenticity in the first place.

Moreover, discrepant levels of concern for authenticity among different tourists in southern Thailand relate not to any inherent intellectual or moral superiority of some tourists over others, but instead to larger issues of class and status differentiation based on the consumption of tourist experiences as positional goods (Mowforth and Munt, 1998). Thus, the desire for authenticity tends to cluster together broad groups of tourists traditionally separated according to either quantitative or normative measures. Furthermore, authenticity represents an important tool for certain tourists engaging in a quest, or competition, to achieve status and distinction.

While tourists in southern Thailand feature a complex array of motivations, this article explores authenticity, specifically, for several reasons. First, influential tourism scholars such as Erik Cohen (1988) and Dean MacCannell (1976; 1992) argue that a search for authenticity underpins most forms of travel among 'Western' tourists, and a great number of authors have continued to tackle the issue of authenticity in the tourism literature in recent years (Pearce and Moscardo, 1986; Sharpley, 1994; May, 1996; McIntosh and Prentice, 1999; Waller and Lea, 1999; Wang, 1999; Lacy and Douglass, 2002; Olsen, 2002; Shepherd, 2002).

Second, as a country long considered an exotic destination in the 'West', Thailand has for decades attracted tourists hoping to experience cultural authenticity. Until recently, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) had even made exoticism a central marketing strategy, using 'Thailand – the Most Exotic Country in Asia' as one of its promotional slogans (Cohen, 2001: 158). Authenticity is not only important among alternative tourists such as trekkers in northern Thailand (Dearden and Harron, 1994), but also among those conventional tourists toward whom marketing efforts aimed at portraying Thailand as a mystical, magical kingdom have traditionally been directed.

Third, although it is by no means the only motivation behind travel, and may even appear to conflict with other interests or desires, authenticity can relate to more than just cultural artefacts, rituals, or settings. In particular, Wang (1999: 360) employs the term 'existential authenticity' to describe activities that allow tourists to 'keep a distance from, or transcend, daily lives' and thereby find their 'true selves'. Similarly, Redfoot (1984) states that for most tourists, 'tourism is likely to be experienced as a liberation of the private sphere, a time over which they have control to do what they wish, where they wish' (p. 306). The relationship between authenticity and such 'typical' tourist motivations as self-fulfilment and relaxation is therefore complex, and one can argue that tourists are driven largely by a desire for 'real' experiences, be they restful sunspot vacations, cultural exchanges with the 'Other', or 'intensely authentic, natural and emotional' interactions between friends or family members (Wang, 1999: 364). Thus, although this article explores authenticity from a mostly cultural perspective, the concept of authenticity as a whole is pertinent to any discussion of travel motivation.

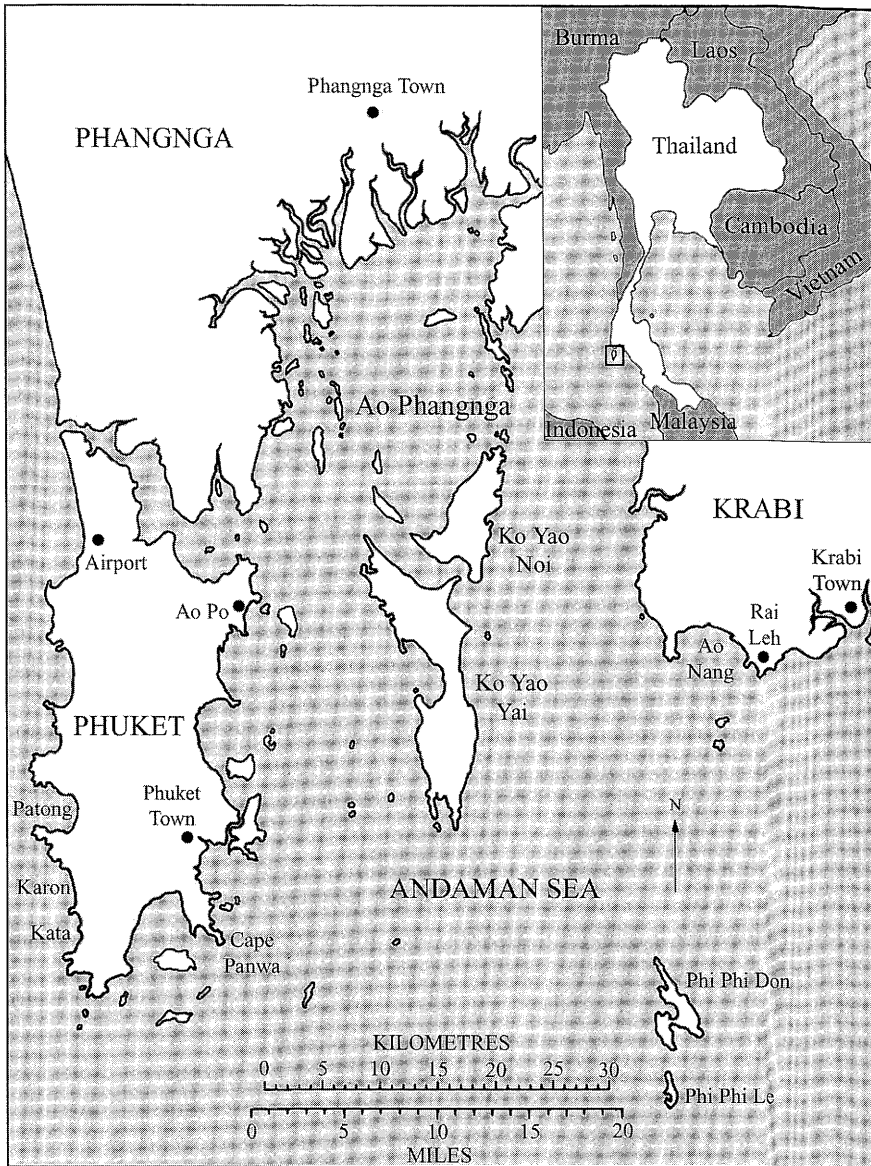


FIGURE 1. *The provinces of Phuket, Phangnga, and Krabi in southern Thailand*

## Methods

This article draws on original data collected in Thailand during 13 months of fieldwork, which were spread out over four separate research visits in 1996,

1997, 1999, and 2001. The fieldwork for this research took place in three provinces in southern Thailand: Phuket, Phangnga, and Krabi (see Figure I).

While Phuket enjoys international fame as a tourist destination, Phangnga and Krabi remain relatively unknown regions. The tourism industry of southern Thailand increasingly relies on connections between these adjacent provinces, and tourist developers have begun to tap into the undeveloped natural attractions of Phangnga and Krabi. The short distances and convenient transport networks between the three provinces have allowed mass tourists staying in Phuket to make daytrips to uncrowded and 'unspoiled' destinations in Phangnga and Krabi. With the recent construction of an airport, rapid tourism development in Krabi is likely on the horizon. As of yet, however, Phangnga and Krabi remain peripheral in the overall tourism industry in Thailand, and serve predominantly as either sites for backpacking and 'off-the-beaten-track' small group adventure travel, or as spillover reservoirs for the developed mass tourism industry in Phuket.

The tourists in southern Thailand that were observed and interviewed for this research were placed into three categories or groups based on differing degrees of contact with, and incorporation into, the conventional tourism industry. The first group features the highest degree of contact with the packaged tourism industry, and consists of passengers of ecotourism companies based on the island of Phuket. These passengers are high-spending mass tourists who stay in four- and five-star hotels and enjoy having something exciting or adventurous to do while on a packaged holiday. The trips taken by these tourists typically feature short excursions to areas of natural interest such as a rainforest or marine sites, and last no longer than six hours from start to finish. Following Pleumarom (1993), I refer to this group as *mass ecotourists*.

Although there are approximately 20 'mass ecotourism' companies in Phuket, this article utilizes examples from the oldest, largest, and most successful of these companies. Founded in 1989 by an American expatriate and two Thai partners, Jaidee Kayak<sup>1</sup> offers daytrips to Ao Phangnga (Phangnga Bay), a marine national park that covers an area of 400 square kilometres and lies immediately to the north and east of Phuket (see Figure I). Jaidee Kayak 'escort boats' transport groups of up to 16 tourists to the islands of Ao Phangnga, where passengers are then taken by inflatable kayaks through cave passages and into open-air lagoons framed by cliffs that rise vertically to over 300 feet (these lagoons are known as *hongs*, the Thai word for 'room'). As the pioneer of sea kayaking in southern Thailand, Jaidee Kayak has set the standard among its competitors, and continues to carry great influence within the ecotourism niche of Phuket's tourism industry. In its early years, Jaidee Kayak sold trips only to guests of particular upmarket hotels, but due to a sharp increase in demand, the company expanded to other hotels and began working with international tour companies and local travel agents. By the mid-1990s, Jaidee Kayak had become the most visible and successful ecotourism company in southern Thailand, and had received several national and international awards, including a British Airways 'Tourism

for Tomorrow Award', a 'Best Tour Programme Award' from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), and a 'Gold Environment Award' from the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA).

The second group of tourists, referred to in this article as *adventurers*, comprises customers of 'adventure travel' companies, which promise unconventional travel off the beaten track for small groups of tourists. Interviews with adventurers were conducted during several trips organized by two adventure travel companies: Avalon Adventures and Xanadu Expeditions.

Based in the United States, Avalon Adventures began in 1988 as a small, family-owned adventure travel company that offered specialized small-group trips to Thailand. Soon thereafter, the company expanded to the rest of Southeast Asia, and in 1998, it reformed under a different name and greatly expanded its operations. Avalon currently offers tours to 20 countries in Asia and Oceania. When Avalon expanded in 1998, it also created the Avalon Foundation, which provides direct financial support for grassroots educational projects aimed at orphaned and disadvantaged children in Asia. Avalon offers two types of trips to Thailand. First, 'Explorer's Thailand' is a preset itinerary lasting 17 days and consisting of visits to Bangkok, Chiang Mai (in northern Thailand), Krabi, Ao Phangnga, and Phuket. Second, groups can create their own customized trips by choosing from a range of 'modules' such as hiking in Khao Yai National Park, staying overnight in floating bamboo cabins on the River Kwai, trekking among 'hilltribe' villages in northern Thailand, and kayaking in Ao Phangnga. In its promotional materials, Avalon promises to provide customers with a high level of individual attention and personalized service. Great emphasis is also placed on the unusual and authentic experiences made possible by travelling in small groups with expert guides. For example, in its 2002 catalogue, Avalon informs potential customers of the benefits of small group travel:

Our group trips are meticulously crafted itineraries that *showcase our unsurpassed regional expertise*. Each trip captures the essence of the respective country by combining essential highlights with unusual, road-less-traveled elements that we've personally searched out to set our trips apart . . . If group travel brings to mind 80 dazed tourists stumbling from a bus, you'll be pleasantly surprised to note that our groups depart with a *maximum of 16 people*. Small groups enable our expert guides to provide an intimate interpretation of each destination, and personally address your questions and needs. These trips represent the cream of the crop in Asia and the Pacific. If you're going to our corner of the world you needn't look further for the perfect journey (emphasis in original).

Xanadu Expeditions is an Australian company founded in 1989. Xanadu operates only in Asia, and specializes in Southeast Asia in particular. Xanadu was one of the fastest growing companies in Australia during the 1990s, and it claims to have 'more staff, more trips, more departures and more knowledge than any other operator in the world'. Exclusivity, responsibility, flexibility, and other themes commonly found in the marketing materials of adventure travel companies also characterize the following excerpts from Xanadu's catalogue:

Xanadu is for those with a yearning for adventure, a sense of fun and a wish to escape the humdrum of mainstream tourism . . . When it comes to group size, the smaller the better! We average just 9 travellers in a group, which means that after a few days it feels more like travelling with a bunch of friends than travelling on a tour . . . Five star hotels simply don't sit well with our philosophy of getting close to the people and culture of a region . . . Xanadu travels in a way that fully appreciates cultures and lifestyles very different from our own. While we do strive to provide the very best holiday possible, we don't shield you from the cultural differences, inefficiencies, frustrations and realities of life that make up Asia. Indeed the emphasis is on getting out there and experiencing the real Asia – warts and all. This philosophy may not suit all travellers.

Xanadu offers 12 different trips to Thailand, lasting from 8 to 28 days. Despite the recent growth in the number of global adventure travel operators bringing tourists to Thailand, Xanadu remains the most active, visible, and well-known within the country.

Lastly, the *backpacker* category consists of mostly young budget tourists who take prolonged journeys and avoid, when possible, elements of the conventional tourism industry, including large-scale facilities, integrated resort complexes, and certain modes of travel such as air-conditioned buses. In Thailand, this group of tourists usually congregates at Khao San Road in Bangkok and then fans out to 'unspoiled' destinations in southern Thailand such as the Rai Leh Beach/Ao Nang area of Krabi province. With rare exceptions (Cohen, 1982), backpackers in Southeast Asia received little scholarly attention in the past, but recent research (Hampton, 1998; Scheyvens, 2002), along with the Hollywood adaptation in 2000 of Alex Garland's (1996) novel *The Beach*, have started to shine the spotlight on this group of tourists, thereby highlighting their importance to the travel culture of Southeast Asia and southern Thailand specifically.

As a qualitative analysis of tourist expectations and experiences, this article relies on data gathered during extensive face-to-face interviews. I conducted taped semi-structured interviews with 27 mass ecotourists, 18 adventurers, 17 backpackers, 4 tour leaders from Avalon and Xanadu (2 from each company), 8 representatives from global tour companies, and 24 Jaidee Kayak guides. Interviews with tourists provided the most pertinent material for this study, and covered a range of issues, including the meaning of authenticity generally and in the Thai context, the perceived authenticity of different kinds of travel and of that tourist's particular trip, perceptions of Thai society, reasons for coming to Thailand, and the importance of having authentic travel experiences. Since the goal of the fieldwork research on which this article is based centred on gaining a deep understanding of behavioural and motivational patterns among tourists in southern Thailand, I chose to rely mostly on qualitative methods. While it may not produce the numerical 'reliability, validity, and generalizability' associated with quantitative methods, ethnographic research yields rich and detailed empirical information and is an effective and logical methodological approach for those hoping to understand the complexity and range of tourist interpretations of authenticity in southern Thailand.

## **Tourists, travellers, and barbarians: mass and alternative behavioural patterns**

The brunt of many jokes and caricatures, the tourist has, since the very beginning of organized travel, assumed a negative identity (see Krippendorff, 1987). Labelled self-deceiving, infantile, ignorant, neurotic, and even racist, mass tourists travel in a Western discursive environment mapped out early by authors such as Turner and Ash (1975), who wrote disparagingly: 'It is perfectly legitimate to compare tourists with barbarian tribes' (p. 11). The often raucous, uninhibited, and disrespectful behaviour of some tourists lends credence to this unfavourable image; the insensitive and patronizing attitudes displayed by some tourists toward host populations in particular foster relationships characterized by servility, subservience, and subjugation (Matthews, 1978; Crick, 1989).

Alternative tourists, on the other hand, are said to possess a greater sensitivity toward, concern for, and awareness of the needs, desires, and problems of hosts (Zurick, 1995). Rather than behaving in a crass or irresponsible way, alternative tourists endeavour to meet their travel needs in a way that least disrupts local culture (Deming, 1996). Further, alternative tourists allege that an overriding respect for local conditions informs and shapes their travel demands (Cazes, 1987; Kutay, 1989). By expressing a willingness to make tourist demands appropriate to local needs and conditions, alternative tourists challenge conventional tourist situations in which local norms, values, or priorities are compromised for the selfish and hedonistic demands of mass tourists (Wood and House, 1991). Hence, through greater cultural sensitivity and communication, alternative tourists are thought to display forms of behaviour markedly different than those associated with the 'ugly' mass tourist (Butler, 1992; Poon, 1993; Weaver, 1993).

Empirical research in southern Thailand belies these stereotypes, however, and instead demonstrates that the behavioural patterns of the three groups either overlap or at least contradict expectations in several ways. First, a prevailing 'holiday mentality' underpins the actions of all three groups of tourists, and the focus on fun, adventure, and entertainment is just as evident among adventurers and backpackers as it is among mass ecotourists. The highlight of most mass ecotourism daytrips centres on aspects of fun and adventure, with the jovial personality of the guides heavily influencing customers' enjoyment of the trip. A strong desire for fun among mass ecotourists has even shaped Jaidee Kayak's efforts to promote environmental awareness and education. In particular, in order to get across the conservation message and leave tourists with a lasting impression and knowledge of Ao Phangnga, Jaidee Kayak daytrips now feature a 'nature game' in which the passenger to answer the highest number of questions correctly wins prizes that include Jaidee Kayak t-shirts and videos. Since this approach mixes the twin goals of fun and education, it has thus far proven a great success according to Jaidee Kayak's managers.

Adventurers and backpackers also display the same proclivity towards fun and entertainment demonstrated by mass ecotourists. In their catalogues, Avalon and



Xanadu affirm that their trips are indeed fun, but there is also a noticeable effort to strike a balance between fun and more 'serious' concerns such as responsibility and cultural sensitivity. For instance, in a section entitled 'Journey Beyond the Ordinary,' Avalon's catalogues states that 'Travel is fun. It's exciting. At its best it can also promote cross-cultural understanding, encourage environmental sustainability, and fulfil long-held personal dreams'. When discussing their reasons for participating in an adventure tour, customers of Avalon and Xanadu invoke this discourse of balance between work and pleasure, so to speak, but as I discuss later, the desire for fun among some adventurers can in practice lead to cultural misunderstandings and insensitivity.

Similarly, despite in most cases sharing a genuine concern for gaining a better insight into Thai culture, many backpackers also prioritize having fun while travelling, even if it means contradicting local cultural or social norms. The party-like atmosphere common to backpacker settings in Southeast Asia such as Kuta Beach in Bali and Ko Phangngan in southern Thailand – the latter of which plays host to popular 'full moon parties' – is a clear indication of the importance of fun and entertainment to backpackers. Hence, while the activities in which adventurers and backpackers participate may lack the tone and sheer entertainment value of 'typical' mass tourist events, the underlying desire for fun, adventure, and memorable experiences nonetheless ties together all three groups.

The second behavioural similarity among tourists in southern Thailand relates to photography. A preoccupation with 'capturing' moments with cameras and hand-held camcorders dominates the activities of many mass ecotourists and adventurers. Cameras and video-recorders are prevalent among mass ecotourists travelling on Jaidee Kayak trips, and the shooting of footage often proceeds uninterrupted during on-board presentations and meals. The purpose behind the photographic and video recording efforts of mass ecotourists is not only to document a person's presence in Ao Phangnga, but also to chronicle the various components of the trip in order to relive memorable experiences at home or share them with others.

A fixation on photography extends to adventurers as well, but unlike mass ecotourists, adventurers use photography as a way to record authentic interactions with locals. According to Redfoot (1984), 'alternative' tourists react to photography's association with inauthenticity in three ways. First, some refuse to take pictures, thereby eliminating 'both the identifying label of the camera and the "contamination" of the present experience which it represents' (p. 296). Second, subtle distinctions are made in the role as photographer, whereby photography is treated as an art form and means of personal expression rather than as an indelible mark of one's status as a tourist. Third, shots are directed toward capturing the authentic lives and actions of 'natives' rather than 'displaying the family in front of some officially authenticated monument or "picture postcard" shots' (p. 297).

The adventurers observed in southern Thailand featured the latter two of the aforementioned reactions. Despite being warned about displaying fancy equipment in front of poor locals, adventurers travel with expensive, sophisticated camera equipment, and the focus on photography as a serious matter is evident in the annual photo competition that Xanadu holds among its customers. Even more evident than the treatment of photography as an art form is a focus on capturing authentic scenes. The inherent power relations exercised through photography (see Sontag, 1977) characterize the behaviour of adventurers more than any other group due to a strong desire to encounter, and capture on film, smiling and happy 'natives'. The promotional materials of Avalon and Xanadu feature many pictures of locals who are often in traditional dress and usually smiling in a welcoming way. None of the adventurers that I observed reject photography altogether, but rejection of the camera as a 'touristy' symbol is much more common among backpackers, who consider obvious public attempts to take photographs as crass. While backpackers take fewer photographs than mass ecotourists and adventurers, photography is still important in that its rejection serves as a measure of backpacker independence from mass, packaged tourism.

Lastly, behaviour that indicates a lack of cultural awareness or sensitivity is common to all three groups. Surprisingly, though, those tourists that most frequently profess to possess cultural sensitivity and a desire to 'blend into' the local community most often display the most offensive (to Thais) behaviour. Of all three groups, one would expect mass ecotourists to conform most closely to the stereotypical behaviour discussed at the beginning of this section, but Jaidee Kayak customers behave respectfully towards the Thai staff. Aside from occasional incidents, interactions between mass ecotourists and Thais foster a sense of congeniality, made possible by the brief and amicable interpersonal interactions taking place in the 'environmental bubble' (Boorstin, 1964; Cohen, 1979) found aboard the Jaidee Kayak boats that take tourists to the islands of Ao Phangnga.

By contrast, the behaviour displayed by some adventurers clashes with the message of cultural sensitivity and assimilation promoted by Avalon and Xanadu marketing. In a letter introducing Avalon's 2002 catalogue, for example, the company's founders write that travel 'goes a long way toward countering evil and creating mutual understanding on our ever-shrinking globe'. Similarly, Xanadu claims that its 'travellers take the rough with the smooth and have a respect for local cultures and environments'. During actual trips, however, I noticed that Xanadu tour leaders would often ignore, or even encourage, the inappropriate actions of their customers, and in those rare instances when standards were enforced, adventurers resented the moral monitoring of their behaviour. Adventurers commonly complain about being told how to act or what to say, and many admitted in private conversations that the constant supervision of their behaviour by the tour leader was unnecessary and stripped some of the fun out of the travel experience.

In addition to possessing a hedonistic, party-oriented mindset, many adventurers also forget or ignore what they are told about conservative Thai attitudes regarding female nudity and sexual impropriety. The issue that most vexes Thais is topless bathing, and although male Thais working at Jaidee Kayak and other tourism companies enjoy the partial nudity of some female tourists, the lack of awareness and sensitivity about improper dress displayed by many adventurers and backpackers causes considerable resentment. However, because direct public criticism is frowned upon in Thai culture – since it threatens harmonious relations and causes the target of the criticism to ‘lose face’ (Mulder, 1990) – this resentment is rarely expressed by Thais, and therefore goes unnoticed by tourists as they violate local standards of moral decency. The behavioural transgressions of adventurers not only lead to resentment among Thais, but also perpetuate stereotypes of ‘Western’ women. A female volunteer from England working as a park ranger in southern Thailand made the following comments regarding the lack of cultural sensitivity among some adventurers:

‘I would say that of all the groups I’ve seen, they’re [Xanadu] the most culturally insensitive. Every single time I’ve seen Xanadu in the raffhouses [in Khao Sok National Park in Surat Thani province], they sit around with tiny bikinis and topless and get drunk and skinny dip in the lake. The young Thais love it at the raffhouses, but I get annoyed. As a woman, you have to cope with people’s perceptions of Western women, and so I get annoyed when Western women act in a certain way that reinforces people’s images, so they [Thais] treat me disrespectfully. With tourists, that’s really irritating but they don’t know any differently, but for the guides [tour leaders] who have been coming here for years, they should know better. It’s like a theme park – one day they’re here and the next they’re gone, so they don’t actually spend that much more time than other tourists getting to know the area.’

In spite of the long periods of time spent travelling throughout Thailand and staying in small, locally owned establishments, backpackers as a group tend to be the least sensitive and respectful of all three tourist groups. This observation confirms research conducted by Scheyvens (2002) and Spreitzhofer (1998), who provide a good overview of the inappropriate and culturally insensitive behaviour of some backpackers in Southeast Asia. The search for fun and novel experiences typical of mass tourists and adventurers becomes, with many backpackers, an interest in underground counter-cultural environments, and leads to involvement in local narcotic practices such as, for example, smoking opium with the headman of a hilltribe. Participation in the ‘hippie’ lifestyle, along with haggling over prices, has resulted in a poor reputation for backpackers among many Thais. Rather than serving a role in cross-cultural communication and understanding, therefore, some backpacker sites such as the Khao San Road area of Bangkok and the Rai Leh/Ao Nang area of Krabi province have become areas of cultural confrontation and misunderstanding between backpackers and Thais.

Among the possible ‘stages’ identified by Edensor (2000) as potential spaces in which tourists enact performances, ‘heterogeneous’ spaces feature a labor-

intensive tourism economy characterized by small family-run 'budget hotels, small cafes and restaurants, souvenir and craft shops, independent transport operators, and unofficial guides' (p. 331). Due to the wide variety of purposes accommodated in heterogeneous spaces, tourists and locals are able to mingle freely without interfering in one another's business. Khao San Road and Rai Leh Beach in Krabi are quintessential heterogeneous spaces, but the frequent and loosely-scripted mingling that takes place between backpackers and Thais has led to conflict rather than unobtrusive mingling. Like adventurers, the close and prolonged interpersonal contact sought out by backpackers leads in some cases to social disruption because of the demands that are constantly being placed on the private personal space of Thais. Since backpacker social settings force Thais to participate in unceasing interaction with budget-conscious tourists, Thais who must deal with backpackers on a daily basis often grow weary of endless bargaining over tiny amounts of money.

The inability of tourists to project an entirely accurate or complete representation of their 'ordinary' life at home hinders bilateral cross-cultural communication between tourist and host. Mass ecotourists, on the whole, accept this and avoid attempts to penetrate these insurmountable barriers, but adventurers and backpackers believe that their alternative approach to travel results in a sincere form of communication with Thais. However, the inappropriate behaviour of some adventurers and backpackers calls such claims into question, and points to the difficulty of grouping the three categories of tourists discussed in this article along the lines of clear behavioural differences.

### **Intimate encounters with 'real' Thais: authenticity and travel motivation**

According to some critics of conventional tourism (Wood and House, 1991; McLaren, 1998), alternative tourists travel for reasons different than those motivating mass tourists to visit packaged, overdeveloped destinations. Unlike mass tourists, who are said to travel as an escape from both home and work (Krippendorf, 1987), alternative tourists travel in search of authenticity, novelty, creativity, and self-discovery (Iso-Ahola, 1989). In the early stages of my research, I shared many of these assumptions regarding the behaviour and motivations of mass and alternative tourists, but it soon became evident, as discussed earlier, that behaviour is a poor measure of differentiation among the three tourist groups. On the other hand, in asking questions about reasons for travelling to Thailand, I discovered that levels of desire and concern for authenticity not only differed widely from one individual tourist to the next, but also served to demarcate the three tourist groups into loose clusters based on inter-group tendencies or preferences. As a multi-layered and subjective concept, authenticity incorporates a range of 'real' experiences (Meethan, 2001), but the 'type' of authenticity discussed by tourists and explored in my research centres on what Pearce (1988) and Pearce and Moscardo (1986) call 'genuine people and set-

tings'. While a desire for authentic natural environments or 'existential' experiences (Wang, 1999) likely play a role in the motivations of tourists in southern Thailand, this article focuses primarily on *cultural* authenticity since that is both a significant factor behind the growth of tourism to the 'Third World' (Mowforth and Munt, 1998) and the most common conception of authenticity among the tourists interviewed for this research.

In order to assess individual and group differences in the meaning, importance, and perceived 'achievability' of cultural authenticity, I asked tourists several questions, three of which will frame the discussion in the remainder of this section: What does authenticity mean to you?; have you achieved or experienced authenticity during your trip?; and does it matter whether or not you have achieved or experienced authenticity (i.e. how important is authenticity to your overall trip)?

### Primitive, poor, and pure: the meaning of authenticity

Despite the difficulty of assessing complex ideas such as authenticity, tourists from all three groups share a view of Thai authenticity that revolves largely around the human, cultural elements of Thai life considered inaccessible to the 'gaze' of ordinary tourists (Urry, 1990). The prevailing image of authenticity among most tourists interviewed for this research features three elements. First, authenticity for 'Western' tourists exists in other times and in other places. At a temporal level, the material and social threads of 'modern' life in industrialized societies appear intrinsically inauthentic, as opposed to the 'traditional' realm which, despite its perpetual creation and invention (see Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), cradles those few remaining traces of authenticity lost in the global rush towards 'modernization' and 'Westernization'. Similarly, most tourists interviewed pictured rural locations and exotic destinations as authentic havens that continued to cultivate different worldviews and ways of life. The degree to which a particular place or 'culture' harbours authenticity thus correlates directly with the degree of difference from 'Western' life. Second, spontaneous encounters devoid of commercial transactions between tourist and host embody a fundamental authenticity. Financial interactions involving the purchase of services or experiences fall short of most tourists' expectations of authenticity since these transactions are intimately associated with planned or structured encounters within touristic environments. Third, in seeking to escape other tourists, most people consider obviously 'staged' or contrived tourist settings blatantly inauthentic since in the collective tourist imagination, 'true' Thai life exists only in places where tourists are not. Again, as with the search for exotic times and places, authenticity is linked proportionally to the scarcity of tourists.

Authenticity as traditional, rural, 'un-Westernized,' and non-commercial permeates the thoughts of most tourists in Thailand, but the extent to which this conception of authenticity goes unchallenged varies widely across different tourist clusters. Among adventurers and backpackers, for example, poverty, 'roughing it', and the lack of visual representations of 'Western' consumerism all

exemplify a certain perception of Thai authenticity. The conceptual link between poverty and authenticity engenders a specific reaction from adventurers and backpackers. In particular, hoping to 'live like the locals', adventurers and backpackers voluntarily subject themselves to relatively harsh accommodation conditions while often travelling third class on local buses and trains. Backpackers, especially, 'rough it' not only for budgetary reasons, but also out of a deep-seated mental association between material comfort and *ina*uthenticity. Adventurers, on the other hand, pay foreign adventure travel companies, and thus act out on poverty-related conceptions of authenticity through harsh, yet relatively expensive, styles of travel alone, rather than simultaneously roughing it while engaging in the typical backpacker competition to travel 'on the cheap' (Riley, 1988; Edensor, 2001).

In addition to forging material and philosophical links between tradition, poverty, and authenticity, backpackers and the customers of Avalon and Xanadu draw clear demarcations between what MacCannell (1976) calls 'staged' tourist encounters and genuine, 'back-stage' interactions. The prevalent discourse of authenticity leads to comparisons of 'real' Thai people with those found in mass tourist settings such as Phuket and Pattaya. Although never explicitly stating so, tourists imply in discussing 'real' people that there exist 'fake' Thais tainted by corrupting Western cultural influences. The dichotomization of the 'real' and authentic with the contrived and artificial implies that direct contact with tourists leads to cultural pollution. In the words of one Xanadu tour leader:

'Tourism has changed the Thais. Xanadu has the responsibility to the preservation of the Thai people, the preservation of their integrity. They're losing that integral link to their ancestors. We're trying to encourage people to keep authenticity within their communities and teaching them that they can prosper as they are, by staying who they are, by not changing too fast.'

Fears about vanishing Thai culture and the harmful effects of contacts with 'Western' tourists also characterize the following comments from an Avalon tour leader:

'We're creating a need by showing ourselves. By exposing ourselves to them, we're creating a need within them to change themselves to be more like us. I think this will have a long-term effect because in the long run, we'll stop coming if they become like us and they have our toys and our way of life. We're going somewhere else because the aim of travelling is to experience something different. One of our Thai guides in the north accused me of wanting Thailand to stay poor and not change at all, but I told him "I don't want you to stay poor, I just want to teach you how to do it better, learn from the mistakes we made, go slowly, slowly".'

An important facet of this strategy of cultural preservation is the shielding of rural Thais from ostentatious displays of 'Western' materialism. In this statement, a Xanadu customer from Birmingham acknowledges the need to be aware of the potential 'demonstration effect' (de Kadt, 1979) that wealthy tourists can have in poor communities:

'At the beginning of our trip, Dave [the tour leader] warned us about not showing off cameras, camcorders, or flashy watches – you know, our goodies and toys – to local people since we don't want to create needs that weren't there before.'

Mass media and popular culture have for decades ensured awareness among most Thais of the range of 'Western' consumer goods available, but Avalon and Xanadu succeed in convincing its customers that rural Thai and 'hilltribe' communities have yet to embrace inauthentic 'Western' materialism.

Backpackers share this belief in, and search for, 'real' versus 'ruined' Thailand, but take it one step further by, among other things, trying to avoid the infrastructure and locations associated with organized mass tourism. Themes of preservation and authenticity permeate many backpacker conversations as well, but a desire to avoid contrived (mass) tourist settings generally takes backpackers to remote locations for longer periods of time and often fosters a more antagonistic attitude toward other tourists.

With such an extensive litany of criticism aimed at mass tourist 'dupes', one would expect to find simplistic perceptions of authenticity on the part of Phuket's mass ecotourists. Many of Jaidee Kayak's mass ecotourist customers did indeed possess the common, almost universal, tourist belief in the direct relationship between authenticity and poverty, exoticism, non-commercialization, and tradition. However, virtually every one of the 38 Jaidee Kayak daytrips on which I participated featured individual mass ecotourists who resisted this hegemonic discourse of authenticity, thereby displaying, as a group, a surprisingly subtle and intricate understanding of how meanings of authenticity vary and evolve over time. As one British Jaidee Kayak passenger stated:

'The real Thailand is what the people do now, and what we see every day around us; it's all real. I came to see how Thailand is changing now, what modern Thais are like and how people live today in Bangkok or other places. Some friends who came to Thailand years ago described it as very different and traditional, but it's much less exotic or different than I expected. I'm not disappointed or anything, though. If you keep an open mind, come to Thailand with an open mind, then you can see things as they are now and how they're changing.'

All three tourist groups contain individual members who question reified notions of cultural authenticity, but during my interviews, the most nuanced opinions and thoughtful interpretations of authenticity tended to come from mass ecotourists, the group from which I had originally least suspected such insight. As a general pattern, then, the views of backpackers and adventurers could be considered 'objectivist' while those of mass ecotourists embody the 'constructivist' approach to authenticity. The objectivist approach to authenticity dominated early discussions of authenticity and tourism. For example, Boorstin (1964) considered authenticity a long-lost feature of travel, available only in the golden era of individual 'travellers'. In the world of the 'pseudo-event', tourists demand, perpetuate, and are satisfied with thoroughly inauthentic, contrived touristic experiences. Among the most renowned and enduring

contributions to the objectivist approach is the early work of Dean MacCannell (1976). MacCannell claims that tourists travel due to both their alienation with the fragmentary and alienating nature of work in industrial society, and the difficulty of penetrating the 'back' (as opposed to 'front') regions of life where 'truth' and authenticity lie (see Goffman, 1959). However, according to MacCannell, tourists constantly encounter an authenticity that is 'staged' by awaiting hosts. By prioritizing the authenticity of 'toured objects' (Wang, 1999) and judging authenticity objectively according to attributes of a supposed original cultural form, objectivist approaches not only remain binary (Olsen, 2002), whereby something is either authentic or inauthentic, but also assume that authenticity is a universal, reified entity that is 'out there' waiting to be discovered by tourists, the majority of whom fail to find 'true' back-stage authenticity in their travel experiences.

By contrast, constructivism treats authenticity as complex, subjective, and socially constructed. According to Wang (1999), constructivists believe that "multiple and plural meanings of and about the same things can be constructed from different perspectives, and people may adopt different constructed meanings dependent on the particular contextual situation or intersubjective setting" (p. 354). Similarly, Cohen (1988, 1989) addresses the possibility of an 'emergent authenticity', which entails a conception of authenticity as a perpetually changing and socially-constructed phenomenon that not only varies from one individual to the next, but also over time and space. In recent years, many studies have extended and expanded on the constructivist approach to authenticity (Silver, 1993; Bruner, 1994; Sharpley, 1994; Meethan, 2001; Taylor, 2001). While the majority of tourists interviewed for this research reveal objectivist views that equate cultural authenticity in Thailand with primitive, poor, and pure natives, thoughtful and constructivist deviations from this tradition-bound objectivist approach come just as, if not more, often from mass ecotourists than from backpackers and adventurers, who tend to spend more time and energy thinking about cultural authenticity.

### 'Seeing' authenticity through the eyes of others

The degree to which tourists feel successful in their attempts to travel 'properly' and thereby achieve authentic experiences in southern Thailand varies considerably. Although, as mentioned above, some mass ecotourists feel that their experiences reveal merely one of myriad layers or levels of authenticity, a majority believes that the short duration of their holiday essentially precludes the opportunity to discover the 'real' Thailand. Mass, packaged tourists thus view the length of time spent in Thailand as the variable linked most directly to opportunities to experience authenticity. Further, linguistic proficiency in Thai, the diversity of travel experiences, and the formation of personal relationships with locals all factor heavily in what mass ecotourists consider necessary conditions for the achievement of cultural authenticity. Significantly, though, not one mass ecotourist passenger of Jaidee Kayak characterized encounters with Thai



employees, street vendors, or others involved in the tourism industry as contrived, fake, or culturally polluting.

By contrast, virtually every adventurer acknowledged during both interviews and informal conversations that they had achieved an experience more authentic and rewarding than those of more 'typical' tourists. Despite travelling for short periods of time (almost always two weeks), adventurers feel that authenticity depends not on how long one travels or assimilates into everyday Thai life, but rather on *how* one travels in the first place. This requisite style of travel revolves around various exercises in 'roughing it', ranging from sleeping on dirt floors, to travelling overnight on wooden train benches, to pitching tents in dense jungles. Coupled with fitting a large number of 'rough' experiences into a short period of time, Avalon and Xanadu visit seemingly remote destinations with 'exotic' residents, such as members of Thailand's various 'hilltribes': *Where* one travels thus becomes as important as one's travel style. Regardless of how or where adventurers travel, feelings of accomplishment and achievement hinge on the quality of the 'tour leader', who serves as the vital link mediating interactions between adventurers and Thai hosts. Interestingly, in an attempt to distance adventure travellers from regular mass tourists, Avalon and Xanadu avoid calling their 'tour leaders' guides, since to do so would perpetuate the negative stereotypical image of guides shepherding large groups of tourists from one spot to the next. Tour leaders provide a window into Thai life by virtue of their knowledge of, and extensive travel experience in, Thailand. An Avalon customer from New York made clear the crucial role played by tour leader intermediaries:

'John [Avalon tour leader] has pretty much made this trip for me. You really feel like you're sharing his friends and contacts. By travelling with John, you get to see the real Thailand through his eyes. Unlike other trips where you have no contact with locals. My trip in Indonesia wasn't as good because the person [tour leader] wasn't very interested or connected to the country like John.'

Perhaps fearing the disapproval of other travellers, backpackers are careful to point out that the only guaranteed way to experience a high level of cultural authenticity is by travelling for long stretches of time among 'real' Thais far removed from the destructive and culturally-superficial reach of mass tourism. Hence, backpackers combine mass ecotourists' temporal expectations of authenticity with adventurers' spatial concerns, but differ in that the independence so valued by backpackers negates any potential role for tour leaders, guides, or any other representatives of organized tourism.

Determining the extent to which individual tourists achieve 'true' authenticity not only simplifies a complex and subjective issue, but also presumes the existence of a reified, tangible authenticity capable of being experienced, witnessed, or felt. However, if for the sake of discussion, cultural authenticity is conceived as denoting everyday life, namely the mundane and routine aspects of the 'taken-for-granted' world of Thais, then it can be said that all three groups, on the whole, fail to achieve authentic experiences. Not only is everyday life too

boring to constitute authenticity for most tourists (Silver, 1993) – one Avalon customer from Kansas City, discussing her residential community back home, commented wearily that ‘all we have is everyday life’ – but mass ecotourists and adventurers travel for periods of time too short to experience or ‘penetrate’ more than a few of the numerous layers that form everyday Thai life.

Avalon and Xanadu satisfy customer demand for authenticity by utilizing several strategies. First, prior to the trip, adventurers receive from the respective company a folder containing information on their itinerary as well as on the history, geography, culture, climate, and ‘do’s and don’ts’ of Thailand: As a cultural ‘primer’, the informational folder provides opportunities, for adventurers with the desire and time, to learn about Thailand before travelling there.

Second, the foreign tour leaders employed by Avalon and Xanadu claim to possess extensive local connections and an ability to share their personal relationships with adventurer customers. By arranging accommodation with local families, or in family-owned bungalows, Avalon and Xanadu engineer a feeling of *communitas* (Turner and Turner, 1978) among their clients, who deeply appreciate the cosy, intimate, and non-commercialized atmosphere created by staying with long-time friends of the companies and their tour leaders. An Avalon tour leader indicates in the following statement that he understands his role and the importance of providing adventurers with a family ambience:

‘Our customers are not just looking for someone who gets them to their flights on time. They’re looking for someone who can say, “Hey, this is my friend Khun Rhad in Chiang Mai, for example, and this is his family and that’s his son and he had a cold last week and he’s really looking better this week”. They really want that intimate contact with people, and one of the first things I say to my clients when they arrive here is “what I am is a liaison to the people and if you’re not interested in the people, you may as well have gone to Florida for your vacation. What I can offer you is the people of Thailand”.’

Third, a desire to promote feelings of family and community also leads to the deliberate concealment of commercialized interactions. Tour leaders ensure that commercial transactions with Thais occur beyond the immediate gaze of adventurers who, buoyed by the sense that they are participating in genuine cultural interactions with locals, are convinced that their overnight homestays stem principally from an intrinsic Thai hospitality and generosity rather than from the financial rationale often driving these, and other, encounters between adventurers and Thais. Preservation of the traditional, rural, and non-commercialized nature of host families and entire villages forms a critical component of supplying authenticity to adventurers, but as a tour leader from Xanadu confided, this occasionally proves challenging in light of contemporary circumstances shaping everyday life in Southeast Asia:

‘In Bali, they’ve had tourism for ages, and they know exactly what they’re doing. We have a problem: We have to call them ahead of time in Bali because they need time to put their Mercedes under huts and take off their t-shirts, put on traditional clothes

when tourists come through. The families we've been dealing with for years are great, but we have to make sure that everyone knows when we're coming. I think it's hilarious, but I don't tell our customers.'

In spite of the myriad efforts of Avalon and Xanadu to furnish their customers with cultural authenticity, I would argue that adventurers fall short of achieving authenticity not only on their own poverty-centred, tradition-based, and non-commercialized terms, but also on those that fasten authenticity to a wide range of everyday experiences. The belief that foreign tour leaders possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and local contacts to provide authentic experiences also proves unwarranted when bearing in mind the high turnover, and limited Thai language skills, of most (but certainly not all) tour leaders, particularly those from Xanadu Expeditions. Besides often speaking no more than a few key phrases of the local language, Xanadu tour leaders frequently change locations within Southeast Asia or leave the company after a short period of time: Out of Xanadu's 30 tour leaders in all of Southeast Asia in 1998, only 10 had been with the company for more than a year, and not one single guide from the 1996 program remained with Xanadu in 1998.

While backpackers often travel for relatively long periods to distant locations, the predilection to travel with other like-minded individuals and stay firmly anchored to a distinct budget travel scene makes it difficult to experience 'typical' Thai life. Backpacker sites feature outdoor cafés, nightclubs, bookstores with European-language publications, and Western-style restaurants, the lounges of which serve as screening rooms where scores of backpackers, backs to the street, watch Hollywood films on a central television. Backpacker scenes may juxtapose settings of more luxurious and large-scale forms of mass tourism accommodation and facilities, but they remain tourist 'leisurescapes' (Cartier, 1998) nonetheless. Of course, I should note that not all backpackers see Khao San Road and Rai Leh Beach as pathways to 'authentic' Thai cultural life, and some of the backpackers that I interviewed criticized and stayed away from backpacker enclaves such as Khao San Road. However, by associating their use of inexpensive 'local' transportation, accommodation, and food with cultural authenticity, backpackers can simultaneously claim to have an authentic travel experience while at the same time spending most of their time in budget enclaves that they themselves recognize as 'modern' and therefore culturally inauthentic in the Thai context.

Despite the rigorous operational style and length of travel associated with adventurers and backpackers, respectively, the depth of knowledge demonstrated by each does not necessarily surpass that of many mass ecotourists. Rather than deriving from tourist 'types', therefore, awareness and knowledge of Thai history, politics, geography, and 'culture' depends on the individual tourist in question. Beyond the relatively basic knowledge of Thailand possessed by all tourists in Thailand, the three groups share the same obstacles to achieving authenticity. Foreigners, and more specifically *farangs* (foreigners of European

descent), mediate the experiences of most 'Western' tourists, from backpackers who rely on 'rough guides' written by *farangs*, to mass ecotourists who purchase trips and receive information through *farang* tour representatives in Phuket, and finally to adventurers taken around Thailand by Avalon and Xanadu tour leaders, 22 of which (out of a total of 23 for both companies) were, in 2002, *farangs*.

### 'That's the only reason we're here'

Just as traditional, rural, and poverty-centred conceptions of authenticity underline the beliefs of many tourists, a large proportion of people interviewed express a concern for achieving authenticity, a goal thought worthy albeit difficult to accomplish. Due to an anti-tourist discourse that decries the hedonistic, self-indulged behaviour of mass tourists, every single tourist encountered during this research stated that 'meeting the locals', and other signifiers of authenticity, are worthy goals of travel that should be sought out whenever possible.

Most tourists recognize the importance of authenticity, but the degree to which the enjoyment of a holiday depends on 'achieving' authentic experiences varies widely from one tourist to the next, and across the three tourist groups generally. Backpackers, for instance, commonly state that travel for them is motivated principally by a desire to enter a realm of authenticity inaccessible to those travelling within the confines of organized mass tourism. Since authenticity features prominently in the professed motivations of backpackers, aberrant and harsh travel experiences are prized for their value as atypical, and therefore *anti-mass*, markers (Elsrud, 2001). For example, an English Backpacker in Krabi assessed the differences between staying in bungalows and hotels in the following way:

'After bungalow owners start going away from backpackers and start building big hotels and get the high rise tourist crowd in, they start giving unnecessary services like having your room cleaned every single day. It's just, you know, unnecessary. Like in Ko Pangngan, you get a broom in your bungalow and nobody's going to come around constantly to clean up after you. If your room is filthy dirty, no one's going to come and clean it. You know, I woke up one morning and there's this awful stench in the room, I couldn't understand what it was, the stench, and it was there for about three days and actually I tried to find out what this smell was so I turned the room upside down. There's nothing there so I look underneath the bungalow and a dog had died underneath the bungalow. It was wild. I couldn't believe it.'

The importance of achieving authenticity among some backpackers does, of course, stem from a true desire to understand Thai culture, but there is also a strong emphasis on acting and appearing different from other foreigners travelling in Thailand either as ordinary mass tourists or as organized adventure travellers. In worrying about what other tourists think of them, backpackers assume the role of 'performers' (Edensor, 1998) who attempt to assert their individual autonomy and identity within 'heterogeneous' backpacker spaces such as Khao San Road and Rai Leh Beach.

Like backpackers, adventurers place great emphasis on the achievement of authenticity, but contrary to long-term travellers on a tight budget, adventurers pay higher prices for short trips, thereby choosing to purchase authenticity from companies who can 'deliver' genuine experiences. As mentioned already, tour leaders serve an essential role in providing authenticity, and the biggest difference between Avalon and Xanadu centers on the greater experience, language skills, and academic qualifications of Avalon's tour leaders, accounting in turn for the much higher prices paid on average by Avalon customers. In particular, Avalon charges 2995 US dollars for a two-week trip in Thailand whereas Xanadu charges 710 US dollars, making Avalon's trip over four times more expensive than Xanadu's.

Since authenticity implies 'rough' travel to remote traditional communities, adventurers tolerate the squalor, inconvenience, and danger often associated with their efforts to achieve authenticity. These efforts, however, are endured but not enjoyed, as was demonstrated by constant complaints about feeling hungry and tired, having to sleep on floors with cockroaches, and going for days without a proper bath. For example, staying overnight with three different 'hilltribes' for three consecutive evenings greatly taxed the energy of one Avalon adventure group, but ultimately boosted the authentic merit of their trip, therefore offsetting any discomfort. Although the elements of danger and adventure frame the majority of their experiences, adventurers are assured that while searching out the 'raw' face of Asia, the presence of an established and experienced tour leader will ensure that the temporary escape from modern life will not be too dangerous, unfamiliar, or inconvenient. Even so, putting up with 'authentic', yet cushioned, hardships is all part of the adventure game and, according to one media executive travelling with his family on Avalon, 'seeing the real Thailand is what it's all about – that's the only reason we're here'.

Despite admitting that short trips prevent the realization of 'true', or myriad layers of, authenticity, many Jaidee Kayak customers still feel that sincere cultural interaction remains the only reason one should travel. More often than not, however, mass ecotourists travelling on short, packaged holidays claim that the lack of authenticity on their trip fails to spoil or detract in any way from the overall enjoyment of their trip. Thus, the hypothetical importance of authenticity to mass ecotourists outweighs both its actual influence on a tourist's perception of the quality of travel and the lengths to which individual tourists will go to satisfy their demands for authenticity. Hence, bearing in mind individual variations and exceptions, the role played by cultural authenticity in determining one's enjoyment of a trip is what tends to differentiate mass ecotourists from adventurers and backpackers.

### **Authenticity and the mass/alternative tourism relationship**

This article has thus far illustrated that mass and alternative tourists, as represented by the three groups observed in southern Thailand, feature similar behavioural characteristics, rely on the same preconceived notions of authenticity in

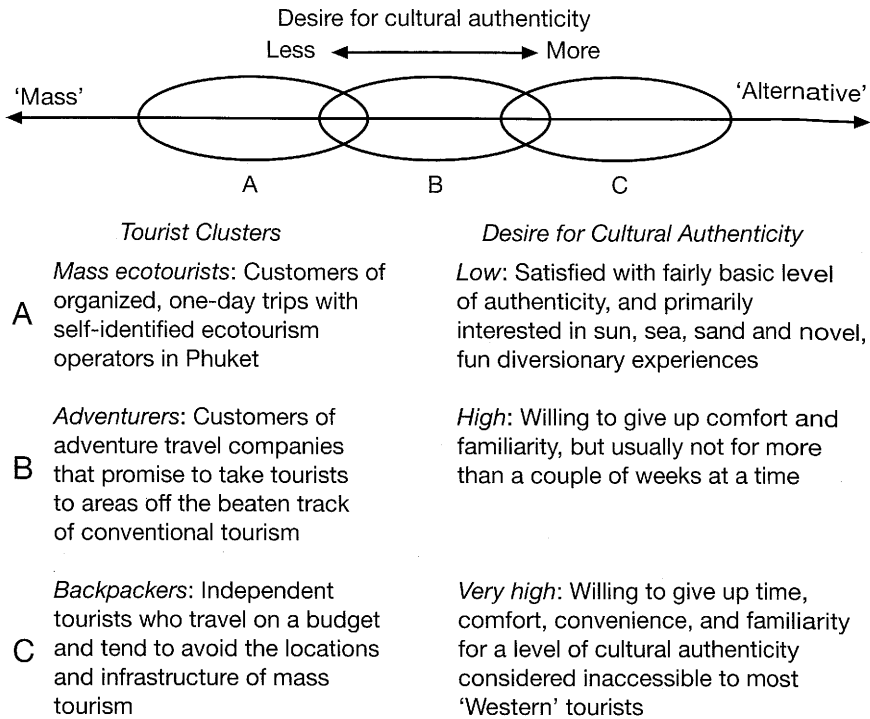


FIGURE II. *Mass-alternative tourism continuum in southern Thailand*

the Thai context, and differ in the importance attached to – and perceived feasibility of achieving – cultural authenticity. In light of these overlaps and differences, one way in which to conceptualize the relationship between mass and alternative tourism in southern Thailand is within the framework of a continuum (see Figure II).

Since few forms of tourism ever stand alone exclusively as either mass or alternative – but instead involve both mass and alternative characteristics simultaneously – individual tourists and the groups or clusters to which they belong can be placed on a continuum based on the desire for cultural authenticity. Thus, rather than reproducing a fixed, dichotomous typology of mass and alternative tourism, a continuum instead places tourists into relational categories based on the overall desire for authenticity displayed in the motivations, expectations, and behaviours of individual tourists. 'Alternative' in this continuum is therefore synonymous with 'authentic', but this does not necessarily reflect a judgment on the inherent authenticity of certain tourist activities or experiences over others; proving the authenticity of another person's experiences is not only empirically tricky, but also fails to take into account the socially-constructed nature of authenticity in the first place.

Although the desire for authenticity is of course a multi-faceted and at times contradictory motivation, it can be assessed by a tourist's willingness to forgo comfort, familiarity, money, convenience, or time in their pursuit of what they perceive to be a culturally authentic experience. The more concerned a tourist is to achieve cultural authenticity, the greater the sacrifice a tourist is willing to make. The greater the sacrifice, in turn, the more 'alternative' the tourist becomes in relation to other tourists less willing to make such sacrifices. Contrary to most conceptions of tourism classification (Dowling, 1997; Poon, 1993), this continuum avoids categorizing tourists as mass or alternative according to objective, hierarchical, or quantifiable measures such as infrastructural scale, numbers of tourists, length of vacation, nature of impacts on local communities, or types of activities undertaken. Instead, the intensity of the desire for authenticity found among a majority of individuals in a tourist cluster defines where that cluster falls along the mass-alternative tourism continuum. I should note that despite placing the three tourist clusters on the continuum, I wish to avoid reformulating rigid quantitative tourist categories into ones based on qualitative measures. By identifying broad and overlapping tourist clusters, rather than mutually-exclusive categories, I acknowledge that a significant minority of individuals belonging to all three clusters can, and in practice do, contradict the tendencies of the cluster as a whole. Rather than precluding individual exceptions or variations, therefore, the three tourist clusters instead serve as expressions of the general tendencies of members of the respective tourist groupings. Notwithstanding the limitations of grouping individual tourists into clusters, a relational approach to authenticity not only fosters a better understanding of how mass and alternative tourism are related in the southern Thai context specifically, but also allows one to assess how varying degrees of concern for authenticity lead to social differentiation.

### **Social differentiation, spatial separation, and the pursuit of status**

Aside from motivational differences, the desired result of travel in terms of social status and the acquisition of 'cultural capital' also serves as an axis of inter-group differentiation (Wheeller, 1993; Munt, 1994). Status differentiation plays a role in the motivations and behaviour of all three tourist clusters but, once again, to varying degrees. The cluster least concerned with status comprises mass ecotourists, packaged holidaymakers that diversify their overall trip by participating in fun, nature-oriented daytrips with Jaidee Kayak, or any other of the 20 Phuket-based ecotourism companies. However, this is not to say that differentiation plays no role at all in mass ecotourist motivations. Jaidee Kayak customers often comment on how their holiday to Thailand has not only allowed them to 'do' and see different places, cultures, or societies, but has also given them great stories to share with friends back home, the majority of whom have never travelled to Thailand. Notching proverbial countries on one's travel belt is

important to many mass ecotourists, and frequent verbal recitals of people's travel résumés demonstrate the importance of informing others of the scope of one's travel experiences.

Mass ecotourist comments such as 'wait till the folks back home see this', and 'I came to Thailand because it's on my list of paradise locations' reveal the inherent social value of first, possessing the financial means to travel at all and, second, of visiting a maximum number of countries in one's lifetime. To those mass ecotourists who relish travelling to places unvisited by friends and acquaintances, an interesting dilemma arises based on the need to balance a location's exotic cachet with a certain popular familiarity. In short, marking notches on one's mass ecotourist belt impresses others only if those notches mean something, which in most cases implies forming a part of the collective global touristic imagination. This is clearly evident in this telling statement, made by an English customer of Jaidee Kayak:

'I came here [Ao Phangnga] because this is the area where that James Bond film was shot. I've taken loads of photographs of the area to show my friends, especially James Bond Island; there will be a lot of envious people back home. I didn't really want to go to places like Phi Phi islands because it's spoiled and crowded, and besides, people at home would say "Huh? Where is that?"'

The status concerns of adventurers and backpackers are best understood and contextualized when placed within the context of work done by, among others, Betz (1992), Bourdieu (1984), Featherstone (1991), and Urry (1990). These authors posit the emergence, within late capitalist societies, of a postmodern society in which consumption serves to mark distinctions between class 'fractions'. An important distinction is made here between economic classes and status groups: The former represent groups based on property and market relations, while the latter represent communities based on similar conventions, lifestyles, and modes of consumption. These authors link the idea of subjective identity based on common consumption patterns to the dynamics of status group formation within contemporary capitalist systems. As Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates, classes wage hegemonic battles to distinguish themselves from the rest of society. Classes, and class fractions, establish distinctions based on occupation, education, commodities, and consumption. Further, Bourdieu argues that the preferences of a particular social group provide the basis for class differentiation and inform the struggle between classes to impose their particular tastes as *the* legitimate tastes (Featherstone, 1991).

Framing analysis within the context of status group identity and classificatory modes of consumption, Munt (1994) and Sharpley and Sharpley (1997) assert that alternative tourism constitutes an attempt by members of the 'new middle classes' to mark their distinction through unique modes of touristic consumption. Ley (1996) defines the new middle classes as members of the 'professional-managerial cohort or the quaternary occupational sector' (p. 15) and Mowforth and Munt (1998) argue that the new middle classes are the 'key social



groups in initiating, transmitting and translating' (p. 33) postmodern consumption patterns and cultural processes. By advocating the development of 'new' or 'alternative' forms of tourist consumption, new middle class tourists aim to stand apart from working and (old) middle class individuals engaging in mass tourism. In addition, scarcity is guaranteed since participation in alternative tourism usually requires a certain level of financial resources, specialized cultural knowledge, or tourist limitations, as is demonstrated by the 'carrying capacity' concept so vital to the discourse of alternative tourism (Featherstone, 1991). Since only tourists who satisfy the above criteria can participate in alternative tourism, exclusion is established vis-à-vis mass tourism, which by definition implies participation by a large, undifferentiated group of people.

Bourdieu (1984) identifies two fractions of the new middle classes: The new bourgeoisie and the new *petite bourgeoisie*. Possessing both economic and cultural capital, the new bourgeoisie are usually well-paid professionals who can afford expensive holidays to areas made exclusive by the absence of other tourists. By contrast, the new *petite bourgeoisie* lack financial capital but establish class and status distinctions through positional goods, claims to specialized knowledge, and conspicuous modes of consumption. Whereas the new bourgeoisie work in high-paying and high-status service jobs in, for example, law, finance, marketing, and corporate management, the new *petite bourgeoisie* work as professionals in the arts, the media, education, social work, the non-profit sector, and other such vocations that 'enhance the quality of life in pursuits that are not simply economic' (Ley, 1996: 15).

Adventurers and backpackers in southern Thailand represent members of both the new bourgeoisie and new *petite bourgeoisie*, and while a younger profile and fewer financial resources tend to place backpackers in the latter category, the two class fractions do not necessarily correspond neatly to the adventurer and backpacker clusters. The adventurers and backpackers that I interviewed in southern Thailand work as bankers, managers, doctors, teachers, business executives, and other new middle class occupations. Aside from including professionals on holiday, the backpacker cluster includes individuals who, at the time, were unemployed, but whose regular line of work would place them in the new middle classes. Further, despite their neglect in most descriptions of the new middle classes, students, who make up a significant proportion of backpackers in Southeast Asia (Hampton, 1998), are still important in that most university students represent *future* new middle class professionals.

According to Bourdieu (1984), 'social fields' are arenas of interaction as well as arenas of competition for different forms of capital. Cultural capital, in particular, is 'not something that can be bought, but instead relies on the ability of individuals to join the game of being able to "know" and "appreciate" what to eat, drink, wear, watch and what types of holiday to take' (Mowforth and Munt, 1998: 132). In every social field, be it health, education, politics, or consumption, dominant actors establish the legitimate norms, rules, tastes, values, and discourse through their collective *habitus*, defined as unconscious dispositions,

classificatory schemes, and taken-for-granted preferences of a particular social group (Bourdieu, 1984). When it comes to the social field of travel, the preferences and dispositions of the new middle classes have shaped the discourse of 'good' (mass) versus 'bad' (alternative) tourism (Munt, 1994). Alternative tourism is an especially attractive expression of superior taste and style because it not only facilitates the acquisition of cultural capital but also 'brings the promise of authentic liminality, a "real holiday"' (Ley, 1996: 309). The achievement of cultural authenticity, considered an increasingly rare commodity in a banal and saturated mass consumer market, allows alternative tourists to set themselves apart as a group while also asserting the individualism of its members. Thus, for the new middle classes, competition for cultural capital in the social field of travel involves pursuing authenticity, a crucial axis of differentiation and distinction.

Competition centred on the acquisition of positional experiences is evident in the actions and statements of many adventurers. One tour leader with Avalon even expressed a measure of frustration at the incessant competition between his adventurer clients, stating that 'many of our customers, especially Americans, view vacations as competitions where you must accomplish something all the time and surpass other tourists constantly'. In addition to decrying the appearance, preferences, and behaviour of 'typical' tourists, adventurers achieve status differentiation by using authentic experiences and a privileged style of travel to mark their social territory. Commenting that South America is the next region she wishes to 'knock off' her list, a bank manager from Seattle travelling with Avalon alluded to the importance of rare, positional experiences:

'Finding untouched areas is crucial in travel, and Thailand is still pretty exotic. This has been a very rustic trip and it took us off the track of regular tourism. I got a sense of what it was like to be in a hilltribe and I got a better picture of Thailand than most others. It's very important for me to go to places others haven't seen'.

Like mass ecotourists, then, adventurers strive to check destinations off a mental wish-list and then communicate their experiences to friends or acquaintances. However, the nature of these lists, and the places they incorporate, include more than just an inventory of countries and familiar destinations. The notches marked by adventurers consist of mysterious, exotic places that are not only missing from the common tourist vocabulary, but are also difficult to access due to the financial, temporal, and logistical restraints facing mass tourists. The more obscure the destination and rigorous the travel, therefore, the better the social stature accorded to adventurers. This perpetual search for 'untouched' locations has become an increasingly difficult endeavour due to international tourism growth and globalization, but adventurers nonetheless pursue these spatial distinctions as complementary tools in an overall strategy of social class differentiation. Whether visiting a distant hilltribe village or an uninhabited island in Ao Phangnga, the mere absence of other tourists suffices in assuring customers of Avalon and Xanadu that social *and* spatial distance are being maintained from the masses. A perfect example of this came from an American IBM

executive who, after hearing his wife complain about the pressure of keeping up with Joneses in their neighbourhood, stated 'Yeah, but the Joneses have never been to Thailand!'

Lacking the financial resources to purchase authentic, positional experiences in the same manner as adventurers, backpackers rely on the length and style of their travels to gain the social prestige that comes with the acquisition of cultural capital. However, this status differentiation is premised on the *rejection* of status, materialism, and mainstream social conventions, with counter-cultural lifestyles and experiences serving not only to rank backpackers internally but also to distinguish the group as a whole from the rest of 'Western' society. As Spreitzhofer (1998: 982) points out, backpackers in Southeast Asia possess 'ego-centric motives' that not only include 'the personal escape from personal crises, together with a general critique of Western civilization' but also relate to 'self-affirmation and desired prestige'. Rather than pursuing status through prestigious short-term travel experiences, individual backpackers in Thailand accomplish their exclusive social position by transgressing and 'letting go' of conventional 'Western' notions of time, nutrition, comfort, and even hygiene. The extent to which backpackers can suffer hardships, save money, and avoid the trappings of 'Western' consumerism determines their position in the overall counter-cultural social hierarchy, and this concern for demonstrating one's toughness and rejection of organized tourism leads to competition among backpackers (Iyer, 1988). For example, an Australian backpacker who came to Thailand to 'get as far away from civilization as possible' offered this indictment of other travellers:

'There are places like Khao San Road where there are so many travellers that that in itself becomes like a nightmare. The thing is, although I travel with other travellers, I'm not a typical traveller because there's the stereotype that goes with being a traveller and I don't associate myself with that. The image is kind of like very hippie, very kind of anti-establishment, we are rebels, we don't agree. They have some kind of political agenda but if you try and push them on it, they've got no idea what they're talking about. It's kind of like they're designer hippies, they don't want to be part of the capitalism thing. Basically, what it boils down to is the fact they don't want to get a bloody job; that's what it is, mate. They want to party and take it easy for the rest of their lives and they'll try to justify it. They're the kind of people who go to India for two days and walk around with a sarong on their heads and no shoes. They take the superficial things from each country. They say "I'm an individual" but the fact is, they come here and all they want to do is hang around with all the other people that have that attitude, and take drugs they've brought with them because hippie travellers always have drugs and they just want to take their drugs and have their little techno party scene in the sunshine'.

Despite coming from a privileged background, staying in Khao San Road, and engaging in the drug scene himself, the attitudes of this backpacker reflect the competition that takes place among backpackers in Thailand, and also betray ambivalence and discomfort about the 'performance' expected of backpackers.

As with adventurers, therefore, backpackers aim for social status differentiation from the rest of society, but achieve this by going further than most mass ecotourists and adventurers in their attempts to escape conventional tourism enclaves, and other obvious symbols of modern 'Western' influence.

## Conclusion

In assessing individual and group motivations, behaviour, and lifestyle choices, this article has argued that, aside from differing degrees of contact with the global packaged tourism industry, one important measure of differentiation between mass ecotourists, adventurers, and backpackers in southern Thailand involves authenticity, and specifically, divergent degrees of concern for experiencing 'genuine' cultural interactions. Not only do aesthetic differences such as packaging, appearance, or nature of accommodations represent inaccurate analytical tools for predicting tourist demands and preferences, but other supposed differences based on motivations and behaviour remain, more often than not, unsubstantiated at the empirical level. Rather than belonging to mutually exclusive entities with fixed boundaries, tourists in southern Thailand form loose clusters that are 'mass' or 'alternative' only in relation to other clusters along a continuum based on a desire for cultural authenticity. Thus, while it is true that most adventurers and backpackers self-identify with the alternative label, it is a subjective concern for achieving authenticity, rather than any measurable objective achievement, that sets them apart from mass ecotourists.

As with any attempt to place individuals into groupings, even those with room for flexibility and variation, the continuum presented in this article masks certain complexities and leaves open several avenues for future research. First, although group patterns are discernible, authenticity carries different meanings for different individuals. There is no necessary correlation between an individual tourist's dress, accommodations, length of trip, or nature of holiday and their conceptions of the meaning of authenticity; predictions based solely on the group to which a tourist belongs are at times incorrect and overlook exceptions and slight variations based, among other things, on experience, occupation, nationality, or age. Even though there exist empirical patterns among members of the three tourist clusters, individual variation within each cluster is significant, pointing to the difficulty, and danger, of creating reified, immutable categories (Edensor, 2000; May, 1996). Rather than reproducing firm tourist typologies, therefore, the continuum is instead meant to convey loose and overlapping tendencies and should be seen more as a means of understanding tourist motivation than an end in itself.

Second, the continuum deals with only a small subset of tourists. The diversity and heterogeneity of both the mass and alternative tourism categories complicate efforts to draw conclusive generalizations about all individuals travelling in Thailand. Since this study addresses the behaviour and motivation of only 'Western' tourists, its observations do not necessarily apply to Thai domestic

tourists or to tourists from the rest of Asia. Stereotypes of Asian mass tourists are even more pervasive and mocking than those of 'Western' tourists, and thus it would make sense for those hoping to question totalizing anti-mass-tourist discourses to also conduct cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons of tourist behaviour and motivation.

Third, this article examines authenticity from a cultural angle since that is the most prevalent conception among tourists, whether they view authenticity in objectivist or constructivist terms. However, had I explored authenticity more widely and assessed the importance of all forms of authenticity, including especially 'existential' authenticity, the results would surely have differed. In particular, though very few individual tourists that I met in southern Thailand characterized authenticity in anything but cultural terms, I agree with Wang (1999) that 'existential authenticity can explain a greater variety of tourist experiences, and helps enhance the explanatory power of the "authenticity-seeking" model in tourism' (p. 349). If tourist responses to questions regarding travel goals, needs, and motivations were coded or interpreted according to a desire for 'existential' concerns – including escaping from the routine of everyday life, travelling to 'find oneself', spending 'quality time' with family or friends, or seeking pleasure in the company of other members of a particular community – individual variation would likely be so great that identifying clusters based on tendencies would be nearly impossible.

Finally, this continuum privileges the tourist perspective over both the nature of the tourism 'product' and the consequences of tourism on host communities. It is just as possible to assess differences among different categories of tourism according to the perspectives of the tourism industry and host populations, but this article has focused on tourist behavioural patterns and motivations because individual tourists are often the ones who respond to, if not actually produce, the discourse of alternative tourism. Moreover, as Crick (1989), Galani-Moutafi (2000), and Mowforth and Munt (1998) illustrate, consideration of the tourist perspective is crucial when trying to assess the role played by social class in producing 'new' or alternative forms of tourism.

#### NOTE

For the sake of anonymity, the names of companies and individuals mentioned in this article have been changed.

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