



Women's voices in tourism research

Contributions to knowledge and letters to future generations



Antonia Correia
Sara Dolnicar



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Contents

Title page	1
Acknowledgement of Country	2
Foreword	3
Contributions by research field	5
Part I. Contributions to tourism knowledge	
1. TOURISM, KNOWLEDGE AND TOURISM KNOWLEDGE - Contributions by Kajsa G Åberg	12
2. SENSES IN TOURISM EXPERIENCE DESIGN - Contributions by Dora Agapito	14
3. DESTINATION MANAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABILITY - Contributions by Julia N. Albrecht	18
4. AGRITOURISM - Contributions by Carla Barbieri	21
5. THE INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN TOURISM, SEX, AND HEALTH - Contributions by Liza Berdychevsky	27
6. TOURISM SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AND THEIR ROLE IN ACTIVATING THE SDGS - Contributions by Karla Boluk	38
7. CONVERGENT PARALLEL MIXED METHODS IN TOURISM RESEARCH - Contributions by Ilenia Bregoli	44
8. INTERNAL BRANDING FOR TOURISM DESTINATIONS - Contributions by Ilenia Bregoli	50
9. SUSTAINING PLANET, PLACE, AND PEOPLE - Contributions by Kelly Bricker	53
10. PRACTICES OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM - Contributions by Adriana Budeanu	63
11. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND REPRESENTATIONAL POLITICS - Contributions by Christine N. Buzinde	65
12. LIFESTYLE ENTERPRISING IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY - Contributions by Erika Andersson Cederholm	69
13. TOURISM AND (RE)PRESENTATION: BEYOND COLONIALISM - Contributions by Donna Chambers	76
14. CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY AND MARKETING IN TOURISM, HOSPITALITY, AND EVENTS - Contributions by P. Monica Chien	83
15. LONGITUDINAL ACTION RESEARCH AND THE WATER-TOURISM NEXUS - Contributions by Stroma Cole	88
16. RELIGIOUS TOURISM / PILGRIMAGE STUDIES - Contributions by Noga Collins-Kreiner	93
17. MODELLING TOURISM BEHAVIOUR - Contributions by Antonia Correia	98
18. LUXURY IN TOURISM - Contributions by Antonia Correia	114
19. MULTISPECIES INTERACTIONS - Contributions by Kate Dashper	126
20. REFLECTIONS ON PLACE, IDENTITY AND TOURISM RESEARCH (AND FINDING ONE'S PLACE IN THE WORLD) - Contributions by Suzanne de la Barre	129
21. SERVICE CANNIBALIZATION IN TOURISM - Contributions by Estrella Díaz Sánchez	138
22. SOCIAL TOURISM - Contributions by Anya Diekmann	151
23. RACIAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH THE BLACK TRAVEL MOVEMENT - Contributions by Alana Dillette with Stefanie Benjamin	156

24. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM - Contributions by Rachel Dodds	160
25. ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE TOURISM - Contributions by Sara Dolnicar	163
26. DATA-DRIVEN MARKET SEGMENTATION ANALYSIS - Contributions by Sara Dolnicar	167
27. TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE - Contributions by Statia Elliot	173
28. ADVENTURES AND MISADVENTURES OF A RESEARCHER - Contributions by Agueda Esteban Talaya	177
29. COMPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS OF TOURISM-RELATED DATA – Contributions by Berta Ferrer-Rosell	182
30. TOURISM ECONOMICS - Contributions by Aliza Fleischer	189
31. MY JOURNEY IN SPORT TOURISM - Contributions by Heather Gibson	193
32. ETHNOGRAPHIES OF TOURISM IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH - Contributions by Carla Guerrón Montero	198
33. SINGLE WOMEN AND HOLIDAYMAKING - Contributions by Bente Heimtun	206
34. HERETICAL THINKING IN TOURISM - Contributions by Freya Higgins-Desbiolles	215
35. VOLUNTEERS AND TOURISM - Contributions by Kirsten Holmes	220
36. ADVENTURE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING - Contributions by Susan Houge Mackenzie	225
37. SOCIOLOGY OF TOURISM AND MIGRATION - Contributions by Raquel Huete	234
38. USING WILDFIRE TOURISM TO PROMOTE ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - Contributions by Karen Hughes and Jan Packer	241
39. TOWARDS JUST TOURISM AND PRAXIS WITH EMPATHY AND CARE - Contributions by Tazim Jamal	245
40. POLICIES SHAPING TOURISM - Contributions by Marion Joppe	252
41. MAKING TOURISM EDUCATION AND RESEARCH POSSIBLE - Contributions by Catalina Juaneda	256
42. TRAVEL DECISION-MAKING - Contributions by Marion Karl	260
43. UNDERSTANDING TOURIST BEHAVIOR IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT - Contributions by Astrid Kemperman	266
44. CONSUMER EXPERIENCES IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY - Contributions by Ksenia Kirillova	274
45. TOURISM WORK AND EMPLOYMENT - Contributions by Adele Ladkin	280
46. VOLUNTEERING AND EVENTS - Contributions by Leonie Lockstone-Binney	284
47. LANDSCAPES OF MOTION AND EMOTIONS - Contributions by Katrín Anna Lund	286
48. TOURISM AND ACTIVE LIVING IN LATER LIFE - Contributions by Jiaying Lyu	291
49. SITUATING TOURISM - Contributions by Heather Mair	295
50. EVENT STUDIES - Contributions by Judith Mair	299
51. CRITICAL TOURISM KNOWLEDGE - Contributions by Ana María Munar	301
52. DESTINATION IMAGE ANALYTICS THROUGH TRAVELLER-GENERATED CONTENT - Contributions by Estela Marine-Roig	306
53. USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN TOURISM - Contributions by Eva Martin-Fuentes	310
54. CROSS-CULTURAL TOURISM STUDIES: REFLECTIONS ON MISTAKES MADE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH - Contributions by Meghan L. Muldoon	314
55. THE DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE OF URBAN DESTINATIONS - Contributions by Bernadett Papp	317
56. TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN FRANCE AND INDONESIA - Contributions by Sylvine Pickel-Chevalier	321

57.	HORSES, TOURISM AND LEISURE - Contributions by Sylvine Pickel-Chevalier	328
58.	INNOVATION IN TOURISM DESTINATIONS - Contributions by Birgit Pikkemaat	334
59.	CONSUMER EXPERIENCE - Contributions by Nina K Prebensen	338
60.	SUSTAINABLE TOURISM KNOWLEDGE - Contributions by Julianna Priskin	353
61.	A JOINT EFFORT TO ACHIEVE BETTER RESEARCH METHODS FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM - Contributions by Yael Ram	355
62.	GENDER STUDIES - Contributions by Helena Reis	358
63.	NON-HUMAN AGENCY IN TOURISM - Contributions by Carina Ren	364
64.	TOURISM INNOVATION - Contributions by Isabel Rodriguez	367
65.	INDIGENOUS TOURISM - Contributions by Lisa Ruhanen	373
66.	TOWARDS WELCOME: FOREGROUNDING VOICES AND GIVING VISIBILITY TO THE MARGINALISED IN TOURISM WORKPLACES AND BEYOND - Contributions by Agnieszka Rydzik	381
67.	FAMILY TOURISM RESEARCH - Contributions by Heike Schänzel	390
68.	TURISMO ARMÓNICO Y SUSTENTABILIDAD – Contribuciones de Rocío del Carmen Serrano-Barquín	394
69.	A TOURISM RESEARCH JOURNEY: FROM HEAD TO HEART - Contributions by Pauline J. Sheldon	399
70.	VOLUNTEER TOURISM / VOLUNTOURISM - Contributions by Harnq Luh Sin	405
71.	A CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE - Contributions by Jennie Small	412
72.	WELLNESS TOURISM - Contributions by Melanie Kay Smith	418
73.	VALUE CREATION IN TOURISM THROUGH ACTIVE TOURIST ENGAGEMENT: A FRAMEWORK FOR ONLINE REVIEWS - Contributions by Rodoula H. Tsiotsou	423
74.	THE LONGEVITY AND ALIGNMENT OF A TOURISM FACT - Contributions by Christine Vogt	434
75.	TOURIST PARTICIPATION IN THE SOCIAL MEMORY OF THE GREAT WAR - Contributions by Caroline Winter	437
76.	SOCIO-CULTURAL DISCOURSES IN TOURISM - Contributions by Alexandra Witte	445
77.	TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCES - THE POWER OF EVENTS - Contributions by Emma Wood	451
78.	DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACTS OF TOURISM - Contributions by Lan Xue	455
79.	ASIAN SOLO FEMALE TRAVELLERS - Contributions by Elaine Chiao Ling Yang	457
80.	IDENTITY THEORY - Contributions by Carol Xiaoyue Zhang	467

[Part II. Letters to future generations of women tourism researchers](#)

81.	Letter from Kajsa G Åberg	473
82.	Letter from Dora Agapito	475
83.	Letter from Erika Andersson Cederholm	477
84.	Letter from Carla Barbieri	479
85.	Letter from Stefanie Benjamin	482
86.	Letter from Liza Berdychevsky	489
87.	Letter from Karla Boluk	493
88.	Letter from Ilenia Bregoli	496
89.	Letter from Kelly Bricker	498
90.	Letter from Adriana Budeanu	500
91.	Letter from Christine N. Buzinde	501

92.	Letter from Blanca A. Camargo	503
93.	Letter from Anna Carr	507
94.	Letter from Donna Chambers	510
95.	Letter from Noga Collins-Kreiner	514
96.	Letter from Ant3nia Correia	516
97.	Letter from Kate Dashper	518
98.	Letter from Suzanne de la Barre	520
99.	Letter from Estrella D3az S3nchez	522
100.	Letter from Anya Diekmann	524
101.	Letter from Alana Dillette	526
102.	Letter from Rachel Dodds	528
103.	Letter from Sara Dolnicar	530
104.	Letter from Berta Ferrer-Rosell	533
105.	Letter from Aliza Fleischer	535
106.	Letter from Isabelle Frochot	537
107.	Letter from Heather Gibson	539
108.	Letter from Ulrike Gretzel	542
109.	Letter from Anne Hardy	546
110.	Letter from Kirsten Holmes	549
111.	Letter from Susan Houge Mackenzie	551
112.	Letter from Freya Higgins-Desbiolles	554
113.	Letter from Raquel Huete	556
114.	Letter from Karen Hughes	558
115.	Letter from Marion Joppe	560
116.	Letter from Marion Karl	563
117.	Letter from Deborah Kerstetter	566
118.	Letter from Ksenia Kirillova	570
119.	Letter from Adele Ladkin	573
120.	Letter from Mia Larson	575
121.	Letter from Anna Leask	577
122.	Letter from ShiNa Li	579
123.	Letter from Leonie Lockstone-Binney	582
124.	Letter from Heather Mair	584
125.	Letter from Judith Mair	586
126.	Letter from Estela Marine-Roig	588
127.	Letter from Eva Martin-Fuentes	590
128.	Letter from Nancy McGehee	592
129.	Letter from Ana Mar3a Munar	595
130.	Letter from Bernadett Papp	597
131.	Letter from Sylvine Pickel-Chevalier	599
132.	Letter from Birgit Pikkemaat	601
133.	Letter from Patr3cia Pinto	604
134.	Letter from Nina Katrine Prebensen	606

135.	Letter from Julianna Priskin	608
136.	Letter from Yael Ram	610
137.	Letter from Carina Ren	612
138.	Letter from Helena Reis	614
139.	Letter from Isabel Rodriguez	618
140.	Letter from Lisa Ruhanen	621
141.	Letter from Agnieszka Rydzik	624
142.	Carta de Rocío del Carmen Serrano Barquín	627
143.	Letter from Pauline J. Sheldon	629
144.	Letter from Harng Luh Sin	632
145.	Letter from Jennie Small	634
146.	Letter from Melanie Kay Smith	636
147.	Letter from Rodoula H. Tsiotsou	639
148.	Letter from Lindsay Usher	641
149.	Letter from Jane Widtfeldt Meged	644
150.	Letter from Alexandra Witte	647
151.	Letter from Emma Wood	649
152.	Letter from Lan Xue	651
153.	Letter from Emily Yeager	652

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37. SOCIOLOGY OF TOURISM AND MIGRATION - Contributions by Raquel Huete

Why did I study Tourism?

When I was a child, I used to play at being a travel agent. My younger brothers were my clients and we would play together, organising trips to faraway countries or even around the world. I was lucky enough to start travelling abroad alone at a very young age, which was unusual in the social context in which I lived. Perhaps the fact that I was born on the border between France and Spain kindled within me an interest in learning about other cultures. It soon became clear to me that I wanted to dedicate my life to travelling, and it seemed that studying a Tourism Studies Degree would be the best way to turn my hobby into my profession. At the age of 22, I started making my first trips as a tour guide. I can still remember the excitement of that first trip to the World's Fair in Seville in 1992. After that I held various positions in a large travel agency. I really liked that job, but not so much the working conditions. Those were the years in which Spain was undertaking the first legislative reforms aimed at making the labour market more flexible, while at the same time intensive privatisation of large public companies was taking place. Tourism remained on the margins when it came to making major decisions in Spanish economic policy, which is still the case today.

Why did I study Sociology?

While at the travel agency, I started to ask myself why the exact same client could be sold a trip to the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands or Benidorm indiscriminately. I was also interested in understanding how the relationship between tour operators and retail agencies worked and what the consequences of tourism were for the places whose landscapes were shaped by this activity. At this point, Sociology was beginning to be taught at the University of Alicante (UA) — a city I had moved to for family reasons — which caught my attention. The Sociology of Tourism did not yet exist as a subject in Spanish universities (Huete, 2008). At the time, it was an emerging discipline that was not taught in the degree course I started in 1993, although there were other subjects in the syllabus that helped me to understand how the Mediterranean had been radically transformed by tourism and its accompanying urbanisation processes since the mid-twentieth century. In this way my initial interest in tourism as a profession gave way to social-scientific curiosity.

The reasons that have been suggested to explain the underdevelopment of Sociology of Tourism in Spanish universities are varied but connected: most contributions on the subject have been made from outside formal academic-university contexts; there has been a lack of interest within the Spanish university environment in analysing a process of social change perceived as less important in comparison to other supposedly more conflictive realities; the impact of so-called “mass tourism” took place in regions far from the main centres of sociological production in the country (at least until the end of the 1980s); the lateness of the incorporation of tourism studies in universities (it was not until 1996), which is further exacerbated when it comes to searching for courses on the sociology of tourism within sociology degrees; the limited international repercussion of texts written by Spanish researchers in this period (as they were not published in English); and the lack of institutional support, coupled with the fact that sociological analyses tend to

reveal critical aspects of the realities under study, which seldom pleases the authorities responsible for their management, who are more comfortable with economic analyses (Huete, 2015; Mantecón and Huete, 2019).

Why did I become interested in research?

For a few years I combined working in various companies associated with the internationalisation of higher education (another form of tourism: educational tourism) with participation in a research group at the University of Alicante (UA). This group focused its work on the analysis of the relationships between tourism, urbanisation processes and new forms of residential mobility (Huete et al., 2008a, 2008b; Mantecón and Huete, 2018; Mazón et al., 2009, 2011); that is, in the confluence of tourist activity with property development. This has had profound consequences for the society, culture and environment of the region where I ended up settling, which is known as the Costa Blanca.

Little by little, I fell in love with research, so I abandoned my other professional activities to join the UA full time and pursue a career as a lecturer and researcher.

My doctoral thesis analyses the motivations of people who end up becoming residents of the places they first visited as tourists. I submitted my doctoral thesis in 2008, and the following year I published it as a book with the title *Turistas que llegan para quedarse. Una explicación sociológica sobre la movilidad residencial* (Tourists who come to stay. A sociological explanation of residential mobility) (Huete, 2009). In this work, I attempt to discover the reasons why thousands of Northern Europeans are so attracted to the Mediterranean. Within the study, which could be considered **my main theoretical contribution**, my interest in understanding the motivations of tourists converges with an analysis of the process of transformation of a tourist space into a residential space. The original contribution of the study and the publications derived from it is the **identification and quantification of the boundaries separating residents, tourists, second-home owners, and temporary residents** (Huete and Mantecón, 2010, 2012). This classification is framed within the new mobilities paradigm developed by Sheller and Urry (2006). Undoubtedly, my post-doctoral visiting scholarship at CeMoRe (Centre for Mobilities Research) in Lancaster, in 2007, strengthened my conviction that this is an essential paradigm on which to build research into the complex reality in which tourism is embedded.

Nevertheless, I also feel indebted to the line of research on lifestyle migration, which deals with different residential strategies oriented not so much by economic motivations as by the broader aspiration of living the “good life”. This line of work has been very fruitful because it helps to understand essential aspects of trips to second homes and to better manage the impacts that this type of mobility has on the host society. Indeed, perhaps my second most significant sociological contribution is the questioning of the theoretical and methodological foundations of the analytical approach based on the concept of lifestyle migration (Huete et al., 2013).

While I was engaged in this research, I became interested in other central themes of the **Sociology of Tourism**: the search for authenticity in the tourist experience (Mantecón and Huete, 2008); the consideration of landscape as a tourist resource (Huete, 2013; Huete and Mantecón, 2017); the perceptions of the host society (Mantecón and Huete, 2011), work in the tourism sector (Marrero and Huete, 2013); and, in particular, gender-based labour inequalities (Huete et al., 2016). More recently my research has focused on the digitalisation of the tourism economy (Huete, 2019), the effects of Brexit in Spain (especially in the regions with the highest influx of British visitors) (Giner-Monfort and Huete, 2021) and accessible tourism, among other issues.

Why did I accept a position of political responsibility in the public management of tourism?

Due to my interest in analysing the working conditions of women working in tourism (an issue that has concerned me since my earliest stages as a professional), in autumn 2015, I was invited to give a lecture aimed at councillors and municipal tourism managers. I explained that human resources are essential for tourism development and that a successful tourism product cannot be designed without taking into account the training requirements and working conditions of workers in the sector. At the end of the talk, someone asked me for my contact details, and within a few weeks I became the Director-General of Tourism of the Region of Valencia. The region has a population of 5 million inhabitants and received 19 million international tourists in 2019, making it one of Spain's top tourist destinations. In my new position, I was not only responsible for promotion as head of the regional Destination Management Office, but also for the organisation and regulation of tourism activity.

It was my opportunity to directly influence laws and public policies. Working at the regional Tourism Ministry (Turisme Comunitat Valenciana), I intensified cooperation with universities, promoting innovation as one of the cornerstones of Valencia's tourism policy. I am pleased to have helped advance key milestones in Valencian tourism such as the *Libro Blanco para una nueva estrategia turística de la Comunitat Valenciana* (White Paper for a New Tourism Strategy for the Valencia Region) and, above all, the *Ley de Turismo, Ocio y Hospitalidad* (Law on Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality), as well as working in strategic areas such as projection of supply, Valencia's tourism know-how in the European Union, the development of smart destinations, the regulation of tourist accommodation and the strengthening of accessible tourism, among other aspects. As I mentioned before, some of these crucial issues would go on to permanently form part of my research agenda.

I am pleased to have contributed towards promoting public policies that have transformed the region and its tourism management through a new form of governance based on smart planning. To this end, the incorporation of technology for the sustainable management and protection of tourist areas has been encouraged, but plans have also been developed to promote the inclusion of all people, making accessibility a central focus of regional tourism policy.

Why do I agree to participate in research dissemination activities outside the academic sphere?

In Spain, relations between knowledge institutions, (in particular universities) and politicians are not straightforward. Research projects are often contracted to legitimise previously taken political decisions. In other cases, research is carried out without taking into account the real needs of the tourism sector.

Personally, I would like to share my view of the steps that the tourism industry and planners should take in order to successfully implement sustainable tourism development plans. That is why I take advantage of the debates and interviews I am offered to present ideas for the medium and long term.

Since my return to academic life in 2019, I see my primary objective as transferring everything I have learnt in public management to research and teaching, but also to contribute to giving tourism a relevant role in public debate and making tourism professions more widely appreciated in Spanish society.

I have continued working for inclusive tourism, developing a research project on the integration of people with disabilities in tourism companies. In this regard, I continue to work with the regional government in further planning of accessible tourism.

A fundamental field of work for me is that of retraining professionals in the tourism sector and the

incorporation of innovation in tourism companies (Huete et al., 2020). The consequences of overtourism and the possible rejection of tourism by residents are also issues which form the focus of my research interest (Huete and Mantecón, 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2020). These issues are related to regulation of the sharing economy, in particular the use of private dwellings for tourism purposes, a problem that was one of my biggest dilemmas when I was involved in regional policy.

Why should we prioritise research and public policies that promote sustainability, training and inclusion in tourism?

In 2020, the coronavirus crisis burst into our lives and transformed everyone's work plans, including my own.

The collapse induced by the pandemic placed Spanish society in front of a magnifying mirror that exaggerated both our virtues and our shortcomings. According to the World Economic Forum, which ranks Spain as the world's most competitive destination year after year, what are our strengths? Its indicators highlight tourism elements whose maintenance and improvement are closely related to public investment: safety, the health system, tourism infrastructures, accessibility (i.e., the ease of reaching destinations, which has nothing to do with accessible tourism), and natural and cultural heritage.

Except for tourism infrastructures, where the private sector plays an important role, particularly in the Spanish hotel industry (which is one of the most modern and highest quality in the world), the rest represent Spain's strength not only as a tourist destination but as a country. In other words, being a tourist destination is good for us if, thanks to tourism, we have better services. But this works both ways: tourism also benefits enormously from public investment in order to attain these indicators of excellence it can boast of.

The weaknesses of Spanish tourism have been well identified for many years, and all strategic plans in the last four decades have proposed actions to remedy them. Without attempting to make an exhaustive list, these weaknesses are: dependence on certain tourism source markets; high specialisation in products with low added value (an entrepreneur would say low productivity); fragmentation of tourism offered (vast majority of small and medium-sized enterprises and self-employed workers); saturation of some tourist destinations (which gave rise to incidences of social disputes in previous summers); low private and public investment for the adaptation of tourism to the digital economy; and, above all, human capital that does not receive training within companies and is poorly qualified (as recognised in reports by the World Economic Forum itself).

To this, I would venture to add that hospitality, which is difficult to measure in econometric terms, is one of our great strengths. However, the scant regard for the social considerations of tourism, and of the professions associated with it, is one of the reasons why every year there is talent drain to other sectors.

Lately I have insisted that the pressing need to bring Britons to Benidorm or Germans to the Balearic Islands clouds the vision of what is important: to diversify markets by creating products with more added value. This is necessary to: 1) improve productivity; 2) attract a demand with more spending power; and 3) improve the working conditions of workers, and in particular, of the workers who occupy the lowest paid positions in the sector.

What are the policies that I believe Spain needs to strengthen? First: workers' training must be improved in order to facilitate their incorporation into the digital economy. This proposal goes hand in hand with improving their working conditions if a talent drain is to be avoided. If efforts in this direction are not intensified, it will be very difficult to access higher-spending market segments and, ultimately, to increase productivity.

Second, we need to further develop mechanisms to ensure governance-based tourism management.

Public-private collaboration is still not taken seriously. It is not acceptable to improvise expert committees in the face of a crisis. These committees should be permanent and be the same ones that make strategic decisions, consulting the necessary specialists according to the problem. The public authorities and the business community must be represented on these committees, but also trade unions, knowledge production institutions and citizens' representatives, as they are the ones who will receive the tourists.

Third, but no less important, is to place the sustainability of tourism at the core of all debates. Do Spaniards really want 83 million tourists to return to the country in the same conditions of overcrowding as in 2019? Do they want them to continue arriving through packages bought from German or English tour operators who take a substantial cut of the amount paid for the trip? Do they want the owners of accommodation, and now also of restaurants, to continue paying commissions of up to 20% to foreign technology companies that promote the marketing of their services, but which do not pay taxes and are outside regulatory control? Sustainability must also be economic and, on this issue, a serious problem is the extent of the hidden economy and informal employment in the tourism sector (job insecurity, legal insecurity for suppliers and users and the tax fraud that comes with it, are not features of an advanced society).

Of course, the sustainability of tourism must also be based on respect, preservation and enhancement of the cultural identity and natural heritage of each region. I am constantly reiterating that tourism constitutes an important return on investment in culture. It must also play an essential role in the conservation of environmental resources and biodiversity, drastically reducing its impact on global warming.

As part of this effort to link my academic side with political activism, I am deeply involved with [TurismoRESET](#). This is a digital platform, of which I am co-founder, in which hundreds of tourism professionals and companies share their concerns and which, in May 2020, launched the *Manifesto for the regeneration of the tourism sector through a socially equitable, environmentally respectful, and economically sustainable model*, which at the time of writing is supported by 1,300 professionals and 300 stakeholders.

Why does being a professor of Sociology of Tourism seem to me to be the best job in the world?

When I enter into a classroom I meet young people who want to learn how to analyse social reality and who are also determined to make the world a better place. At the university, I feel that I am part of a transformation process that goes beyond the transmission of knowledge. We instil values such as critical thinking, solidarity and tolerance. I believe that sociology has a lot to contribute to tourism. That is why teaching courses on the sociology of tourism is an opportunity for me to open young people's eyes to the consequences of one of the social phenomena that most shapes today's society. As they proceed along their career paths, young people transform what they have learned in university classrooms into concrete actions, and that makes me happy.

Spain's recent history, like that of so many other countries in the world, cannot be understood without tourism. Today, the tourist experience continues to transform the way in which the world's peoples relate to each other. In the development of the interactions that make up the tourism system, complex socio-cultural, economic, demographic, urban, political and environmental effects are generated. With the help of my students, I try to construct an explanation that examines this reality in greater depth, hoping to awaken in them new research vocations.

As a lecturer at the UA, I have also had the opportunity to take part in international tourism research teams and networks, especially in Latin America, where I maintain strong emotional and intellectual ties.

Finally, I believe that the UA (placed 36th for Tourist Studies in the Shanghai Ranking) has a long way to go, which is why I have taken over direction of the life-long learning and postgraduate studies centre. This is my

most recent challenge. The Spanish university system faces great challenges, such as digitalisation, which brings new ways of teaching, and can see universities with traditional teaching systems sidelined. Public universities must rely on research as the basic pillar on which knowledge is built. In Spain, the focus on research distinguishes public universities from private universities. The latter focus their educational efforts on programmes created hastily, in response to market demands, but without a solid research background behind them.

In short, being based at the university, I find myself in the best position to contribute towards my country remaining a world leader in tourism and, at the same time, to help correct its weaknesses. In this way it will be able to continue creating the prosperity required to make the world a fairer place.

Written by Raquel Huete, University of Alicante, Spain

[Read Raquel's letter to the next generation of tourism researchers](#)

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113. Letter from Raquel Huete



Dear young researcher,

If you question everything that happens in our social world, you will discover the social sciences to be the pursuit you have been looking for. If you can think yourself away from the familiar routines of your everyday life and look at them with a critical gaze, or connect your personal challenges with larger social issues, then you are called to become a true sociologist.

If you like to travel consciously and meet people while being respectful towards the host society, you will find pleasure in looking for new ideas to develop a fairer and more sustainable tourism industry.

Then never stop enquiring how social life and tourism works. In this way, you will ask questions, look for data, talk to people, listen and read what other researchers have found out and, please, make your own hypotheses. It does not matter whether your research is a mainstream issue or not, you must try to write and publish your ideas.

Even if you are proud to be a sociologist, do not be afraid to cross the boundaries into other disciplines. It is always a good idea to explore the different perspectives that other sciences offer to understand human behaviour.

If you want to be an expert in tourism, you will have to be a tourist because you need to feel like a guest in order to comprehend tourists, while you will have to be a host in order to understand local society. You will learn a lot of things by travelling, but you will also have great experiences by being a host. So do not hesitate to host people at home, listening as they share their thoughts and discussing their perceptions of the place where you live. In both situations, travelling and hosting, it is worth making the effort to understand others, learning their language whenever possible and above all being open-minded. Finally, if you really want to be a social scientist, be very respectful of the different ways of being in the world.

I hope you will find your own way to become a brilliant tourism researcher.

Best wishes from Spain.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Raquel Huete', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Raquel Huete

University of Alicante, Spain