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EMBRACE YOUR INNER SELFIE

The travel photo phenomenon

Steve Gillick

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16 APR 2018: They are cynically nicknamed “selfie stickers”. You know those people wandering the world with a selfie stick as their nearest, dearest companion. They seem to monopolize all the good viewing places at attractions as diverse as Niagara Falls, the Charles Bridge in Prague, the marble bench directly in front of the Taj Mahal, the

Intihuatana (Sacred Rock) at Machu Picchu, and more.



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And those selfie sticks are like a forest of metal prongs that fellow travellers have to duck, swerve, dodge, side-step and fend-off, in order to avoid injury or, in a worst case scenario, be accused of interrupting the spontaneity of the occasion, usually comprised of a group of blissfully, happy people, wildly smiling and gesticulating at the other end of the stick.

You'd think I have it in for selfie stickers. But I don't. They are not just a trend, but rather a phenomenon that will most likely be around for a long time. And while some find it irritating (and I admit that I do, from time to time) we need to sit up and pay attention, in the context of being career travel professionals, people watchers, service providers and those who get excited about 'psychographics', that is, the reason WHY people do things, such as travel.

Some in the world of higher education have

bemoaned the fact that a person with a smartphone and/or a selfie stick is missing out on all the memories of a travel experience, as they are replacing the pursuits of 'looking, reflecting and experiencing' with a rapid succession of photos and selfies.

The comment is that they are capturing the moment but not living it. However, if a growing number of travellers are becoming camera-dependent to enjoy their vacation, then it's time to re-define why travellers are travelling and we need to strategize how we can capture their imagination with marketing and promotion at the agency or independent contractor level.

The selfie phenomenon is usually associated with younger travellers, Generations Y and Z, however it's really cross-generational, from seniors to juniors. Smartphones with smart cameras can take amazing photos that not all standard camera lenses can handle. While a professional photographer may bring two or three lenses with them, many travellers prefer the free-and-easy mode of travel where they need to be mobile, agile, light-weight and always, 'in the moment' of the experience.

When they see the street corner vendor making fresh papaya salad in Bangkok, those smartphone-camera-endorphins kick in and demand a photo (or better still, a selfie) with the vendor as s/he crushes chili peppers using a mortar and pestle, right then and there. Memories of the experience are shown to social media friends and followers in the context of experiences that place the participant right into the scene. In other words 'I didn't 'just visit' Bangkok, I immersed myself with the people and culture of Bangkok'.

Some may label this as selfish or egotistical (here's me in every single photo I took while I was on holiday last week) while others see this as getting into the spirit of the destination (i.e. I am not just dispassionately observing the destination with my camera, but I am interacting with the destination first-hand, up close and personal).

So when promoting destinations to your current and prospective clients, those so-called "Wow Visuals" need to be front and centre, and with minimal text to back them up. The old 'wall-of-words' type of brochures and marketing is out. Travel is an experience of the senses and therefore marketing and advertising should embrace this enthusiastic glow. Videos capture attention and imagination. Still-photos can do the same when they reflect the senses: seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting and of course the sense of humour.

The photos that you took on a personal holiday or on a Fam trip play a major role in stirring up enthusiasm when they capture you, or other people, getting involved with the destination: walking, trekking, eating, drinking, bicycling, boating, bargaining, befriending, and bantering with the locals.

Moreover, your selfies can actually work as a visualization exercise for clients who can immediately picture themselves in your selfie.

Just think of those real estate shows on television where, in almost every episode, someone says "I can see myself drinking coffee on this patio every morning". That's what your selfies can accomplish with a prospective traveller: I can see myself on

that boat holding up the sail fish that I just caught; I can envision myself standing next to the Moai statues on Easter Island; I can picture myself drinking a Mojito in that bar in Cuba next to the vibrant music and the energetic dancing, etc.

And then we need to consider the needs of travellers with smartphone cameras. They need visuals and not speeches when on tour (otherwise they will wander off on their own to seek out interesting street scenes, attractions and exhibits to fulfill their personal quota of photos for the day). They need serendipity around every corner in the form of fascinating discoveries that involve people, culture, history, food, architecture, shopping, land and water activities, and more.

And they need interaction wherever and whenever possible. Shearing a sheep, making a Jade necklace, crushing the mint for that Mojito, and more. On a recent trip to the city of Ono in Fukui Prefecture, Japan, our guide pointed out 7-Step Street. It was a street named for the fact that it took 7 very BIG leaping steps to cross it. While some of us took photos from various angles, the Vlogger in the group took a selfie video of himself animatedly and exaggeratedly taking each of the 7 huge leap-steps needed to cross the street.

The posted video was a great success with questions about the street, and Ono's other attractions (a morning market and a castle on the hill). It was a selfie video that truly 'stepped' up to the travel plate!

Travel has always been a very personal pursuit and each individual traveller memorializes their experiences in their own way, so we need to pay homage to those who get out the smartphone and

oftentimes, the selfie stick, and encapsulate their precious travel memories in a way that is meaningful and significant to them.

Clients will empathize, visualize and then actualize their travel wish list when you show them proof that you too embrace your inner selfie!



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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