

Am I a traveller or a tourist

First of all, I have to admit, that so far I have not had many opportunities to travel abroad and I might have difficulties defining myself as either a tourist or a traveller. I have been to Italy, Greece and Austria though; therefore I guess my position to judge about that is still a bit better than that of a Slovak geography teacher, who we used to host in secondary school once, and who admitted that coming to Slovenia was the first time he had ever transgressed the borderlines of Slovakia.

Ashamed, I have to admit, that so far I have had the privilege to visit Italy only as a tourist. In my defence, I have visited Italy only about three or four times, the last time being the trip at the end of primary school. Teachers usually of course do not trust primary school graduates, but matters are made even worse if the students are handicapped. Being surrounded with teachers, pedagogues and nurses one does not have a lot of opportunities to really relax, albeit the fact that most of them were quite liberal and did not unnecessarily hold us back. Still, most of our time was spent admiring various statues, buildings and other local sights, which Italy is literally littered with. Do not misunderstand me, sightseeing certainly was fun and we all enjoyed and learned a lot, yet some of us were not able to have as much fun as we wanted.

One of the problems we have experienced in Italy is not at all locally oriented, it is rather quite generic to any place I've been to. The problem is, that most people percept handicapped people in general (not just kids) as immensely fragile. Majority probably even believes, that there is a high probability of handicapped people just falling apart for apparent reason whatsoever. Because of such narrow-mindedness of the Gardaland theme park personnel, no one in our class was allowed to board a roller coaster or pretty much anything that was moving faster than 20 miles per hour. I must however note, strange as it may be, that I had no such problems when I visited Gardaland with my parents about eight years earlier. No one stopped me from boarding any of the artefacts and although I was younger, I was allowed to act more traveller-like than eight years later, which in my opinion is completely absurd.

In Italy I was therefore in spite all my strongest objections treated as a full-blooded tourist. This was, at least partially the fault of over paranoid personnel and partially also the fact I was on a school trip, since people are usually much more careful when they are dealing with a class of primary school students in comparison to dealing with individual families with smaller children.

A trip to Greece (to the island of Zakhyntos be exact), at the end of the third year of high school, was something completely different. Firstly, I was not a minor anymore. Although I do not smoke or drink alcoholic beverages, over there I had at least a vague feeling that I am now freer than I was before. Secondly, and more importantly, this time I was not surrounded by an army of pedagogues and nurses. This time I accompanied only by a single man, who has been assisting me in the classroom throughout the whole high school. We have become very good friends and spending a week in his company and in company of my schoolmates promised to be lots of fun. Since this trip was technically still defined as an excursion, it promised a lot of sightseeing, which was, contrary to popular belief, quite a bit less interesting in comparison to the one in Italy. You see, except the Parthenon the Amphitheatre and a few statues in the museum, most of the Greek artefacts were brought to Rome, after the Romans conquered Greece. The consequence of this was, that every other sentence uttered by our guide was “Well, this statue nowadays stands in a certain museum in Rome, but I assure you, it takes your breath away...” followed by us staring at empty plinths for an embarrassingly long time.

Save the sightseeing and plinth-looking I spent most of the day on the beach (under the obligatory sunshade of course), swimming and getting to know my schoolmates better. Evening and early morning hours were usually spent in discos, listening to incredibly loud rock music.

Only the last paragraph describes the “traveller’s way” and although the paragraph is short, I do not believe there is much more to say. Travellers in my opinion do not do a lot of sightseeing (although not seeing at least some of the main attractions is in my opinion a sin); they concentrate on having fun and learning new things in process. And this is probably the worst mistake tourist agencies generally make: they usually go into too much detail and try to show their costumers too much and forget to reserve at least some time for relaxation. That is probably why backpacking is getting more and more preferred over travelling with agencies.

As it is for me, I prefer being a traveller to being a tourist. I do appreciate getting to know new facts, but without feeling the beat of the life, time is poorly spent. Just like the poet Robert Louis Stevenson I like “hearing the rare song” and “seeing the road that stretches and the roadside fire”.