Voluntourism: Tourists, Volunteers, and Locals in Cusco, Peru
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Tourism is the third largest industry in Peru, with 13 million people passing through yearly. It is by far the largest industry in Cusco, the country’s most visited region. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site and jumping off point to some of the country’s most famous archaeological ruins, such as Macchu Picchu and the Sacred Valley, Cusco attracts thousands of tourists daily. Historically, travelling was marked by leisure tourism, where visitors were able to “gaze” upon a different culture from the comforts of their own. Today, “alternative tourism” such as adventure tourism, eco tourism, and volunteer tourism are among the most popular forms of tourism in Peru.

Since the 1970’s, there has been a boom in volunteer tourism. It is estimated that 1.6 million people volunteer abroad each year. As opposed to more conventional forms of tourism, these volunteers seek a mutually beneficial experience and a development of the self. Cusco has become a popular destination for international voluntourists because 35% of the population lives in poverty. Volunteers work in fields such as education, environmental conservation, female empowerment, and childcare. The sites of this research project include a group home for teen mothers where foreign volunteers can work with both the mothers and the children in the orphanage, and a Spanish and Quechua language center that places students in volunteer positions. Each of these sites offers a very different experience for the volunteers—one requires a commitment of over a month, and the other does not, but has a high program fee. Both offer interesting insights into the world of volunteer tourism. During my time in Cusco, I interviewed volunteer tourists, volunteer coordinators, the director of the group home, and several people who work in the tourist industry in Peru.

I will use these interviews and my experiences in Cusco in my independent study that analyzes the motivations, experiences, and expectations of volunteers abroad. The project will explore how the volunteers challenge their existing perspectives as well as navigate the new culture and ideologies they find in Cusco. It investigates how their respective ideas meet, fit into, and grapple with the ideas they learn about. It also analyzes the impact of these longer-term stays on the culture and economy of Cusco.

Tourism is known to affect the culture of indigenous communities that have not changed in centuries through neocolonialism and globalization. Alternative tourism brings European and North American volunteers and travelers into even closer contact with these communities. Where schools used to have a predominantly agricultural focus, today they teach English and artisan skills in response to the growing tourism industry. Through my interviews with trekking guides and hostel workers, I will analyze the “other side” of volunteer tourism—how the native Cusqueños are adapting to the demands of a generation who is looking for a more “meaningful” and “authentic” experience.

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