

## **The New Age experience in Sedona, Arizona**

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### **Abstract**

This working paper examines the potential to customize a New Age destination, using data collected from hospitality and tourist operators at Sedona, Arizona, United States of America (USA). Data show that customization is overt at tourist attractions, but that hotels generally limit advertising of New Age products and services to in-house guest information. Resistance to the New Age phenomenon is considered to influence levels of customization, and some interviewees noted a preference to the term 'spiritual seeker' to describe their target market.

As customers were offered spiritual development, self-help, and stress relief, it was determined that New Age tourism is an experience rather than a service, providing some support for Hemmington's (2007) thesis that hospitality is primarily experiential. The paper provides a list of products and services of potential interest to New Age tourists, and the observation that Sedona, while attractive to New Age tourists, is also an expensive upscale resort, therefore limiting access to some visitors.

Keywords: experience, hospitality, New Age, Sedona, spiritual, tourism

### **Introduction**

Although Hemmington (2007: 1) proposed that hospitality is an experience based on 'generosity, theatre and performance', there is scant research exploring the kinds of experiences offered or sought, especially for New Age tourists. This study therefore examines a New Age destination to determine how it customizes products and services to meet the needs of a specialized market, and therefore, whether New Age hospitality exists as an experience.

### **Background**

New Age has been defined as 'popular or vernacular religion'... involving the 'practices and beliefs of ordinary, lay practitioners' (Sutcliffe 2003: 19). Western hospitality, while generally well placed to cater for main-stream tourists, may not be so accommodating to travellers 'on the fringe', who seek places supportive of beliefs and practices that are outside mainstream thinking. Therefore, whereas sacred sites might attract those wishing to meditate, pray or contemplate (Vaughan 2002), New Age travellers may also seek psychic readings, learn about feng shui or extra-terrestrial beings,

or have their auras read – all of which could be enhanced by specialized provisions. Pernecky and Johnston's (2006) study of New Age tourists shows that there are varied levels of interest in New Age thinking, and that this segment of travellers can be categorized as low, medium or highly specialized New Age tourists. The authors argue that it is the highly specialized New Agers that are most demanding when they seek New Age experiences.

Field work was undertaken at Sedona (Arizona, USA), a popular destination for New Age travellers (Ivakhiv 2001) who visit and experience the energy vortices reputed to exist there. A small selection of hotel and tourism operators were asked how they customized products and services to satisfy the demands of New Age travellers, and also, what their customers wanted (further data collection will entail an on-line survey of New Agers to determine their expectations of hospitality at New Age destinations).

Sedona has around 10,000 residents and a cost of living 26% higher than the national average (Sperling 2012). There is no public transport, so those without cars are severely disadvantaged in their enjoyment of the town. International brands such as Hyatt, Hilton and Diamond Resorts are prominent, alongside various boutique lodging houses and retreat centres. Sedona is an upscale resort catering to out-of-state domestic tourists and a few international visitors (Elliott D. Pollack 2006). In 1995, a Northern Arizona University study apparently revealed that over 64% of visitors hope for some kind of spiritual experience, suggesting that spirituality is important to the overall Sedona experience. However, jeep tours, hiking and cycling are also important attractions, as are the many resorts providing spa services to city dwellers seeking respite from busy lives.

## **Methods**

Interviewees were a psychic, spiritual guide, meditation teacher, and three hotel managers, all of whom were asked about their work, customers, customers' needs, and any specialist services and experiences they provided. Data were analysed by highlighting phrases relevant to the research topic, then sorting these into themes so questions could be generated to match each theme<sup>1</sup>. For example, the manager of an upscale hotel and spa described his customers in terms of activities, such as 'getting out on the trail', 'really experiencing Sedona', and 'hiking and cycling'. A spiritual guide however, described customers in terms of what they sought, such as 'their own personal truth'. The question generated to match these phrases, was 'what do you think your customers want?' This question was then re-applied to the transcripts, and all suitable responses extracted, resulting in a wide range of perceived wants and needs, such as good views, healing and happiness.

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<sup>1</sup> This 'Reverse Interrogation' process emerged during the data analysis and will be explored in a subsequent paper



## Results and observations

Although ideas and support for customizing hotel rooms were anticipated, not only were these not particularly forthcoming, but as the psychic pointed out, the presence of ‘metaphysical tools’ (i.e. specialized New Age equipment) might deter some visitors:

The guy would get in the door and be just on the edge of being open and come into the room and see a pendulum on the counter, or oracle cards on the night stand and say ‘why have you brought me here?’

The meditation teacher also saw no need to provide specialized items, as most New Agers brought their own ‘meditation totems, or their crystals, or their own aromatherapy...’. However, various customized products and services were identified in the interview data, and are presented in Table 1, supplemented with those observed in Sedona shop-front and website advertisements.

<b>Table 1: New Age products and services</b>		
<b>Products</b>	<b>Services</b>	
<b>Interview data</b>	<b>Interview data</b>	<b>Advertisements</b>
Aromatherapy oils Crystals Meditation totems Oracle cards Pendulums	Alpha release techniques Chakra balancing tours Clairvoyance Cord cutting Energy work, energy healing Labyrinth walks Lectures and talks Massage Medicine wheel ceremonies Meditations	Astrology readings Aura photos and readings Concerts Destiny and love readings Dream analysis Medicine wheel tours Numerology services Reiki Séances Sound therapy
<b>Advertisements</b> Feng shui supplies Tarot cards	Native American ceremonies Organic food and spa Personal retreats Psychic readings Psychic work Sacred site tours Shamanic and journey work Spirit alignment techniques Stress reduction ceremonies Stress reduction techniques	UFO site tours Yoga classes

Customization for New Age tourism was apparent on shop-fronts, tourist offices, and specialized sites such as retreat centres, but not at hotels (except on brochures advertising New Age services). Because so few accommodation websites offer New Age services, it was initially thought hotels did not customize for this specialized market. The researcher’s hotel offered guided meditations, yoga classes, and lectures on the Sedona vortexes, but these were not advertised, and could be discovered only by visiting the hotel. However, travel blogs revealed some hotels offered more than they advertised. The upscale Enchantment Resort apparently offers past-life regressions, tarot readings,

palm readings psychic massages (Garner 2006), and while the Sedona Rouge website advertises psychic readings, tarot, and spiritual acupuncture, this was the exception rather than the norm. Hotels may have avoided advertising New Age services in case this limited their appeal to other tourists.

Responses on the wants and needs of customers, and how they experienced Sedona (Table 2), revealed an emphasis on spiritual development, self-help, and stress relief. Data in the top row outline spiritual services, and in the second row, services for retreats and general holidays. Responses are sorted to address the research question of whether New Age hospitality exists as an experience, and demonstrate the experiential nature of hospitality for both New Age and general tourists.

<b>Table 2: Customer wants and experiences</b>	
<p><b>New Age customers want and need</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Healing</li> <li>Help letting go of the old stuff</li> <li>Knowing they co-lead the meditation</li> <li>Readings, stones, cards, crystals</li> <li>Renewal and re-inspiration</li> <li>Search for their personal power</li> <li>Some tools</li> <li>Something spiritual</li> <li>Spiritual ethics</li> <li>Take their life to the next level</li> <li>Tap into the higher part of themselves</li> <li>Their own personal truth</li> </ul>	<p><b>New Age customers get</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brochures on readings and other new age activities</li> <li>Connection with energies of the land</li> <li>Empowerment to connect with their own truth</li> <li>Energy for the next part of their journey</li> <li>Find their power animal</li> <li>Help to explore their own answers</li> <li>Help to kind of get out of their own way</li> <li>Learn there are other possibilities in life</li> <li>New insight discovery</li> <li>Own spiritual link to whatever they want</li> <li>Spiritual experiences through products and psychic readings</li> <li>Stress reduction and problem solving</li> <li>Things to help them find clarity</li> <li>Tools to find their own answers</li> </ul>
<p><b>All customers want and need</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adventure, exploration</li> <li>Be brought down a notch so they are all the same</li> <li>Be comfortable and warm</li> <li>Be in a time they will always remember</li> <li>Disconnect from their responsibilities</li> <li>Escape the heat</li> <li>Experience Sedona bikes and hiking</li> <li>Flat screen television etc.</li> <li>Good deal</li> <li>Good views</li> <li>Happiness</li> <li>Help making the most of the experience</li> <li>Hike, read books, shop</li> </ul>	<p><b>All customers get</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conversations with everybody</li> <li>Different environment</li> <li>Feel relaxed</li> <li>Friendliness</li> <li>Help to get the best experience at Sedona</li> <li>Help with their different desires</li> <li>Lead them to where they want to go</li> <li>Listen to what they're saying</li> <li>Memorable experience</li> <li>Peacefulness</li> <li>Self-service to break that whole idea of waiting on them hand and foot</li> <li>Something they probably didn't expect</li> <li>Talk about whatever they want to</li> </ul>

Hosted environment In-room Jacuzzi or spa experience To be just 'you and your wife' Personal service Remember their trip because of the people they meet Sit down and actually meet other people Slow down, wind down Someone to talk to them and be intuitive Someone to listen & read body language To feel peaceful and happy inside What they love in their life What's the best	They're welcomed Very personal, very experiential, very customized stay We find out what they want to do 'Wow, that's exactly what I wanted'
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During the recruitment phase, it was discovered that 'New Age' connotes UFO abductions, 'space cadets', 'rainbow people', and a general willingness to pursue a kind of happiness that is immune from external forces (e.g. family, leisure, or money). 'New Age' and all that implies was unpalatable to some, and many operators used the term 'spiritual seekers', as more representative of the kinds of visitors they wanted to attract. It is therefore possible that overt New Age customization was avoided because of a resistance to New Age people and ideas, but 'spiritual' services discreetly provided because they were in demand.

### **Conclusions and implications**

During recruitment, it was discovered that 'New Age' connotes UFO abductions, 'space cadets', 'rainbow people', and a general desire to pursue a kind of happiness that is protected from external forces such as family, leisure, and money. 'New Age' and all it implies was unpalatable to some, and many operators used the term 'spiritual seekers' to describe the visitors they wanted to attract. It is therefore possible that overt New Age customization was avoided because of a resistance to New Age people and ideas, but 'spiritual' services discreetly provided because they were in demand.

Although it was expected Sedona would be a calming and supportive destination for a spiritual seeker, in reality it was an up-scale resort, where economic values were particularly apparent. High-pressure time-share salespeople were evident on the street and staffing information offices, and the Chamber of Commerce's tourist office was reputed to favour those who offered financial incentives. What was reputed to be a sacred site was really an expensive luxury resort catering to wealthy city dwellers seeking renewal and re-inspiration, excluding those with limited financial resources.

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