

Cannabis Tourism

Cannabis is consumed for medical and recreational purposes in many places around the world and has long been connected to travel and tourism in illegal and quasi-legal contexts. Cannabis is part of the formal, scientific name of the plant (*Cannabis sativa*, *Cannabis indica*) that contains the psychoactive compound THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) and the non-psychoactive compound CBD (cannabidiol), which are known for their uplifting effects on the mind and body, respectively. Although referred to colloquially as ‘marijuana’, ‘weed’, ‘pot’, ‘ganga’, ‘Mary Jane’ and ‘grass’, these names carry with them connotations that reproduce stigma.

Originally, cannabis use was identified with non-institutional forms of tourism like ‘drifting’ and ‘backpacking’ in destinations like India and Thailand (Scheyvens, 2002). Amsterdam, the Netherlands is an early instance of liberal drug policies attracting visitors to quasi-legal ‘coffee shops’ to purchase and consume regulated cannabis (Korf, 2002). Cannabis use fits into the broader context of drug tourism, which involves the awareness, consumption and usage of drugs that are illegal or socially illegitimate in either the destination visited or in the tourist’s home country (Uriely and Belhassen, 2006). As the figure indicates, when associated with drug tourism, cannabis use is framed by deviancy and risk with the possibility of arrest, stigmatization and cognitive damage (ibid.). As a marginalized activity, drug tourism is not connected to the formal tourism industry established at a destination.

Cannabis use in the context of tourism is not a new phenomenon but the legal context in which it takes place, as well as the policy that defines it, is. Legalization is a worldwide trend, changing global perceptions of cannabis and providing new opportunities for tourism. The figure indicates that legalized contexts offer hospitality, recreational, leisure, wellness and educational experiences that revolve around the production and consumption of cannabis. Grow site and dispensary tours, for example,

are Colorado’s top cannabis tourism draws since the US state’s legalization in 2012 (Kang, O’Leary and Miller, 2016) and are emerging in the urban areas of other legalized states such as California, Massachusetts, Maine and Nevada. Education around the physiology and pharmacology of the plant is integral to these experiences in which tourists can legally consume cannabis and openly immerse themselves in the cannabis culture and industry (Keul and Eisenhauer, 2019).

In 2018, Canada federally legalized cannabis for recreational purposes, which enables tourism providers to offer experiences that incorporate the purchase, consumption and production of cannabis. In legal contexts, cannabis tourism includes, but is not limited to, specialty travel agencies, cannabis-friendly accommodation, events, consumption lounges and transportation services. Live music, festivals, theatre, comedy and other forms of entertainment can also leverage cannabis to enhance the tourist’s sensory experience. With the adoption of cannabis as a legal resource by tourism-related businesses, cannabis use is increasingly becoming tolerated and mainstream in North America (Belhassen, Santos and Uriely, 2007). Changing attitudes will influence a greater acceptance of cannabis as an attraction or amenity, a form of special interest tourism (Kang et al., 2016) that caters to and supports both the cannabis curious and enthusiast. Cannabis tourism meets an important need by providing information related to the purchase and/or consumption of cannabis (Keul and Eisenhauer, 2019).

Cannabis in itself has no inherent intrinsic meaning. Different places around the world ascribe different values and norms to the plant. In both legal and illegal contexts there is a different set of social and material relations. The myriad of relations and meanings that surround cannabis make it a plant with multiple identities and a contested ideology. The difference between cannabis as a form of deviancy and cannabis as a form of recreation, leisure, therapy and medicine is ideological. While tourism acts as an agent of normalization that makes cannabis a more common activity taken up by individuals in their leisure time, the use of cannabis in some countries like China is illegal. Cannabis as a ‘drug’ in illegal contexts is a moral label that needs to be held up against object materialities whereby cannabis acts as a medicine or a normalized non-drug or recreational substance. This distinction is important to consider in

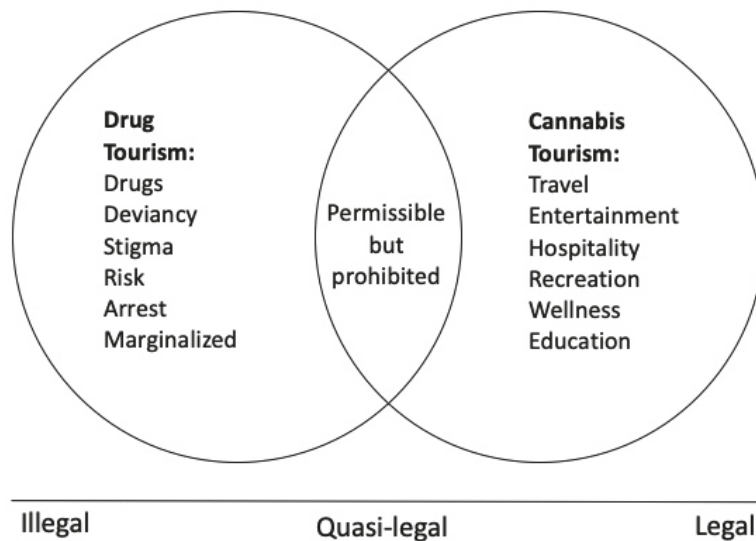
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research on cannabis tourism because it directs, or at least strongly influences, the nature of the knowledge produced.

Destinations where purchasing cannabis is legally and safely made available to the public, as well as the avoidance of legal and social consequences of cannabis consumption while travelling or vacationing, are major motivating influences of cannabis tourists (Belhassen et al., 2007). A spectrum exists with respect to visitors who choose cannabis-centric vacations where purchasing and consuming cannabis might be a primary reason for the trip, to those visitors who encounter cannabis opportunistically where cannabis experiences are secondary vacation activities (Taylor, 2019). Cannabis tourists are described demographically as being a very diverse group (Keul and Eisenhauer, 2019). Cultural, social and psychological factors, as well as a person's level of familiarity with cannabis will play varying roles in the decision-making process that influences the type of experience tourists have with cannabis. Experimentation, pleasure orientation, quest for authenticity, purchasing, social prestige and emotional healing are six general categories that explain motives for consuming cannabis during a vacation (Belhassen et al., 2007; Wen et al., 2018). The sense of belonging that can be felt when travelling to cannabis-friendly destinations

where the culture celebrates cannabis consumption can also be an important part of the tourist experience (Belhassen et al., 2007).

Travelling to a place in whole or in part because of the ability to purchase and/or consume cannabis (Taylor, 2019; Uriely and Belhassen, 2006) is one definition of cannabis tourism. The legal context is another defining element. Travel, entertainment and hospitality businesses in North America that legally incorporate cannabis as part of their product/service/experiences and provide the space for a legal cannabis culture need to be differentiated from drug tourism, as the figure conceptualizes. Attitudes and perceptions towards cannabis are increasingly tolerant and it is no longer acceptable to profile tourists as deviant and/or partaking in marginal activity (Kang et al., 2016; Keul and Eisenhauer, 2019). Tourism is tolerated as a socially acceptable practice and is part of normalizing cannabis into mainstream society. Moreover, tour guides in Colorado use cannabis tourism as a platform from which to destigmatize the plant and its industries, contest deviance and challenge the law (Keul and Eisenhauer, 2019). The largely socially accepted status of tourism offers credibility to cannabis as a recreational activity in which people engage in their free time. Although legal cannabis tourism challenges perceptions of deviancy, discourses



Legal contexts that frame cannabis use in tourism

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of deviance and remaining stereotypes still pose potential conflict for tourism development that might deter certain markets from visiting a destination (ibid.).

Given the newness of the legalized cannabis tourism industry and its not yet understood economic, social and cultural impacts, future research can take any number of directions. First, more research is needed in refining definitions of cannabis tourism. Although purchasing and/or consuming cannabis while on vacation are types of 'cannabis experiences', the definition of cannabis experience needs to be broadened to include educational activities at places where tourists neither consume nor purchase cannabis. To date, definitions of cannabis tourism are consumption centred. However, given the role cannabis producers play in offering tourism experiences through educational and learning components, such as visitor centres at production facilities, the definition of cannabis tourism needs to be revisited with respect to including non-consumptive elements. Further, in a legal context, cannabis tourism needs to be theorized as a form of social responsibility concerned with public health policy designed to reduce the potentially harmful consequences of use, while, at the same time, promote a safe way to provide cannabis-enhanced recreational experiences. Tourism is an example of an already existing social institution that, in adopting cannabis as a resource, plays a role in normalizing processes by setting standards that become embedded in the broader social acceptance of cannabis.

Although currently, a limited number of countries allow recreational cannabis consumption, increasingly there is worldwide movement towards legalization, as evidenced in Mexico, Israel, the European Union, South Africa, Australia, the United States and New Zealand. The cannabis tourism industry emerging in North America, especially, is indicative of the future opportunities for tourism at destinations around the globe.

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