

Visitor Experiences at Heritage Sites: A Phenomenological Approach

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There is a surprising lack of understanding of visitors' perspective on the experience of visiting a heritage site. Previous studies used quantitative approaches that did not shed light on visitors' perspectives, terms, and meanings. Drawing upon the tradition of phenomenology, this exploratory study used qualitative research methods to examine college student visitors' perspectives on heritage sites they had visited. Respondents' experience was multidimensional: they emphasized activities in which they had engaged, their companions, site personnel they had encountered, and information learned during their visits. The results suggest a need for more careful site management (including the physical environment and site personnel) and changes in marketing, advertising, programming, and site missions. Further research on visitor experiences using phenomenological and qualitative approaches is needed.

Despite the growing interest in heritage tourism, there is a surprising lack of understanding of how visitors define a heritage site and what the activity of visiting a heritage site means to them. While some researchers have thought heritage to be "undefinable" (Herbert 1989, p. 10), others have agreed that different types of heritage and heritage sites are distinguishable, namely, natural heritage, cultural heritage, and built heritage (An Foras Forbartha 1985; Herbert 1989; Prentice 1993a). Still others have stated that the importance of heritage sites is their potential for educating the public (Danzer 1988; Hatch 1988; O'Connell 1988). Yet, however useful they may be, these distinctions have been made by scholars and professionals. Do visitors themselves think of heritage sites in terms of nature, culture, and the built environment- as predominantly educational places? Or are there other salient aspects to their visit experiences? What is known about *visitors'* experiences with, definitions of, and perspectives on heritage tourism?

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Studies from various disciplines have shed some light on aspects of the subject, yet the majority of them have used predominantly quantitative approaches in which researchers predetermine categories of meaning. For example, social psychological research at heritage museums and historic sites has documented aspects of visitor behavior such as verbal behavior (Birney 1982) and family interaction (Hilke 1989). But many of these studies have used methods such as eavesdropping and observation that do not allow researchers to learn visitors' own interpretations or explanations of their attitudes or behavior. In tourist studies, Prentice (1993b) examined the motivations of heritage site visitors by analyzing their own self-interest ratings, but their choices consisted of conceptual categories defined and supplied by the researcher, rather than by the respondents themselves. In the field of environmental psychology, researchers have described visitors' preferences regarding the attributes of natural sites and have examined how people respond to different types of environments (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). Yet many studies investigating the relationship of people and the environment have given rise to numerical scales and statistical models that offer little insight into the subjective nature of peoples' experience (Brown and Daniel 1984; Wilson and Slack 1989; Fishwick and Vining 1992).

While such studies offer important data, reliance on quantitative approaches can be "divorced from everyday life" (Fishwick and Vining 1992) and can produce results that are surprisingly distant from and inaccurate in relation to visitors' own meanings and experiences (Pickles 1985; Schreyer, Knopf, and Williams 1985). In an industry so dependent upon the satisfaction of visitors, such a gap in knowledge and understanding seems unthinkable. Yet very little research into visitor experience at heritage sites has been adequately designed to explore the visitors' perspective rather than that of the professional or researcher. Research thus far has not elicited and presented visitors' own terms, discussions, and meanings related to heritage site visiting.

An alternative conceptual and methodological approach that is potentially valuable but greatly underused in the study of visitor experiences is phenomenology. As propounded by Husserl (1911) and Heidegger (1962), the basis of phenomenological research is the discovery of the structure of the phenomenon under study from the perspective of the individual experiencing that phenomenon. Understanding emerges from information, rather than being directed by theories, laws, and concepts. The phenomenological approach "seeks the meaning of events, not their causes" (Seamon 1982, p. 123) and explores meaning "by examining individual values and mental constructs" (Wilson and Slack 1989, p. 119). Within recreation and leisure research, phenomenological approaches have been used to explore such topics as experiences at outdoor recreation sites (Fishwick and Vining 1992), geographic and environmental planning for a residential waterfront (Wilson and Slack 1989), and environmental studies (e.g., Seamon 1982). Specific methods used have ranged from open-ended interviews to think-aloud protocols, all of which seem most overdue for application to studies of visitor experiences at heritage sites.

One extremely promising technique for eliciting "individual values," "mental constructs," and visitors' own categorizations of the visit experience is recollection study (Neisser 1984). Using this technique, a researcher individually asks informants to describe their memory or memories of a particular event, such as their most recent site visit. Recollection study appears to

be based on two important assumptions: (1) visitors store memories of their experiences that are recallable (Falk 1988), and (2) through the self-selective nature of memory, we store recollections that are meaningful to us.

This technique was recently used to investigate the nature of museum visits and learning. In an exploratory study Falk (1988) conducted a series of pilot interviews in which 11 subjects shared their recollections of a museum visit. The researcher then identified predominant themes in those recollections. In Falk's study, respondents were prompted by an interviewer who asked a series of specific questions likely to have influenced the direction of respondents' answers. To better approximate a phenomenological approach, respondents could be asked to describe their memories without any additional prompts or questions, eliciting the individual's own terms and content.

Given the paucity of research on heritage site visitors from a phenomenological perspective and the apparent merit of the approach, the present study used qualitative research methods to explore the phenomenon of heritage sites by: (1) inquiring into the meaning of the term "heritage site" to one type of visitors, namely college students, and (2) exploring, through the examination of their recollections, what visits to heritage sites mean to them. In summary, how did the perspectives of college student visitors' compare to those promoted by scholars and other professionals?

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology does not contain a tradition of techniques; there is "no one correct way of doing phenomenology" (Seamon 1982, p. 119). As in all research, the precise method selected should meet the goals of the study. Therefore, after a pilot phase in which open-ended questions were tested interviews, a brief questionnaire was developed for use in this study. The key questions posed were:

- What does the term "heritage site" mean to you? Please explain.
- What was the last heritage site you visited?
- Where is this site located?
- Please describe your visit in as much detail as possible.
- What did you get out of the visit?

A convenient population for exploratory research is college students. Moreover, given the fact that many college students visit heritage sites, this population represents an important type of visitor. Therefore, the study questionnaire was distributed to students in four classes in the Department of Recreation and Park Administration at Indiana University. A total of 60 students completed the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire as fully as possible, using their own ideas, understandings, and knowledge of heritage tourism. Students confirmed their status as visitors by identifying and recollecting a heritage site visit.

Data were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques. Responses were read and reread until a set of comprehensive categories and themes emerged for each question. An accepted process in qualitative research, the data analysis routine seeks to "understand the people

studied" and induce meaning from the data (Patton 1990, p. 392). Thus, categories and themes were "grounded" in the data of visitors' experience.

Several limitations to this study must be noted. First, respondents were undergraduate and graduate students between the ages of 18 and 38 (the majority between 18 and 25) and most were residents of Indiana. Therefore, generalization of the findings cannot be made beyond this visitor type. Second, students did not define themselves beforehand as heritage site visitors, although all participants in the study had visited a heritage site recently and confirmed their suitability. Third, this small sample of 60 was not collected randomly. Despite these limitations, this exploratory study offers an initial step in uncovering some of the meanings, terms, and recollections offered by the visitors.

RESULTS

The Meaning of "Heritage Site"

Respondents' explanations of the term heritage site reflected two major themes: (1) heritage sites involve history, and (2) heritage sites involve history along with culture. An overwhelming percentage of respondents explained that a heritage site somehow involved history, and two specifications of this theme emerged. In general, respondents noted the primacy of history.

"Heritage site means a historic site, which was inhabited by famous people. It has some form of history and nostalgia." (male, age 23)

"A heritage site is a place with a lot of history." (female, age 20)

"It's a historic site. I picture log cabins and Indians and Pilgrims or Presidents' homes." (female, age 19)

Among those who commented on the importance of history to heritage sites, several specified that a heritage site provided a sense of atmosphere.

"A heritage site is a historical place that has been restored in some way so that the visitor can get some kind of feel of how it would have been during the time period presented." (female, age 21)

Several others who mentioned the importance of history to their definition also added that a heritage site involved something important or significant that had happened there.

"A heritage site is a historical site that has some type of importance, such as Lincoln's Boyhood Home, or the Washington Monument." (male, age 20)

The second major theme, less frequent but nonetheless distinct, referred to a heritage site as involving history and culture.

"A heritage site is a place of historical and cultural value." (male, age 20)

"Something of cultural and/or historical significance happened there." (female, age 30)

Student visitors do not think of heritage sites in terms of nature or the built environment. Some do think of culture. More significantly, most think of history as a defining aspect of heritage sites, a point not usually made explicit in scholars' definitions of the term.

Sites Visited

When asked to name the heritage site they had visited most recently, respondents stated a variety of sites, mostly within the United States, including Colonial Williamsburg, the Liberty Bell, and the Thomas Edison House. Perhaps because most of the respondents were residents of Indiana, a majority of them named sites located in Indiana, such as Conner Prairie, Wylie House, and Napanee.

The three most common terms used by respondents to describe the sites were *village*, *park*, and *house*. Other terms used were *mansion*, *plantation*, *event*, *museum*, *monument*, and *building*. No respondents used the terms *natural heritage*, *cultural heritage*, or *built environment* in describing their choices. However, nearly two-thirds of the sites reported by respondents might be classified by researchers as *built heritage* sites.

These responses reveal that when student visitors give examples of heritage sites, they describe them in terms of their built structure. To that extent, types of heritage sites mentioned in the literature (An Foras Forbartha 1985 ; Herbert 1989; Prentice 1993a) are part of student visitors' conceptual framework. However, student visitors do not seem to distinguish sites according to the resources each features.

Visit Recollections: Salient Aspects

To examine the terms with which respondents recalled and described their visit experiences, they were requested to provide more specific information: "Please describe your visit (the most recent heritage site you visited) in as much detail as possible." Seven different themes, or salient aspects of a visit, emerged as meaningful in the data: (1) activities, (2) companions, (3) site personnel, (4) information, (5) built environment, (6) nature, and (7) culture. Each description was coded for the presence or absence of each of these aspects. Significantly, most respondents did not describe their visit in terms of one single or predominant theme. Rather, most descriptions included a combination of several salient aspects. These aspects appeared with varying frequency and with little pattern to coexistence. However, while it appears student visitors do think about heritage sites in terms that might be categorized as nature, culture, and the built environment, they more frequently mention other aspects of the visit.

Activities. The most frequently mentioned attribute of the visit was the activity or activities that the respondent engaged in while at the site.

"I went and had a picnic in the open area of the park. After that, I walked the trails and could see the White River and also got to see where Indians' land used to be." (female, age 21, Mounds State Park, Indiana)

"I went in for an interview, and after the interview, I just walked around the place and looked at everything." (male, age 21, Brown County State Park, Indiana)

Companions. Nearly as predominant a theme in one form or another was the presence of a companion, the person or persons with whom the student was visiting the site. For many respondents, the companionship aspect was implied by the repeated use of the term "we" in the visit recollection, as illustrated by this typical example.

"We first got there and we looked at the capsule that was taken from a rocket that had been in space. We then watched a short documentary about Gus Grissom. Finally, we looked at important dates in the space program, then left the building." (male, 20, Gus Grissom Memorial, Indiana)

Many, however, explicitly mentioned the names and/or relationship of their companion(s), suggesting the centrality of that companion to the significance of the visit.

"My parents are divorced and I hadn't seen my father for awhile since he moved to Northern California." (male, age 25, house in northern California)

"In one week, my friend and I toured Old Town, Virginia. She was my tour guide and added a little bit of historical significance to the buildings we saw, and of course the bars there and at Georgetown. We did the memorials, etc. in about 7 hours, a lot of fast walking. We then spent two days in Ocean City, Maryland and one night went to visit other friends in Laurel, Maryland." (female, age 30)

"On Mother's Day in May, my parents, my sister and boyfriend, and I visited the great Mound at Mounds State Park. We were walking the trails and decided to show it to my sister's boyfriend. The great mound is a huge burial ground for Indians." (male, age 22, Mounds State Park, Indiana)

Site Personnel. A third theme mentioned by many of the respondents was another social aspect of a visit - namely, the personnel with whom they came in contact at the site, such as tour guides, interpreters, or naturalists. Numerous quotes such as these reveal how frequently visits were affected by people encountered at the site.

"On our first visit, the site was closing in 5 minutes so we went back the next week. We were able to hear the interpretive presentation of the curator with a group of retired people on a tour. We lingered at the paintings while the retirees went on the house tour. After the retirees left we went to the house and a well-intentioned but ill-informed interpreter presented us with some information. We got out of there as soon as was politely possible." (female, 23, T. C. Steele State Historic Site, Indiana)

"We went in the front door and an elderly lady appeared and asked if it was our first visit. We said yes and she took us on a tour. She showed us all the rooms and their significance." (female, age 22, mansion at Clemson)

University)

"I don't remember much because I was so young. I do remember the picnic grounds and the insides of a few of the houses. The people were really nice." (female, age 19, Conner Prairie, Indiana)

Information. A number of respondents mentioned specific facts or information they had learned during the visit. Often this information was described as having been provided by a tour guide, as in the following example:

"We went from cabin to cabin exploring. People were dressed appropriately and explained where the cabins came from, who originally owned them, and where they came from. They told us what they were made of, when the glass windows were first invented, where the kids slept, what kind of bed and mattresses they had. When daughters had boys over, Dad would set the courting candle to the length that matched how much he like the kid. We saw how guns were made, bowls, spoons, etc." (female, age 23, Fowler Park, Indiana)

"It was a big old house. I believe the house was even built in the late 1700's or something. I thought it was fun. At the time it taught me things about the man that lived there." (female, age 21, a mansion in Vincennes, Indiana)

"I went on a guided tour of both the Ford and Edison homes and garden. On this trip, I learned the history and culture of the houses and the presidents." (female, age 21, Thomas Edison House, Florida)

Built Environment. No respondents mentioned the term "built environment" specifically. However, respondents did mention things that might be categorized as features of the built environment. In particular, respondents typically identified the type or function of a building, or commented on its appearance or condition.

"It was a place that was set up like an old town with a school, general store, etc." (female, age 22, Billy Creek Village, Indiana)

"The building is quite historic. Very representative of earlier architecture here in Indiana. The inside was filled, almost cluttered, with artifacts from around this area." (male, age 26, Monroe County Historical Museum, Indiana)

"All of the buildings are old and antique-like." (female, age 20, Conner Prairie, Indiana)

Nature. Less frequently, informants mentioned some aspect of the natural environment. Once again, they did not use this term, but their comments seem to represent that category,

as seen in the following representative examples:

"There was a lot of greenage, shrubs, and trees. The lawn was landscaped beautifully." (female, age 25, Ernest Hemingway 's House, Florida)

"The plantation was huge, with large amounts of moss and vines hanging on every tree." (male, age 23, Calhoun Plantation, South Carolina)

"The park contains grassy areas, large deciduous trees, and a few paths." (male, age 22, Indiana University)

Features of nature and the built environment were often mentioned together, as in the following examples:

"The only thing I remember is a white house with a beautiful green back lawn. On the back porch of this house were some white chairs and I think even a swing. There were also pretty flowers in white pots." (female, age 19, Mount Vernon)

"I don't remember much because I was so young. I do remember the picnic grounds, and the insides of a few of the houses." (female, age 19, Conner Prairie, Indiana)

Culture. While some respondents mentioned the word "culture" in their recollections, culture was most often implied by mentioning the ways of a people depicted or observed.

"We were riding bikes and along the bike trail were these mounds that Indians had made. The signage told us about the tribe and their culture." (female, age 21, Fernandina, Florida)

"It was family oriented and it showed how the Amish lived. They had crafts, they made food, it wasn't just a show, they lived like that." (female, age 20, Amish Acres, Indiana)

The student visitors' memories and descriptions often referred to items that could be thought of as aspects or features of natural, built, and cultural heritage. But more frequently their descriptions of site visits mentioned their activities and their companions, the site personnel, and information they learned. Given the salient themes in respondents' visit recollections, it appears as though the heritage site for the college student visitor is an active, social experience - where they, together with their companions, are involved in doing things such as looking, watching, walking, picnicking, driving, and, in particular, encountering site personnel and learning.

Description of Visit Outcomes

The last question that respondents were asked was "What did you get out of the visit?" Their responses reflected two broad themes: (1) knowledge gained, primarily factual and external, and (2) experiences that were more personal and emotional in nature.

Knowledge. For many respondents, the outcomes of the visit to the heritage site centered around gaining knowledge on specific topics:

"I learned about parts of the space program and pretty much the entire life of Gus Grissom." (male, age 20, Gus Grissom Memorial, Indiana)

"A memorable visit, and we learned a lot of valuable information about manatees and dolphins." (female, age 23, Sea World, Florida)

"I learned how the square and its buildings functioned in the past as part of Bloomington's heritage, as a center for local business and manufacturing as well as serving the university community. I also gained a sense for architectural taste of the past." (male, age 31, Bloomington Walking Tour, Indiana)

For slightly fewer respondents, the knowledge gained was specifically a sense of what life was like for another cultural group or during another time period.

"A feeling for what it was like to live in that time period." (female, age 20, Conner Prairie, Indiana)

"Knowledge of the past, and respect for how they used to live." (female, age 23, Fowler Park, Indiana)

Whether the students learned about a specific subject or a specific time period, these statements seemed to suggest that they acquired a deeper appreciation of the culture of the former inhabitants of the site, the time period, or the subject matter. However, these student visitors did not seem to make any personal connections between themselves and the knowledge gained.

Personal Experience. In contrast, nearly half of the respondents experienced outcomes that could be described as more personal, emotional, or experiential. Three different kinds of such outcomes were mentioned: (1) highly personalized learning, (2) social benefits, and (3) aesthetic experiences.

Highly Personalized Learning - Many student visitors appeared to make a highly personalized or reflective connection between themselves and the specific information they seemed to be learning, as illustrated by the following examples:

"I gained an appreciation for when and how my home city was founded and defended." (female, age 23, Vincennes, Indiana)

"A feeling of pride and curiosity arose as I thought back to a typical student at IU in 1824." (male, age 22, Indiana University)

"A sense that I probably couldn't have lived back then, without technology we enjoy now, but I could handle being a quiltmaker. In that capacity I would fit in wonderfully." (female, age 21, State Park, Kentucky)

"The visit gave me some ideas to use on my own home - pots and pans, and other kitchen stuff that's much cheaper than the high-tech stuff on the market." (female, age 20, Wylie House, Indiana)

Social Benefits - The fact that many respondents cited the importance of their companions when describing their visit experiences suggests the social benefits of their visits. These examples mention some of the ways in which student visitors enjoyed significant interactions with their companions.

"Enjoyment of watching my children learn in this environment." (male, age 37, Conner Prairie, Indiana)

"I got to talk with my father." (male, age 25, house in northern California)

"I learned the family history, and heard what the house meant to each of our family members." (female, age 20, house in Kentucky)

"I got to finally see where my friend lived and worked and get an adult view of all the attractions I saw in 6th and 8th grades on family vacations and school trips." (female, age 30, Washington, D.C. and Alexandria, Virginia)

Aesthetic Experiences - An aesthetic experience or appreciation of the setting was a noted outcome for some respondents.

"I was impressed by all the cats and how beautiful the house was. The location was great and you could hear the ocean." (female, age 25, Ernest Hemingway's House, Florida)

"I got to see the beautiful atmosphere and Indian's land." (female, age 21, Mounds State Park, Indiana)

"Some knowledge about painting styles and a beautiful walk through autumn leaves." (female, age 23, T. C. Steele State Historic Park, Indiana)

"It was a great opportunity to spend time with my family, enjoy good food, and listen to beautiful music." (female, age 22, Conner Prairie, Indiana)

The largest portion of respondents described their visit outcome as knowledge gained only. However, a significant portion enjoyed a personalized experience as described above or reported experiencing both kinds of outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The primary goals of this exploratory study were to examine the meaning of the term heritage site for one type of heritage site visitor - the college student - and to examine what a visit to a heritage site means from the student visitor's perspective. The study revealed that student visitors thought of heritage sites as places that involve either history, or history and culture. They recalled their visits with reference to seven salient aspects: (1) the activities in which they engaged during the visit, (2) their companions, (3) the site personnel they encountered, (4) the information they learned, and the components of (5) nature, (6) culture, and (7) the built environment they noticed. Student visitors described the outcomes of their visits in terms of two broad themes: (1) knowledge gained that was primarily factual and external, or (2) several categories of personal experience, including personal learning, social benefits, and aesthetic experiences.

How do student visitors' perspectives compare to those of scholars and professionals? The findings of this preliminary study suggest that student visitors think of heritage sites in somewhat different terms than do scholars and professionals. Prentice (1993a) suggested that heritage sites should be differentiated in terms of types of heritage: built, natural, and cultural heritage. This is not an uncommon view among scholars and professionals in the field. However, this exploration found that student visitors do not differentiate between types of sites, even though they seem to recall aspects that could be categorized as each. Rather, student visitors think of heritage sites as a mosaic of different aspects, not unlike the way that state park visitors have been found to relate to state parks: "as a combination of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, people, personal experiences, and in the context of other places" (Fishwick and Vining 1992, p. 61).

While student visitors do not distinguish categories or types of heritage, they do think of heritage sites in terms of history. While history is often implied in scholars' definitions, it is by contrast a very conspicuous dimension of student visitors' conceptions of heritage sites. This finding carries important implications for heritage site professionals. If heritage sites are seen by student visitors as primarily places to experience or learn about history, heritage site professionals may need to market their sites more effectively by clearly describing their role, product, and experience to student visitors. Marketers and site-interpretive staff alike may wish to educate student visitors on the different types of heritage. Since most respondents in this study had visited sites that could be classified as built heritage, perhaps student visitors do not usually think of natural or cultural sites when thinking of heritage sites. This suggests another "teachable moment" for the heritage professional: to raise awareness about types of heritage sites other than historic homes, museums, villages, and burial sites.

While student visitors do not distinguish sites by type of heritage, they do appear to notice and recall aspects of the built and natural environment in ways that strongly suggest that the quality and condition of the physical environment is an important component of the site visit experience for many people. Some student visitors recalled the condition of the site in negative terms, as evidenced through comments such as "it was dark, dirty, rundown" and "the sculpture was tarnished and looks greenish," while others remembered impressive things, such as "a lot of greenery, shrubs, and trees," and the "large amounts of moss and vines hanging from every tree." At best, elements of the built and natural environment contributed to an experience of beauty for some student visitors. Researchers have found that nature is important to people (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). The findings of this study suggest that student visitors are likely to notice and

recall aspects of the surroundings; therefore, careful design and maintenance of the physical environment of a heritage site, particularly its natural aspects, should be a critical goal for site professionals.

Tourism professionals of all kinds have long known the importance of interactions between industry representatives and the public. This study indicates that the personnel at heritage sites are an extremely important component of many student visitors' site recollections. Like the physical aspects of the site, interactions with site personnel were recalled by student visitors when they were particularly negative or particularly positive. For many, site personnel such as tour guides and interpreters functioned as conveyors of knowledge and learning. Given these findings, the importance of well-trained and friendly site personnel cannot be overemphasized. And given their importance in student visitors' recollections, site personnel should be educated to see the importance of their role in the successful operation of a heritage site.

Despite the many ways in which student visitors appear to think about heritage sites somewhat differently than professionals, there is one critical point on which they agree: that the experience is often educational in some way. Some student visitors recalled specific information they had learned, and many considered the chief outcome of their visit to be the acquisition of knowledge. However, some respondents personalized this knowledge, while others did not. Future research efforts into the nature of learning at heritage sites may prove useful for understanding this difference, as well as how to educate student visitors most effectively and meaningfully.

In addition to seeing their visit as educational, student visitors appear to recall and value several other types of experiences at heritage sites. Perhaps most significantly, student visitors seem to value heritage site visits for the social opportunities they can provide. The occasion to be in the presence of or interact with family members and friends is a valued experience that heritage sites offer for some student visitors. Student visitors also mentioned a range of physical activities engaged in at sites - often with their companions - such as bike riding, walking, and enjoying nature. These findings suggest that the student visitor's experience of a heritage site is multidimensional. Therefore, sites may well need to reexamine and adjust marketing, advertising, and programming efforts, as well as their very missions, to accommodate and fit the complex nature of the student visitor experience.

Studying visitors through a phenomenological approach is a critical direction for the future of both heritage tourism research and practice. While this exploratory study offers an initial step, further efforts are needed to document, uncover, and understand visitors' words, conceptions, and experiences. Applied as an evaluation tool at individual sites, phenomenological studies can undoubtedly yield data that can inform site management. Used in larger-scale studies, such as interviews with heritage site tourists of many different types across the country, phenomenological approaches may well hold the key to truly illuminating the multidimensional nature of visitor experiences at heritage sites.

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