Chapter 5

Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage to the Ecuadorian Andes: The Case of the Virgin of El Cisne

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ABSTRACT

The singularities of the pilgrimage to the Virgin of El Cisne in the South of Ecuador identify it as a unique religious event. It was decreed by Simón Bolívar. It has a circular route spacing in time, and since its origin, it has a tourist focus while at the same time performing the Loja Fair Trade also created by the Liberator for boosting the influx of pilgrims venerating the Virgin.

INTRODUCTION

Describe the general perspective of the chapter. End by specifically stating the objectives of the chapter.

“Religious tourism” is a newly emerging concept. According to Garay and Cànoves (2011), it is closely linked to the emergence of the so-called “post-Fordist passenger cars”, deeply rooted in the Anglo-Saxon setting. However, authors like Raj and Morpeth (2007) value it as a sustainable and ever-growing international phenomenon worldwide. It is an increasingly significant segment of the global

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tourism market, based on an element that, for Juárez et al (2012), is not new as it has been present in man’s own future and in his relationship with the idea of the divinity for thousands of years. Religion is a phenomenon which has always been associated with the human being since time immemorial and the cause that led him to build physical spaces impregnated with a spiritual halo worthy of being visited. And this, as Martínez (2009) rightly points out, also has a significant economic impact on populations where any religious figure is worshipped.

From the economic perspective, religious tourism constitutes an efficient instrument of dynamization of the host economies in terms of income, employment generation, balance of payments, tax revenues, synergies with other economic sectors, and social entrepreneurship (Sinclair, 1998; Balaguer & Cantavella-Jordà, 2002; Seetanah, 2011). It is also an engine that generates resources aimed at the conservation and preservation of the material and immaterial forming places of worship which a significant number of visitors, pilgrims or not, are attracted to throughout the year or seasonally for the celebration of certain festivities or unique religious events (Fernández, 2012). It also allows the community to experience a retrieval process of the collective memory, the reconstruction of history, the verification of sources and the strengthening of its connection with the living space and its cultural identity (Nunes, 2012; Akerlof & Kranton, 2010).

In short, there is a positive effect, not only in strictly economic terms, but also in social and cultural aspects, in those emblematic places of religious content where there is a growth and development of this type of tourism. This effect makes an impact on the central area and radiates throughout the region (Lorenzo & Ramón, 2011; Tobón & Tobón, 2013).

Thus, according to data from the Spanish Tourism Office, ratified by the World Tourism Organization, the sector composed of those involved in travel for religious or spiritual reasons, moves more than three hundred million people each year (González, 2011) and generates a turnover of over thirteen billion euros (Guillén & Ramón-García, 2015). Consequently, these pilgrimages, viewed from the point of view of displacement or travel from one place to another, require an entire commercial infrastructure that responds satisfactorily to the needs of the pilgrims and so must be considered as an integral part of the tourism industry (Reynoso & González, 2012). One should not forget that religious tourism uses the same means of promotion and marketing as any other type of tourism, including mass tourism (Porcal, 2006; Santos, 2006).

The case of the Virgin of El Cisne is an example of unique religious tourism, because of the singularity that surrounds it.

With this idea in mind, the purpose of this chapter is first to know the origin and tradition of Virgen de El Cisne; second, to determine the national and international importance of pilgrimages around the devotional phenomenon; and third, to underline the scope of tourism symbolized by this event.

It should be specified that, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of pilgrims searching for religious experiences, although the increasing number of people taking part moved by other — spiritual, cultural or tourist — motives is also significant.

On account of the importance of this event in southern Ecuador, and the opportunities it offers to influence tourist development in the areas involved —El Cisne and Loja— the structure of this chapter is the following:

The first part contextualizes two terms representing the focal point of this study: religious tourism and pilgrimage, and also the similarities and differences between both concepts.