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- Submitted 6 July 1994
Resubmitted 1 October 1994
Accepted 4 October 1994

0160-7383(94)00100-6

Independence for Western Women Through Tourism

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When considering the role of women in the guest-host relationship of tourism, it is often the women of the host environment who draw the attention of researchers. They are the group acted upon as providers of a hospitable temporary stopping place for guests, as makers of cultural artifacts, and as the receivers of outside influences and/or abuses. The study of female hosts' labor, exploitation, and gender roles, as observed by outsiders, and often as a result

of outsiders' presence, raises important and revealing questions about both guest and host societies.

There is, however, another group of women who warrant additional study: the Western female tourists or *guests*. This circle of women is not defined by age or marital status, but by the fact that they have the option and inclination to be tourists. They are women who have the time, money, and desire to embark upon a journey that takes them away from familiar surroundings. An analysis of the tours and writing of 19th and 20th century women (such as Emily Sargent, Edith Wharton, and Mary Morris), combined with the study of late-20th century organizations (such as Alaska Women of the Wilderness and Womanship), sheds light on the motivations of Western female tourists and the effects of tourism in its various forms on them. Further, such an investigation demonstrates striking similarities in the social and economic goals linked to tourism for 19th and 20th century women. It is noteworthy, for example, that Edith Wharton and Mary Morris, writing a century apart, set out on their travels with much the same goals. Each hoped to escape her mother's world, and each employed her travels as a source of creative, professional production.

The methods by which one might successfully analyze the role of tourism in Western women's lives range from a thorough critical examination of the writing these women produced, to the application of Dean MacCannell's (1976) anthropological model. A particularly fruitful model for an investigation of Western women tourists might be Eileen Green, Sandra Hebron, Diana Woodward's *Women's Leisure. What Leisure?* (1990). As Green, Hebron, and Woodward discovered, what defined leisure for the women in the group they studied was not the activity they participated in, but the occasion for social interaction away from their domestic circles. The link between tourism and leisure is inevitable; indeed, much of what women such as Emily Sargent and Mary Morris seemed to find both pleasurable and productive in their journeys was the opportunity for interaction with both friends and strangers.

Men such as the American author Washington Irving and the French painter Paul Gauguin also used travel to escape their domestic responsibilities and as a source of professional production. For men such as these, however, travel was only one among several means of gaining self-defining experience away from their homes, spouses, and offspring. The latter home environment was a physical manifestation of a man's productive abilities, yet not the defining element of his character as it is for many women. A woman's choice to leave her familial sphere behind for short or prolonged periods, to be without a home, suggests that there was a desire, conscious or not, to escape the routines and expectations of everyday life. Travel could enable a woman to break free from the domestic environment to which she had been relegated but over which she historically had little control, in order to attain a non-traditional role, such as professional author (Edith Wharton), or to elude the "wretched" life of an unmarried woman (Emily Sargent).

The sources for an investigation of Western women tourists exist in published travel essays, novels, private correspondence, and data from groups that focus on women as tourists. The unpublished letters of Emily Sargent, for example, provide insight into her life not simply as a single woman, but as an *unmarried* woman in late-19th and early-20th century America and Europe. They reveal how, through her annual tours of Europe and the United States with friends and family, she constructed a meaningful life for herself as a woman who did not work outside of her home. The life she created for herself as a tourist was one that would not otherwise have been possible in her social milieu.

Emily Sargent remains an eloquent example for late-20th century married

and single women, whose individual voices are rarely heard. The desire of women like Emily Sargent to undertake the challenge and pleasure of travel has led to the recent formation of organizations that offer travel opportunities for women. The extent to which the search for experience beyond one's daily life continues to engage late-20th century women is evident in the striking number and variety of organizations in the United States and abroad, such as Alaska Women of the Wilderness, Womanship, Woodswomen, and Outdoor Vacations for Women Over 40, which focus on women as participants. Through the collection of data, including participant statistics and founding charters, from these groups one could obtain information which would parallel that found in Emily Sargent's late-19th century personal correspondence.

Together, an in-depth study of 19th and 20th century women tourist's literature and correspondence, and an investigation of 20th century women's travel organizations represent two challenging undertakings. Individually, each project results in its own enlightening insights. A combined analysis of the ensuing conclusions reveals the consistent role of tourism as a source of independence for 19th and 20th century women. If one looks closely at the correspondence and travel accounts of 19th and 20th century women tourists within the context of their domestic work and leisure, one can begin to assess the motivations of Western women tourists and the effect of their tours on their public, that is professional, and private lives. The historic letters and publications, along with the modern travel group data, constitute the basis for demonstrating that in spite of technological and social advances, tourism was and remains a significant method for Western women to gain independence from their domestic environments. □ □

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Submitted 25 August 1994

Revised 7 October 1994

Accepted 20 October 1994

0160-7383(94)00101-4