

Surrey Think Tank
Reconceptualising Visiting Friends & Relatives (VFR) Travel

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Co-ordinators: Hania Janta, Scott Cohen, Allan Williams

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) constitutes a major component of travel and tourism flows, and one that is being significantly reshaped by changes in migration and mobility patterns, transport and communication technologies, and cultural shifts. Despite the importance of this topic, researchers have paid only intermittent, and largely ad hoc, attention to it (Backer 2012). The Surrey Tourism Research Centre is therefore proposing to hold a think tank – a day long workshop – to explore the meaning, changing nature and implications of VFR travel.

VFR is fundamentally an expression of the relationship between tourism and migration/diasporas. As early as 1990, Jackson contended that migration contributes to ‘unrestricted tourism flows’ and these arguments have gained conviction over time. However, the nature of that relationship is being reconstructed as a consequence of changes in border controls and migration/mobility regimes, and technological developments, including the rapid expansion of low-cost airlines and new forms of internet communication. In particular, the traditional model of longer term migration, or perhaps of migration and return, has shifted towards more short-term, circular, and sequential migration, all of which provide different needs and opportunities for VFR travel. At the same time, VFR travel potentially informs future migration, through the creation of ‘search spaces’ as well as mobility competencies (Williams and Hall 2002).

VFR travel, in many ways, is an example of what Sayer (1992) terms ‘a chaotic concept’. It is longer on empirical observation than it is on theoretical understanding of what are, in fact, a highly diverse set of constitutive flows. It is enmeshed in, but rarely disentangled from, the web of relationships around diasporas, transnationalism, inter-generational transitions, and the reaffirmation and re-creation of (hybrid) identities. Moreover, ethnicity, although recognised as a powerful shaper of return visits to relatives and friends in migrants’ country of origin (Feng and Page 2000), is also significantly absent from much of the literature on VFR travel. Shorter term visits (constituting different forms of tourism) are essential to the lives of migrants, and their families and friends, as well as to the survival and shaping of diasporic cultures. Yet, the blurred nature of migration and tourism relationships, and their multitude forms, makes the VFR concept problematic to deconstruct.

Much of the literature on VFR travel focuses on migrants’ return visits to their ‘homeland’ and to their families, in particular. Homeland, memories and family obligations are crucial in understanding this stream of VFR travel. However, family VFR travel flows in more than one direction, and is essential in the delivery of a range of care and support, as well as in the reaffirmation of identities and obligations. Visiting friends travel has received even less attention, and arguably suffers from a double neglect, both within VFR travel as well as in relation to other forms of tourism. Visits to friends constitute one of the driving forces of modern tourism, and this – as is also the case with visits to family – takes on increasingly diverse spatial forms, with visits to third spaces complementing those between the homes/home areas of the participants. Such visits offer scope for renewing trust,

social bonding and social identities, while their objectives range from the common pursuit of shared pleasures, to the celebration of significant life course events, to the furthering of career and economic interests. Not surprisingly, Larsen et al. (2007, p. 259) contend that the analysis of obligations and social networks at-a-distance should be central to 21st century tourism analysis.

Because of the constantly changing meanings of 'home' to the different participants in such networks, VFR travel is not only a celebration and renewal of the positive. Migrants' trips back 'home' may involve aspects of strangeness, such as lack of orientation, loss of familiarity with culturally-infused 'current slang', and a general feeling of loss that 'home' is no longer what it was imagined to be (Uriely 2010; King et al. 2011); the same applies to the loss of how friends are imagined. Arguably, technological advances in communication and transport potentially reduce the likelihood of such abrupt realisations, but the fact that they persist is testimony to the enduring power of face to face, and place-specific connectivity (Urry 2002). Alternatively, VFR tourists in a different place might cognitively and emotionally move from strangeness to familiarity (Uriely 2010).

The maintenance of relations with country or place of origin may centre on visiting significant others, but it also has secondary objectives, such as maintaining some form of residential attachment, and the access to the rights attached to this, whether electoral, welfare or border crossing. Another objective may be to access (whether or not paid for) amenities such as medical or dental services (Lee et al. 2010), hairdressing and other personal services; this may be informed by the relative trust attached to providers of such services in the home and destination, as well as cost considerations, and possible lack of fluency in a host language. Further objectives may include the purchasing of products that are more affordable or, being culturally specific, are only found, in a place of origin, to be cyclically imported to the migrant's new home, or to visit familiar places to which there is affective attachment (Pearce 2012).

The movements associated with VFR travel amongst migrants, however, are not evenly distributed: power asymmetries exist in which some move more easily than others, whilst others may be excluded in different ways. The availability of VFR travel, like most mobility, depends on access to economic, socio-technical, and cultural resources (Cresswell 2010). Often this is linked to whether migration has been forced or coerced as opposed to being voluntary, with the reduced friction associated with initial voluntary migration conducive to further mobility flows; mobility may beget mobility, and this is particularly apposite to VFR travel.

Finally, while much of the focus of VFR travel is on first generation migrants, we should not underestimate the significance of the 2nd or 3rd or subsequent generations' visits home. Sometimes infused by childhood memories of visits 'home' with parents, or of family narratives and material objects that symbolise home, they are important components of VFR travel, serving to reinforce, but also to challenge, identities (King et al 2001; Coles and Timothy 2004). Where earlier social networks have long withered, visits to some form of 'homeland' may still take place in the form of 'roots tourism'. The availability of historical archives online, probably reinforces rather than substitutes for such tourism mobilities. Moreover, searching for roots may lead to (re)discovery of long lost family ties, and the creation of new VFR networks in due course. Students undertaking a journey in search of their roots, sometimes combined with a language or culture course on their ancestors, also visit their families (Drozdowski 2011), although here the notions of 'home' and identity are more fluid and more complex to pin down.

The workshop aims to explore a number of questions in relation to VFR travel:

- What are the economic, political, socio-cultural, environmental and technological forces that shape VFR travel?
- How, and to what extent, do different types of migrants engage in various types of VFR travel?
- How do the experiences of 1st generation, 2nd generation and later generation migrants differ when they engage in VFR?
- What are the functions of VFR travel?
- How do virtual networks and forums generate, complement, or substitute for different types of VFR travel?
- Who benefits from VFR travel and what are the politics of who is excluded?
- How does visiting friends tourism differ from visiting family tourism?
- What is the purpose, and what are the consequences, of the increasing trend of VFR tourism encounters in third places?
- What are the interconnections between 'ethnic', 'roots' and VFR travel?

As the title of this think tank implies, the aims of this workshop are to explore new directions in VFR travel research, providing a unique opportunity to discuss future research agendas, and establish a network of researchers in this important field. The discussion will be framed by a small number of keynote presentations on particular issues, and opportunities to provide brief synopses of individual research. Our confirmed keynote speakers are:

- Professor Russell King (Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex; Editor of *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*).
- Professor John Urry (Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University; Editor of *Mobilities*)

We are in discussion about submitting a proposal to *Mobilities* for a special issue as an output of the think tank.

Contributions are welcomed from a wide variety of disciplines, in order to foster a diverse and creative discussion. Potential contributors to the workshop are invited to submit an abstract of their research (500 words max) to Hania Janta (h.janta@surrey.ac.uk) by 31st January 2013. The number of places at the think tank will be strictly limited in order to facilitate discussion. There is no fee for attending the think tank. All contributors, other than the keynote speakers, will have short presentation timeslots to profile their research, as the aim is to maximise the general discussion time.

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