Preface

Rural tourism marketing and consumption is connected intricately to uneven processes of development and wealth distribution across the world. At one level, the industry is driven by consumption patterns linked to the symbolic prestige value associated with specialist rural tourism products (e.g. wine consumption; hobby vacations offering painting, writing, art and craft experiences). At another level, however, rural tourism production and marketing ends up favouring some groups and communities who gain from involvement in the industry leaving others marginalised. Generally, the understanding of rural tourism and its marketing tends to employ few central motifs (embodying binaries such as historical/modern; personal/impersonal; authentic/commodified) in defining rural identity, notwithstanding contemporary societal frameworks marked by complex and dynamic global interconnectivity. The most pervasive image is of rural symbolising a way of life ‘long lost’, ‘quaint, isolated by geography and culture’ (Ware, 2003, p. 161) and marketing literature (including web-based) tends to build on idealised rural settings as the locus for authentic, cultural experiences. Moreover, the politics of rural tourism remains largely unexplored in the marketing context, especially issues of class, gender and authority. For instance, despite research on tourism for community development (see the works of Beeton, 2006; Mair and Reid, 2007) questions that remain unresolved are: whose terms are being addressed in marketing rural tourism experience and enterprise? Is the tradition-specific imagery or what Edensor (2002) calls, ‘reified notions of culture’ generated by the consent (and content of lives) of those involved? Whose voices articulate community culture/tradition and determine boundaries of acceptable change? Why are particular places, narratives and sensibilities either included or eliminated in the process of developing rural tourism destination brands?

Also, there is little appreciation of the fact that rural tourism marketing should be understood mainly in terms of careful channelling of mass-tourist flows so that they do not ‘end up in real places’ (Ancelet, 1992, p.258) or ‘community space’ and cause disruption to local routines (Modi, 2009). Moreover, existing research offers little means to track the blurring of boundaries between the quotidian, mundane aspects of rural
Marketing rural tourism

life and marketing imagery, a concept Engel (2004, p. 1) refers to as ‘postmodern aesthetic’ characterised by a shattering of boundaries between representation, reality and the real identity. Thus the focus of this book is on presenting a critique of prevalent spatial, material, performative, exhibited and archetypal enunciations and stipulations attached to the notion ‘rural’ through illustrative examples and developing a case for authentic, evocative representations of rural experience and enterprise in marketing/promotional literature. I draw upon research on relational capital, place-making and identity in an attempt to chart accurately rural actors’ response to their spatiality (i.e. particular geographic location), influenced by their rootedness in the local socio-economic fabric and the manner in which they influence consumption, production, employment patterns and policy-making processes.

Generally, the ethos of this work stems from my research on integrated rural tourism (IRT), a term I coined with colleagues working on a collaborative programme of research called SPRITE (Supporting and Promoting Integrated Tourism in Europe’s Lagging Rural Regions) funded (2001–2004) under the EU’s Quality of Life and Management of Living Resources programme (QLK5-CT–2000–01211). I define IRT as ‘tourism explicitly linked to economic, social, cultural, natural and human structures of localities in which it takes place’ (Saxena et al., 2007, p. 351; see also, Ilbery and Saxena, 2009, 2011; Ilbery et al., 2007; Saxena and Ilbery, 2008, 2010). Hence at the community level, I propose that IRT has the potential to link traditional trades, training programmes, local culture and way of thinking to extra-local economic forces. At the operational level, it thrives on connections formed by tourism actors (gatekeepers, local businesses, resource controllers, host communities and policy makers) across a variety of dimensions – economic, social, cultural and natural – in a range of manifestations (including those represented by resources, activities, events, facilities, services and products). Drawing upon my work on IRT I underline the significance of multi-layered place narratives, actors’ personal life stories that enable an authentic representation of their role in the production – communities, firms, institutions and non-profit-making organisations – and consumption – tourists who ‘... determine their own perspective and actively create their own travel narrative’ (Richards and Wilson, 2006, p. 1216) of rurality and its marketing. Since most data were collected through narrative interviews (see Czarniawska, 1998), it allowed participants to tell their stories about their localities, changes they had witnessed, how they themselves had come to interpret and understand those changes plus the symbols and narrative devices they underlined for use in tourism and place promotion. In general, actors’ narratives, exemplified in a number of potent symbols within a locality – myths, ceremonies,
rituals, brands and anecdotes – are employed in populating the content of individual chapters.

Chapter 1 elucidates the research context outlining the materiality of varied experiences rurality offers and actors’ enterprise in conveying the real/symbolic value embedded within them. At the heart of the discussion is the emphasis on juxtaposed accounts and processes – shaped and reworked by actors’ ingenuity and sociality – involved in selling and performing rurality. Case examples illustrate how informed from within and ‘built on local referents’ rural tourism can be an effective means in ‘. . . (re)creating peoples and places’ (Salazar, 2010, p. 15). Such a perspective foregrounds the agency of both hosts and guests (also see Chapter 6) in crafting innovative forms of tourism experiences and offerings.

Chapter 2 examines different levels at which rural and rurality is being (re)imagined by actors’ overlapping identities and their creative practices. The focus is on a series of differing/competing as well as complementary forms of rurality and rural products/experiences constructed not only through packaging and marketing, but also negotiations about the uses and design of rural space as actors mobilise particular place narratives in harnessing its potential. Varied shades of rurality are brought alive through the act of (re)imagining tourism purpose for ‘non-places’ (see Armstrong, 2010) – decaying and existing on the margins of everyday life and experience – as they are imbued with fresh purpose and meanings.

Chapter 3 focuses on the contested nature of readings and narratives of place, outlining the sundry manner in which localised sub-cultures and subjectivities are employed in the making of touristic sites. In doing so, it underlines how the rhetoric related to place marketing embodies both emotional (those of locals replete with their emotive engagement and interpretation of place) and rational (policy perspectives geared towards reinforcing the status quo and crafting the context of place planning and marketing) narratives. Further, since the role of place narration is more than mere telling; rather enhancing people’s sense of identification with the place as Uzzell (1996) suggests, attention to multiple storylines foregrounds actors’ agency in negotiating the experience of rurality on their own terms.

Chapter 4 investigates the scope, scale and characteristics of rural tourism firms that have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and have a real potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property, radically impacting upon the profile of tourism provision. I underline small tourism firms’ active role in staged performances of rurality, scripted and choreographed, to overtly act out particular representations of rural life (Lynch et al., 2009). Instances of entrepreneurial synergies between marketing and branding strategies of
permanent rural retail shops, periodic markets (e.g. farmers’ markets) and micro-firms (e.g. either run/set up as self-help groups or formed by ‘lifestyle entrepreneurs’ and employing less than ten employees) illustrate how spontaneity and intuition take precedence over pure economics.

Chapter 5 discusses rural tourists’ predilection to experience ‘mundane’ aspects of rurality in addition to commercial representations (or tourism imaginaries) of places they have consumed prior to their visit. The main emphasis is on presenting varying encounters tourists report in the process of co-creating and experiencing particular versions of rurality which are likely to serve as the basis for their future quest of intangible and immaterial and yet valued and memorable experiences (see Binkhorst, 2002; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). In presenting tourist narratives, my endeavour is to draw attention to sites/sights, sounds and stories that capture their imagination and by appealing to their emotions help them in developing a meaningful interface or ‘connect’ with rurality. Further, given the online user-generated content that allows tourists to become co-creators of the (content of) destination imaginaries, demand for off-the-beaten tracks and tropes beyond the ‘traditional tourist story’ (Bryon, 2012, p. 35) is ever expanding.

Chapter 6 develops the discussion in Chapter 4 further by highlighting how tourists’ practices and rural communities’ participation and engagement with the process of creating tourism experience is impacting upon their lives. I present a fluid view of ‘community’ as a reference to the locality, a ‘sense of community’ as experienced by residents, and the use of ‘community’ as a rhetorical tool by agencies (following Fairbrother et al., 2013), critical to an understanding of multifarious processes associated with the community-tourism interface. Specifically, my thrust is on understanding how locals’ socio-cultural identities are estranged or interlinked with many of the typical entrepreneurial activities associated with rural tourism (e.g. art galleries, museums, souvenir/retail shops, food and drink outlets and natural attractions). Previous research on dynamics inherent in rural communities (see Bramwell and Lane, 2000; Derksen et al., 2008; Woods, 2006) is applied in presenting how residents can simultaneously cement and uproot tourism’s place at the heart of rural destinations as well as engender innovative forms of tourism.

Chapter 7 brings the discussion to a close by evaluating the implication of transition from a routine of production/consumption of commodities (natural/built) to the increasing ascendancy of the production/consumption of ‘experiences’ for rural tourism marketers. My emphasis is on both individual and collective dimensions involved in presenting and marketing new forms of rural tourism experiences and enterprise. A key focus here is to underline actors’ agency (see Côté and Levine, 2002) and storytelling
(both in person and in digital medium) that offers a layer of counter-narrative to widely held imaginings of place and serves as a catalyst for imaginative place promotion.

Overall, the thrust of this work is to argue in favour of a fuller comprehension of rural tourism marketing, capable of depicting the plurality of cultural identities and diverse networks that are integral to the locality. This leads me to examine challenges as well as opportunities inherent in distinctiveness-based marketing campaigns that are selling rural tourism experience and enterprise by being responsive to the requirements of the rural populace. In doing so, my aim is to foreground rural providers’ ingenuity in contrast to the formulaic mechanisms comprising of the ‘same aesthetic and spatial references [employed] wherever one is in the world’ (Rojek, 1995, p.146). In fact, in developing a case for the need to include contemporary representations of rurality in marketing/promotional literature, I draw attention to the temporalities and spatialities of rural cultural (i.e. creativity) production and presentation. In doing so, my endeavour is to underline ingenuity, shaped and influenced by the relational capital of individuals (both tourists and residents, owners/managers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who with their creativity are reworking localities and the creative milieu inherent therein (see Gülümser et al., 2010; White, 2010). Most data were collected by means of ‘narrative-style’ interviews (see Paulson, 2011) which allow interviewees to randomly explain their life history and aspect(s) of their experience(s) and culture. Overall, in crafting the case-based discussion used in the book I have also included my own experience, working on the premise that ultimately the researcher cannot be separated from her or his subject (see Ellis and Flaherty, 1992). Indeed, I purposefully draw upon my experiences to introspect differing perspectives on the consumer-consumptive aspect of the rural tourism industry, challenging in the process the conventional production–consumption dichotomy.

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