



Flanders
State of
the Art

Large-scale listening exercise 'Seeking the power of travel'

SUMMARY
FINAL REPORT
JULY 2018



VISITFLANDERS

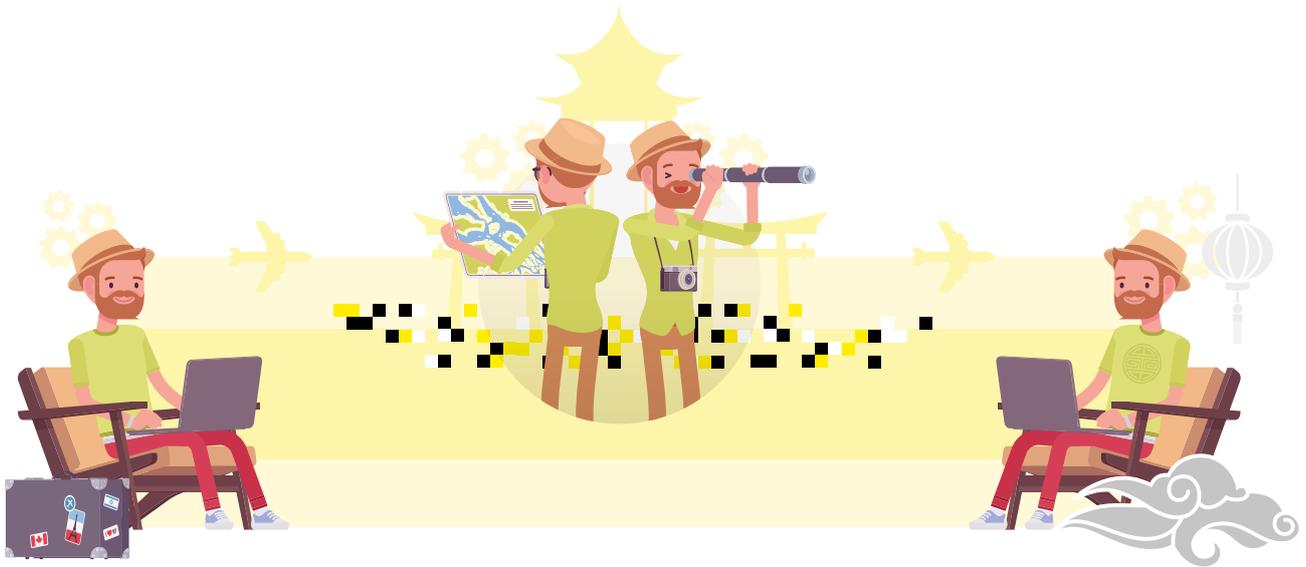
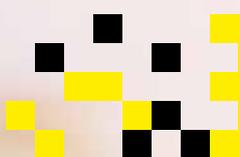


TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction3**
- 2 Survey method4**
- 3 General story patterns6**
- 4 The Traveller’s Journey8**
- 5 The impactful travel experience9**
 - 5.1 Core elements 9
 - 5.2 Strengthening factors..... 17
 - 5.2 Emotions that occur with experiences.....19
- 6 The impact of the experience..... 21**
- 7 Conclusion and recommendations24**



1 INTRODUCTION

In this investigation, we have listened to stories about significant travel experiences – experiences that have touched people and stayed with them. Over **1,600 travellers** have told us what made the experience so significant and powerful and what impact it had on them and their environment during and after their trips. We have thus obtained an overview of the essence of travel and its corresponding power.

The listening exercise forms part of the **‘Tourism Transforms’** project, where tourism professionals and anyone else who feels involved in tourism examine the challenges of the future and set out a future vision for tourism in Flanders.

Since the 1950s, tourism has seen spectacular growth and this has contributed to prosperity in various locations. We can say that tourism is largely based on an economic model that focusses on growth and profit. We measure our success on the basis of economic indicators: more overnight stays, more turnover, more employment, etc. The climate crisis, however, confronts us with the negative impact of our travelling behaviour. In some places ‘over-tourism’ leads to angry residents and dissatisfied tourists. By 2030, international tourism will have grown to around 2 billion international tourists. According to many people, business as usual is not an option.

The travel stories introduce emotion into this essentially economic story and provide another voice when it comes to the ‘importance of tourism’. Travel can touch people very deeply and generate positive change on a personal level, but also within their broader environments. The listening exercise provides elements that illustrate the context in which positive, impactful travel experiences occur, the factors that play a role in this, and how that can change lives. In turn, we learn how this power for change can contribute towards a healthier society and more sustainable tourism. Listening to **what travellers really consider to be important** will help us develop valuable and enriching tourism in Flanders; for our guests, but also for all of the hosts who live and work here.



2 SURVEY METHOD

The large-scale listening exercise is based on the SenseMaker method. This method begins by gathering a large number of stories that are interpreted by the story-tellers themselves. The stories are seen as short descriptions of experiences, anecdotes, moments, situations, etc. of which people have been part. We are therefore gathering experience 'fragments' from many different people. It is the number and variety of the experiences and perspectives that enable us to identify patterns in the themes or target audiences we would like to investigate.

The prompting question

Respondents share a story on the basis of a trigger question. This is an open question that invites the respondent to share a specific experience. For the large-scale listening exercise, we used the following trigger question:



Tell us about a **moment** or **experience** during a trip or excursion when **you felt truly moved** and which you will **always remember**. Tell us about this **particular moment** and describe the **impact** it had on you. Tell us about a moment that you experienced personally (not a story passed on by someone else). This could be a positive or negative experience that took place in your country or abroad.

The interpretation questions

In most qualitative research methods, researchers interpret the textual material that they gather. With SenseMaker, the storytellers make a primary assessment of their own stories. The process of self-interpretation is carried out by answering a set of follow-up questions (signifier questions) related to their experience or anecdote. Through the process of self-interpreting the stories we gain more insights in the corresponding context or underlying layers of the experience: feelings, dynamics, values, contextual factors, etc. Various types of signifier question are used: multiple choice, dyad and triad questions. The large-scale listening exercise consisted of 22 questions.

The multiple choice questions are used to better understand the context and general nature of the stories. This 'tagging' can be used thereafter to categorise the stories and enable comparisons between types of stories.

The feeling I associate with the experience is ...

(max. 2 selections)

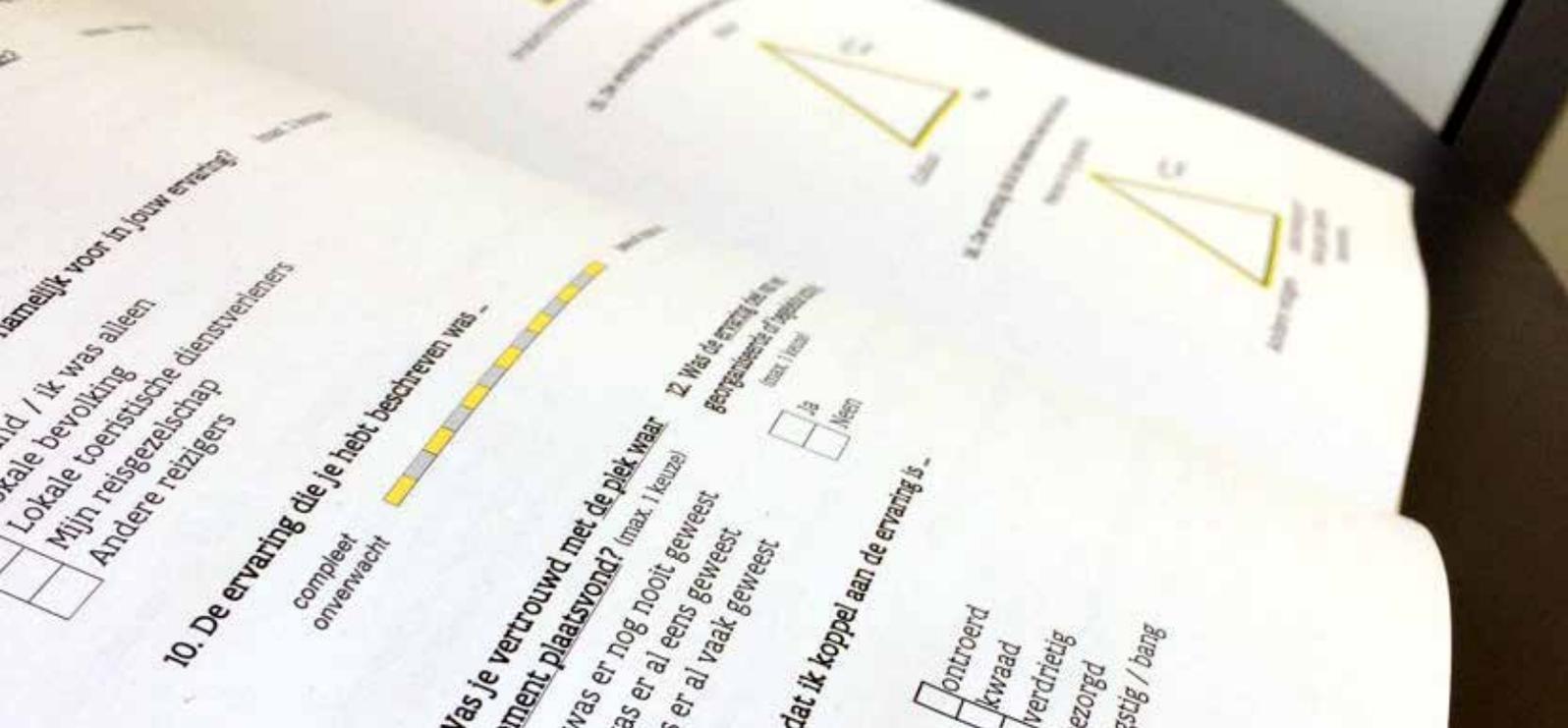
- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> proud | <input type="checkbox"/> moved |
| <input type="checkbox"/> hopeful | <input type="checkbox"/> angry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> connected | <input type="checkbox"/> sad |
| <input type="checkbox"/> overwhelmed | <input type="checkbox"/> concerned |
| <input type="checkbox"/> inspired | <input type="checkbox"/> anxious / afraid |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other: | |

Your story mainly took place in...

(max. 1 selection)

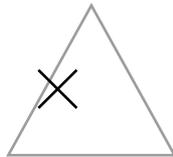
- | |
|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> natural surroundings (sea, mountains, forest, ...) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> the countryside |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a town or city |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other:..... |

Through the dyad and triad questions respondents are able to provide a nuanced answer between 2 or 3 answer options. The answers across all stories generate visual patterns for each question (see later).



What were you doing at that specific moment?

Watching/experiencing



Talking/meeting

Doing/activities

How important was the specific place for this experience?

totally unimportant

crucial



Data gathering

The stories and answers to the corresponding questions were gathered via personal interviews, facilitated group sessions and an online platform. A team of 24 students and 20 internal and external employees were trained for the large-scale listening exercise. They collected a total of **1,644** stories over a period of three months.

The analysis

The analysis of all stories and questions involved both a qualitative and quantitative analysis. First, there was a **quantitative** analysis of the interpretation questions. For this, we worked with frequency tables and examined the visual patterns for the dyad and triad questions. These patterns provided general insights into the underlying context, the nature of the experiences, the corresponding emotions and the impact/effect of the experiences for the various groups of respondents. SenseMaker enables to spot important trends and to draw conclusions around impactful travel experiences, even without the actual stories.

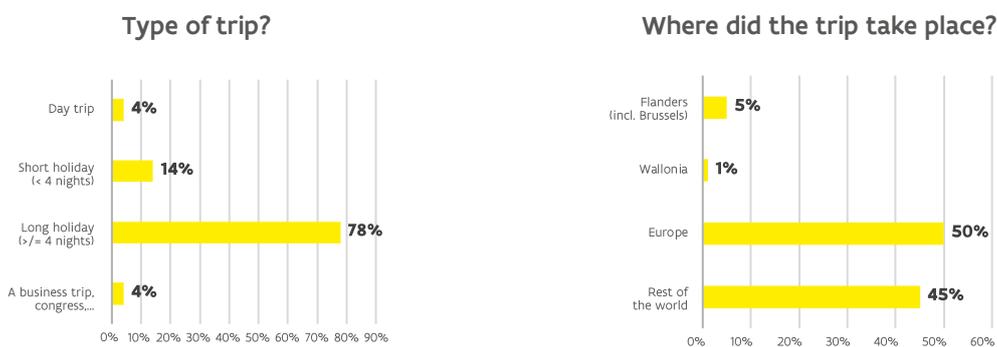
More in-depth contextual insights were gathered by reading the stories (i.e. the **qualitative analysis**). During a two-day workshop, the patterns were discussed and a series of focused reading sessions were organised with a group of 15 people. We identified patterns, similarities and differences in the story contexts and the situations that involve impactful experiences. As a result, we present below 3 core elements that induce impactful experiences, each with subdivisions. In a second and third reading session, each of the categories were then quantified.

3 GENERAL STORY PATTERNS

Of the 1,644 stories, 82% came from Belgians and 18% from foreigners. Women shared 940 stories (57%) and men shared 704 (43%). 20% of the stories originated from people who work in the tourism sector. We did not note any significant differences in the stories between men and women, within domestic or foreign tourists, or people who work in the sector and those who don't. The stories show very universal characteristics in this regard.

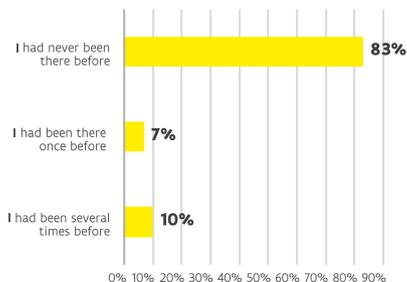
Type of trip

82% of the respondents recalled an experience that had taken place during a long trip (over 4 nights). Most of the stories concerned Europe or the rest of the world.



83% of the experiences took place at a location that people had not visited previously.

Were you familiar with the place where this moment occurred?



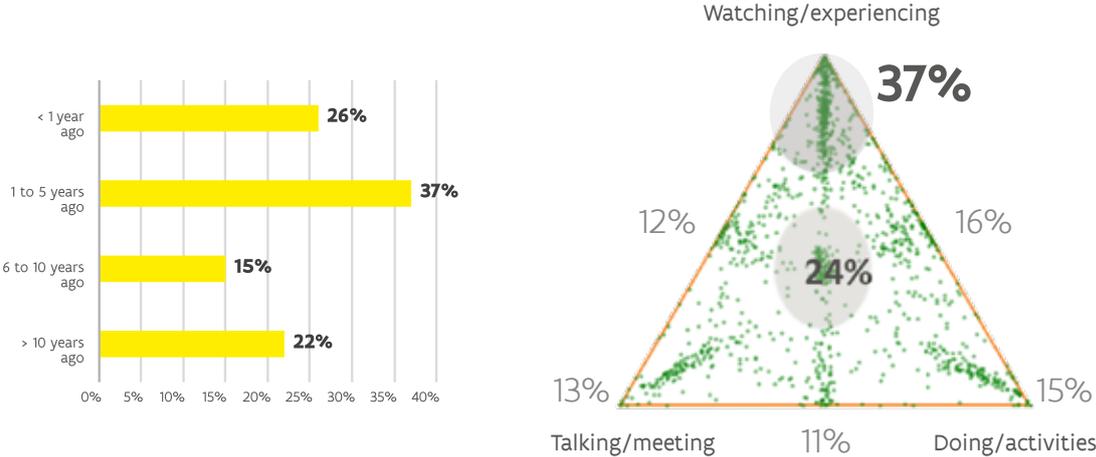
We can thus conclude that the 'difference' or the 'unknown' element of the location that people are visiting plays an important role in the impact of the travel experience. It has not been visited before; it is 'new and unknown'. An impactful experience requires a certain distance from the place that is familiar. The majority of Belgian respondents (83%) indicated that their impactful travel experience took place in other European countries and in the rest of the world. This 'difference', i.e. a lack of familiarity with the location, is very pronounced.

The predominance of long holidays (more than 4 nights) can be explained by the choice of destination, which is often further away. However, long holidays also offer more time and space to slow down, meet people, and to immerse yourself in nature and culture which, in turn, makes the impact greater (see later).

Characteristics of the specific moment

The length of time since the experience took place can vary widely. 1 in 4 stories concerned impactful experiences from the preceding year. Almost 4 out of 10 happened 1 to 5 years ago. Just over 1 in 5 of the people talked about a story that had happened over 10 years ago.

What were you doing during the experience?

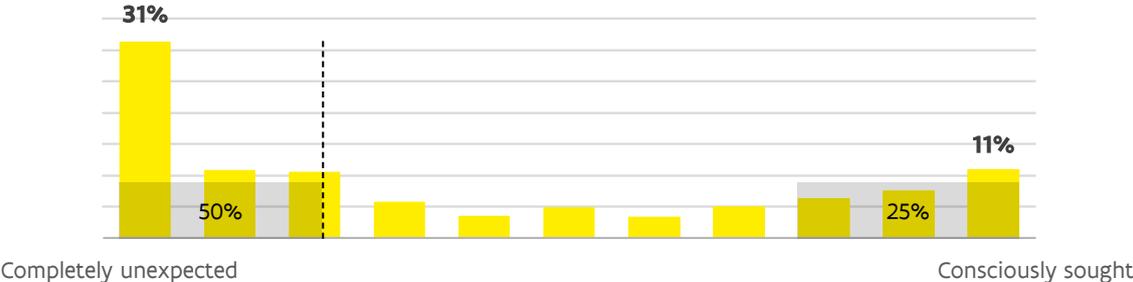


N=1268

In the above triad question, each respondent answered the question by putting a dot on a place in the triangle. This question gauges what the person was doing during the specific, impactful moment. Each dot in the diagram corresponds to a story. The person literally gave 'his story' a place in this triangle, indicating what he was doing at that moment. We see a representation of all of the stories which, according to the story-tellers, still have a moderate to very high impact on their lives (1,268 stories).

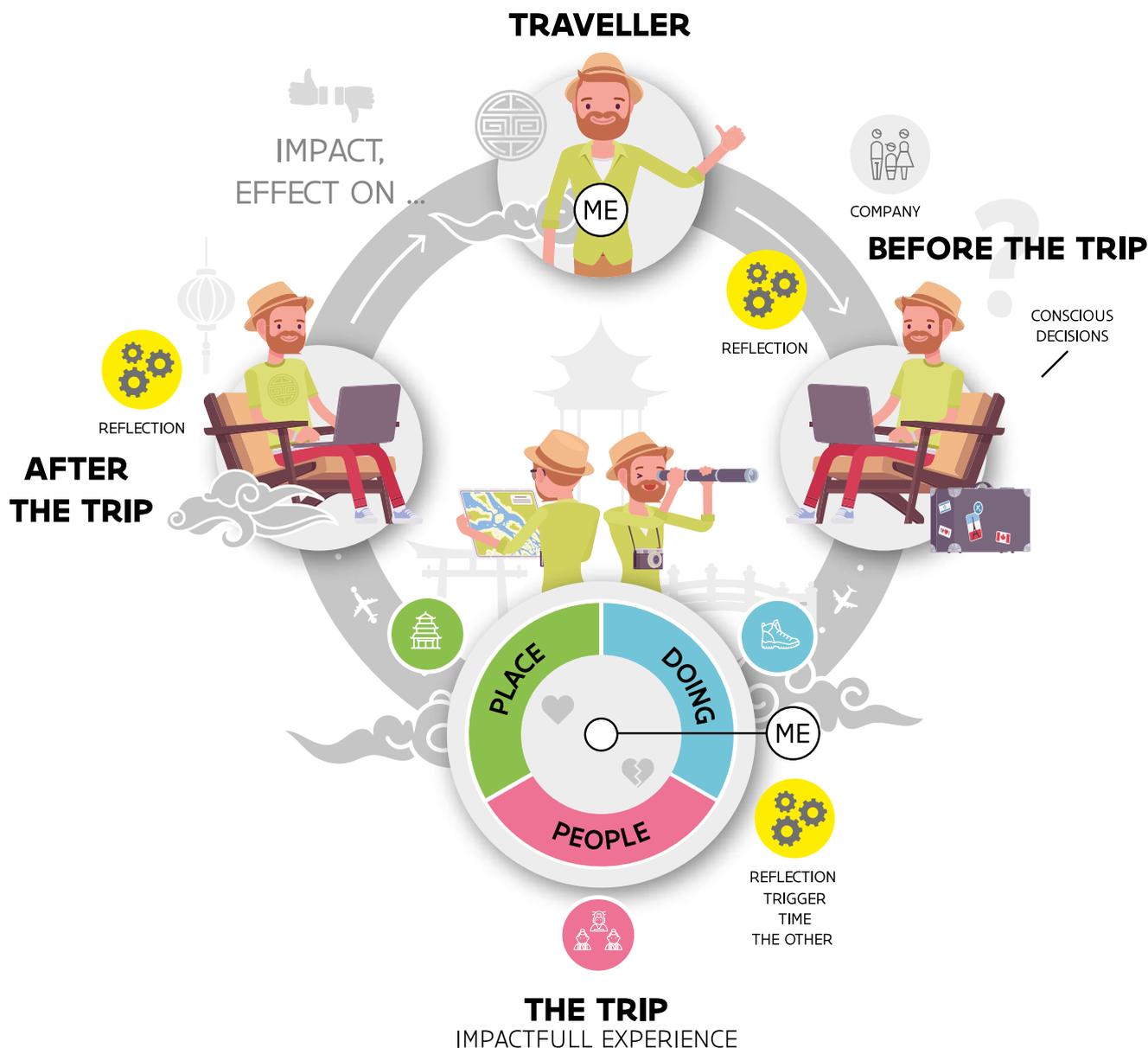
As we can see, 'watching/experiencing' is dominant. 37% of story-tellers locate their story entirely in this corner. However, 1 in 4 opt for the centre; a combination of 'talking', 'doing' and 'seeing'. Specifically, 'doing/activities' covers 15% of the stories, and 'talking' 13%. From this, we can learn that there was variety in the situations, and 'seeing' was the predominant result. We will see later that we can link this to 'experiencing places'.

The experience I had was...



In the above figure, we can see that the story-tellers' experiences were largely completely unexpected. 50% of the stories are located in the corner 'completely unexpected' (the dotted line is the median). We also see, however, that quite a few experiences were deliberately sought out by the traveller.

4 THE 'TRAVELLER'S JOURNEY'



Listening to over 1,600 stories provided interesting insights into the whole travelling process, i.e. the traveller's journey. We discovered that the impactful experiences during a trip, and the effect that this can have on the tourist, can be contained within a cyclical process. The trip or journey begins with the **traveller**. Who he is and what 'baggage' he carries with him, will determine the further course of the trip, i.e. the **deliberate choices made in relation to the trip** (where, what, with whom, budget, etc.), the intensity of the travel experience and the corresponding emotions, and the **impact of the trip** on the traveller. Reflection, i.e. consciously experiencing the trip, both in terms of planning, experiencing the moment and enjoying it thereafter, is important in terms of the overall impact. The traveller builds up new experiences as a result of the impactful event which can influence his thoughts, emotions and actions. And this can have an impact on him and his environment, on new trips and excursions, and on many other choices and activities in life.

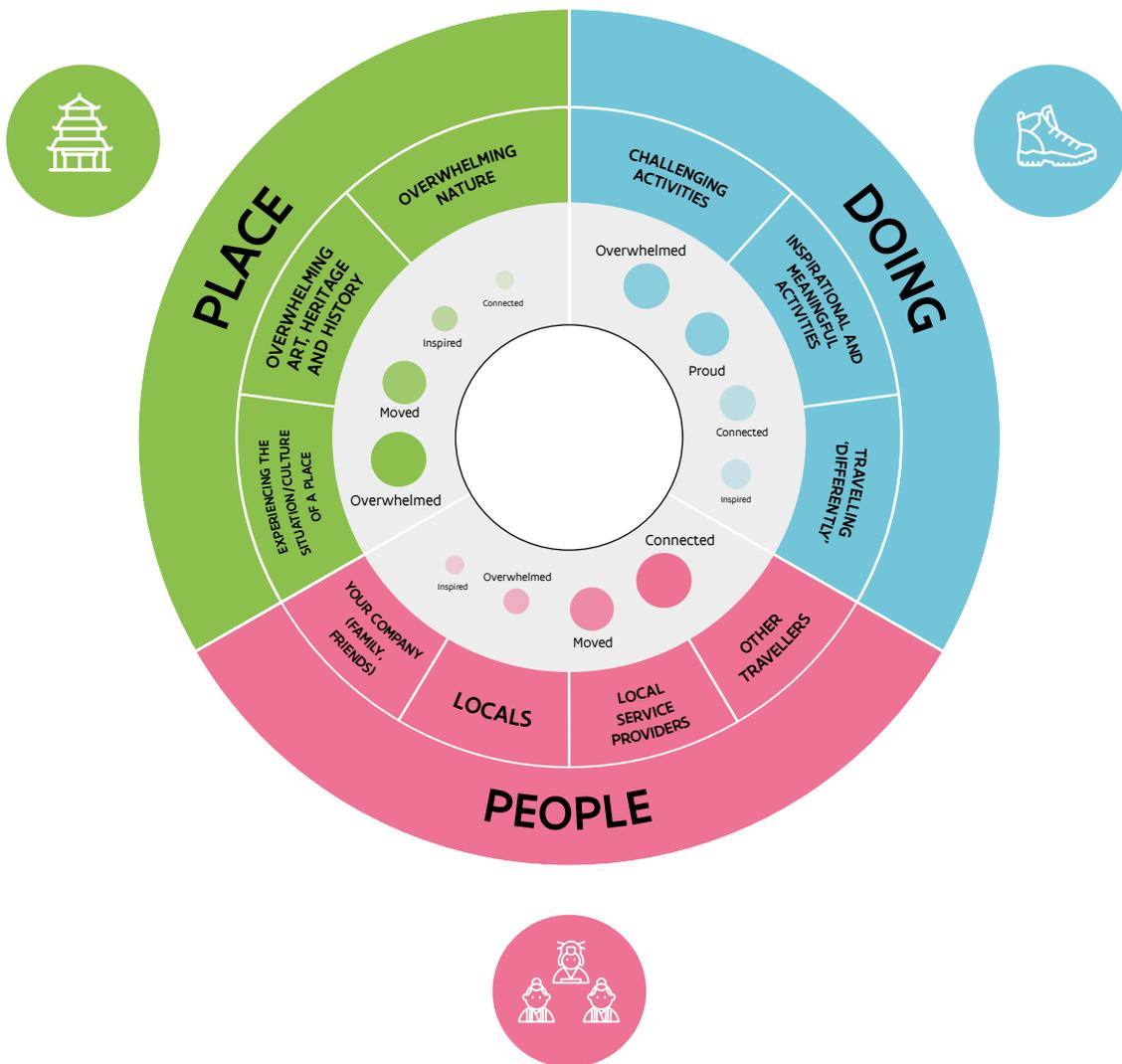
5 THE IMPACTFUL EXPERIENCE WHEN TRAVELLING

In each of the stories, we discovered elements that turn the events of a trip or excursion into an **impactful experience**. A few of these are particularly significant for the impact of a travel experience. We are talking about core elements. In addition, there are a number of other factors which play a role and can strengthen the impact of the experience.

5.1. Core elements of an impactful experience

By reading and examining all stories thoroughly, we have been able to distinguish 3 core elements: stories related to the 'place', to 'people' or to 'doing'.

The 'place' concerns experiencing a location, in which one is immersed. 'People' is all about meetings and dialogue. When it comes to 'doing', it's all about activities or travel formulas that inspire, challenge or invite the traveller to experience 'something different' in terms of a place or its residents.



Each of the 3 core elements can be divided into subcategories. We will explain these below.



5.1.1. PLACE

The experience of a **place**, due to confrontation with or immersion in:

NATURE

Nature, in all its stunning beauty and vastness, as a source of calm, wonderment, mystic connections, happiness, etc. In the stories, we simultaneously see confrontations with the fragility of nature (e.g. plastic on the oceans) and the threat or risk that this can present (e.g. getting up close and personal with animals, crossing a ravine in the mountains, etc.).

FINDING MEANING IN NORWEGIAN NATURE

At a stunning wild-camping location in Norway, I sat alone on the banks of a stream, day-dreaming. Suddenly I felt overwhelmed. I realised that I was sat in a place, with its rocks, water, moss and waterfall, which had been there for centuries, perhaps even millennia. I felt part of a larger entity, the cosmos. A beautiful, gratifying and fulfilling feeling. The experience enabled me to see, at a later stage, that it is possible to have a spiritual experience without belief and religion. This has helped me in my work in a hospital where I try to help sick people.

ART, HERITAGE AND HISTORY

Expressive art, music, dance, architecture, monuments, etc. created and passed on by people. We are moved by beauty, the art and capabilities of people, and the corresponding magnificence. For example, appreciating the magnificence of a cathedral, standing face-to-face with an artwork, attending a fantastic concert, and more. But also in terms of a person's insignificance, e.g. Holocaust sites, World War One in Flanders Fields, etc.

BAŚÍLICA I TEMPLE EXPIATORI DE LA SAGRADA FAMÍLIA

We went to Barcelona with my Spanish evening class. The Sagrada Familia left a lasting impression on me. The entire construction by Gaudi. The originality in terms of the arches, light, colours, space; I can't express it. It quite literally took my breath away. I hope that I'm well enough to go and see it again when it is finished.

I'll be 81 by then. Of course, Barcelona is a real gem of a city, but what this architect developed in terms of originality is impressive and the Sagrada is astonishing. How they will top it, is a mystery to me, but I hope that they fulfil the high expectations that I have on the basis of the glorious construction that is there already.

Video 'Running around a modern art museum like a child' by Jo Uytterhoeven:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISzpeqDCft8&t=5s

CULTURE AND THE (SOCIO-ECONOMIC-POLITICAL) SITUATION OF A PLACE

Culture equates to standards and values, religion, language, symbols, rituals, food, lifestyle, and so on, relating to a location. For example: the scents and colours of India, the Italian dolce far niente, Buddhist ceremonies, etc.

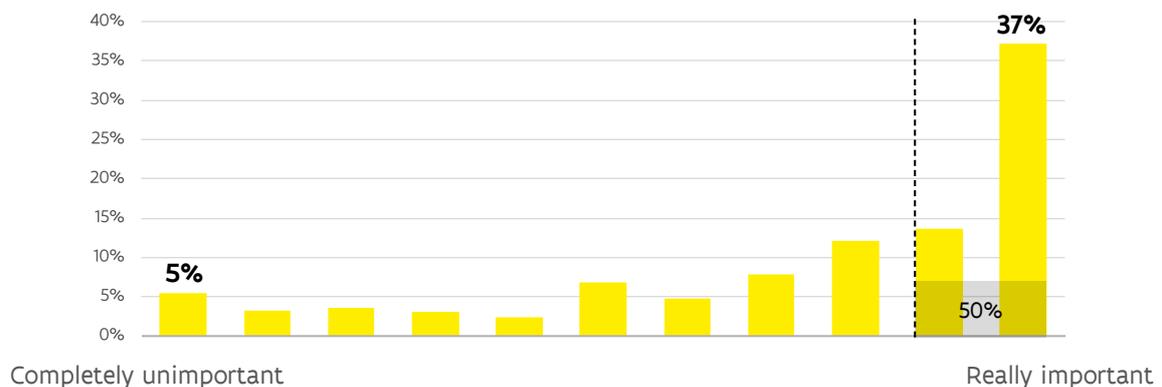
The socio-economic-political situation of a place indicates how a place is 'organised' and managed. Travel brings us into contact with positive and inspirational examples, i.e. sustainable city development, well-organised public transport, and a successful cultural mix, but it also confronts us with poverty, authoritarian regimes, danger, war and terror, discrimination and population groups.

People can feel moved by the culture and situation in a location ('I feel good here') or repelled by it.

FIRST EXPERIENCE IN EUROPE

As cliché as they may sound, one of the most memorable experiences that I had in Belgium was on the first day that I arrived. I had just checked into my hostel (in Molenbeek, of all places) and since it was still a good time of day, I wandered across the canal in the direction of the center of town. I was immediately impressed at how lively the center of Brussels was. People were playing music on street corners, others were drawing on the ground with chalk and blowing bubbles on a closed off street. A clown was performing in front of the steps of the Beurs. I stopped there on the steps to watch with the other people seated there. I don't even particularly like clowns, but I really enjoyed myself. I felt safe, I didn't feel like I stood out. What I enjoyed was what I saw as people from the neighborhood coming together. And that's what I really appreciate are honest displays of vibrant multicultural life and flourishing communal art. It really set the tone for my adventure in Europe!

The importance of the 'place' is also clear from the slider question that story-tellers also answered. Half of the people provided a score of 9 or 10 out of 10 in respect of the question asking how significant the 'specific place' was in the moment they had described.





5.1.2. PEOPLE

We can distinguish 4 types of encounters with people during a trip or excursion:

CONTACT WITH THE LOCALS:

hospitality and helpfulness that goes further than expected, a profound contact and a sense of genuine connection and involvement, learning about 'being different'.

UNEXPECTED COMPANIONSHIP, EMBRACED BY HOSPITALITY:

During a four-day hike in the mountains of Myanmar, I was unable to reach the next village where I could stay for the night. It quickly began to get dark and I didn't have enough information to know whether I would be able to arrive safely (before it was too dark) at my destination. On the mountain road, there were 3 huts, which were home to wood-cutters and their families. I knocked on the door and asked if I could stay the night. Our shared language was limited to gesturing. Nevertheless I managed to tell them that I had very few options. They took pity on me and did all they could to accommodate this surprise visitor and offer me a warm place to sleep. Their hospitality went above and beyond. I felt very uncomfortable when I realised that the family had so little themselves in terms of eating and sleeping but that they had done all they could to provide me with hot food and a comfortable bed. We laughed, I played with the children, and we took photos and shared information about family and life in Belgium (as far as our gestures would allow us). And miles away from Belgium, I felt at home. The woman of the household was 20, just 4 years younger than me; she had three children and a husband who had lost a leg due to a work accident. Together with her parents, she lived in the hut, which was split into two. I looked at her; she was a strong woman. I was grateful for having shared a moment with her.

CONTACT WITH LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS:

personal contact, involvement, hospitality and service that transcends business, radiating passion and authenticity.

Contact with locals and local service providers can be very positive, but it can also be negative if people are confronted with animosity, indifference, arrogance, a lack of assistance, obtrusiveness, mistrust, etc. This can also lead to an impactful travel experience.

TELEPHONE IN STENI

Greece, Evia, October 2017. We had decided to climb a mountain in Steni. We arrived in the village in the dark. We went to find a place to stay the night and came upon a hotel. We went in and encountered an old lady in a nightdress. She didn't speak a word of English and went off with a walking stick to find someone else. Pjotter came out and was clearly enthusiastic about us being there. He showed us all of the rooms (we were clearly the only ones there) and we were able to choose one. Once we were installed, we went back to the large lobby. There, Pjotter and his friend Kostas had set out home-made raki, wine, calamari and Greek salad. It was a lovely evening. Even though Kostas, a shepherd, did not speak English, the drawings, gestures and translations by Pjotter meant we could build a relationship. In the morning we enjoyed a free breakfast and practical tips for our mountain trip. Pjotter was clearly concerned for us. In the evening, he called me on my mobile. He was really worried and wanted to make sure everything had gone well and that we had reached the top of the mountain. And to send greetings from Kostas, of course. His call really touched me. It was an indication that they were genuinely concerned and felt a connection.

BEING WITH FAMILY OR FRIENDS IN A DIFFERENT SETTING (TRAVEL COMPANIONS):

depth of the contact and the sense of genuine connection, distance from day-to-day life

HEAVY STUFF AT BREAKFAST

We were travelling with friends to Croatia. During breakfast in our apartment, we started talking about 'grandparents'. Everyone had a tale to tell; a grandma with Alzheimer's, grandparents they'd never known, grandpa always causing arguments, etc. After wiping away a few tears, we all felt quite relieved. I think we had seen another side of one another. We had been friends for over 6 years but there were still things between us that we'd never talked about.

MEETING OTHER TRAVELLERS:

doing things with strangers, feeling a connection despite the short contact time.

OUR OZZIE FRIENDS

The night we met Anja and Warren in Barcelona. That is something I'll always remember for the rest of my life! That in one whole afternoon we became such good friends with these people (who are 30 years older than us) is unbelievable! I still have contact with them and next year they will come to Portugal! I am so stoked to see them again! It is good to keep contact and I am happy we still are, because they live on the other side of the world! This had a great impact on me because now I'm more sociable with every person, doesn't matter what age they are! It's nice to have friends all over the world and I wish to meet more people like Anja and Warren.



5.1.3. DOING

This concerns activities and travel formulas that people have (usually) found for themselves and which go hand-in-hand with an intense experience.

CHALLENGING ACTIVITIES

Physical and mental challenges and activities that take you out of your comfort zone, allowing you to push boundaries and find yourself. Sometimes people actively seek out risk (e.g. extreme sports). The traveller's personal 'baggage' (i.e. experience, fitness, etc.) plays an important role in this. What is a huge challenge for one person, is easy or obvious for someone else. Examples of this may be the Mont Ventoux ascent on a bicycle, travelling with a disability or after an illness, a parachute jump, etc.

CYCLING FOR NEW EXPERIENCES

After a serious illness, I set myself the goal of cycling from home (Limburg) to the sea, in a few days, with a group. The weather was not ideal and the bicycle trip was a real challenge so when the group arrived in Cadzand after three days in the pouring rain, I had an overwhelming sense of happiness that I had found the physical strength to do it. Since then, we've been on lots of cycling holidays as a couple or with a group, to discover the world in a different way. The link between sport and discovering new places is a very enriching experience for me.

Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn5CYwU7r5c

INSPIRING AND SIGNIFICANT ACTIVITIES

Activities that focus on inner development: personal growth, enrichment, learning, feeling mentally and physically well, etc. For example: meeting the Dalai Lama, a retreat, a yoga trip, a cookery workshop, a painting trip, an educational or exchange visit. Activities that are more focussed on the internal, which can be significant for others and contribute towards creating a 'better world', e.g. doing voluntary work on your holiday, are also included in this category.

MASAI AND MY BONSAI MUSE

Saitama, Japan with a few like-minded people (Bonsai enthusiasts). ... My first time in an authentic Bonsai garden. The discipline of the owner and the employees. The huge impact of natural beauty, through which I could wander, in wonderment and asking questions (even though this was in a Japanese/English mix, it still worked). The sense of never wanting to leave. Sharing what happened day-to-day. Could I also create the atmosphere at home? A continual motivation to keep looking further. And... to return (now, 5 times)

TRAVELLING 'DIFFERENTLY'

Travel formulas that encourage slowing down and relaxing, meeting people, immersion in nature and culture, seeing things differently, etc. For example: back-packing, long train or boat trips, cycling or walking through a city or region, seeing an area from the air, detox trips, and more.

CALM, SILENCE AND PEACE

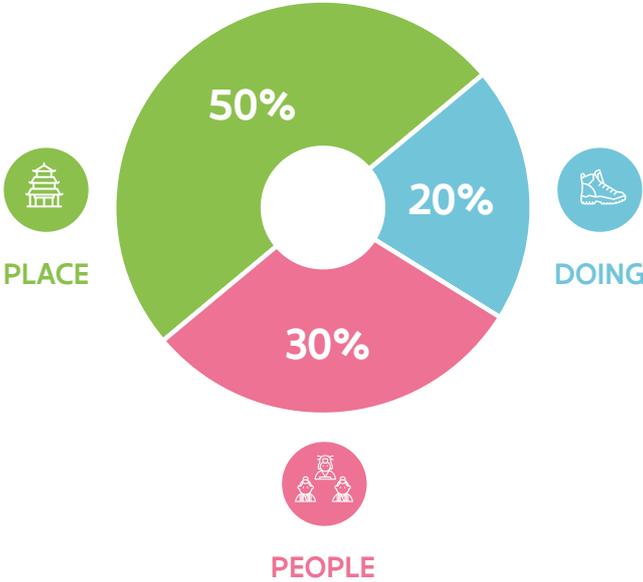
Three years ago, I made a road-trip on my own for the first time! I travelled through China for a month and it was the best experience of my life. I'd never travelled alone before. We always used to go with the family, the whole clan of 10 to 25 people travelling to a destination and then heading out on small excursions. I was so fed up with doing the same thing that I decided that after my studies, I would go away all summer and do something on my own! I was delighted to be doing my own thing, even if I didn't really like it to start with. After a week or so, I began to enjoy the peace and quiet; seeing and doing what you want is the way I always wanted to travel! I don't have any regrets, it was the best adventure I've ever had and I have travelled on my own since then too. (...)

NOTA BENE:

In many stories, we could identify a dominant core element but we also regularly see the presence of multiple elements that reinforce one another. A good example is a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella. This includes a physical challenge; walking provides time and space for reflection and meaningful meetings with locals and other pilgrims, and you are immersed in the nature and culture of the places you pass along the way. The journey is inspiring and people often feel very different about life after a pilgrimage.

5.1.4. HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE CORE ELEMENTS FROM AN IMPACTFUL EXPERIENCE?

The 3 core elements are not reflected equally in the stories. For all of the stories that have so far had no negative impact (93% of the stories), we have determined their importance by rereading them.



The most dominant are the stories where the 'place' played the biggest role in the impactful experience (50%). Then, 30% of the stories are about meetings with 'people'. 1 in 5 of the stories are about 'doing'.

Within the 3 main categories, there are major differences between the subcategories. Experiencing a situation or the culture in a location is most often the dominant element (22% of the stories). Meetings with other travellers that lead to impactful experiences are the most infrequent (3%). In relation to meetings between people, meetings with locals are most evident within the stories.

DOMINANT SEGMENT 'NATURE OF THE IMPACTFUL EXPERIENCE'

PLACE	experience the culture/situation at a place	22%
PLACE	overwhelming nature	18%
PEOPLE	local population	13%
PLACE	art, heritage, history	11%
PEOPLE	fellow travellers, family, friends	7%
DOING	challenging activities	7%
DOING	travelling differently	7%
PEOPLE	service provider	6%
DOING	inspiring and significant activities	6%
PEOPLE	other travellers	3%
	None of these	2%
TOTAL		100%

In essence, travel is about a significant experience of the culture and nature in a place and meeting the local residents.



5.2. Reinforcing factors for an impactful experience

A number of elements determine how impactful an experience is.

- Everyone takes their own **personal baggage** on holiday. Whether you're young or old, the things you've seen in life, whether you've travelled a lot or are seeking something out for the first time, how **open** you are to what you may encounter while travelling... It all affects the impact of the experience. What makes an impact on one person may not bother somebody else.

MY VIEW OF MY FATHER

In 1995, a few months after the death of my dad, I decided to take some time off. I would usually travel alone but I decided to avoid all the fussing and go on a group holiday around Ecuador. The travel group was intensely tiring. When we stopped for a moment on a high plateau during a bus trip through the mountains, everyone got off the bus. I stayed in my seat. Enjoying the stunning view, I suddenly began to cry. I was thinking about my dad who also used to love views like this. It was a strange experience. So high in the mountains, I felt extremely close to my dead father. I still think back to that moment; it was so pure and intense.

- Travelling is ideal for introducing you to unknown places, people and activities. The **unknown or different** takes you out of your comfort zone. Different food, a different bed, different transport... they all distance us from the everyday. Depending on how often we have encountered the unknown or the different, it can make us feel uneasy or provide a bit of a culture shock. We are confronted with minor and major problems that we can't always resolve with our usual problem-solving strategies. Our usual game plans offer no instructions; we must see things from another perspective. We question things and this initiates a process of self-evaluation, of adapting our values and beliefs, of personal growth...

Video Taiwan, lost in translation. By Hannelore Verschueren
www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQykOHbmn84&t=6s

BITTERSWEET TALE

We visited a village in the Dominican Republic where Haitians lived. They worked for very little money in the sugar cane fields. We talked to a few of the children in a classroom and shared a few sweets around. Some of the kids told us they were going to be the president, or become an astronaut. It was great to see that the children had so many dreams and so much hope for their future. But simultaneously, it was heartbreaking because we knew that the children would never get an opportunity to realise their dreams. How the people there lived, the lives of the adults and children, made me think about my own life. They were so grateful for what they had, even though it was barely anything at all.

- You're **challenged** with minor and major problems and situations that you encounter when travelling. You push your own boundaries.

ME, MYSELF AND I

I went on a student exchange to Canada. At the weekends, I had to entertain myself with exciting activities. I wasn't used to doing that as I used to always leave it up to my partner. It was a real challenge for me to be organising myself in a strange country, in another language. I thought; 'Ok, what now?' Suddenly I had to make plans on my own. I really had to come out of my shell because I had nobody to fall back on. I opted to go to Quebec for a weekend; I organised my travel, found accommodation... it was all a huge challenge! But organising it all myself gave me a sense of freedom. Choosing what I wanted to do, wanted to eat; it gave me a real boost in terms of my freedom and independence. The idea that I could do it all, without help, was amazing. Now I do everything myself. Or with my partner.

- **Unexpected** events and meetings often reinforce this process. We also see this in the patterns from the stories.
- Space for **reflection and mindful experiences** go hand in hand with an impactful event. During the trip, it is important that there is time to, quite literally, 'stand still', to slow down and be 'in the moment', to reflect and dream, to engage in long conversations, to act on unexpected ideas or invitations ('going with the flow').

REVELATION

Provence, in a rented gypsy caravan between the trees. I was there with my friend but while he worked on the computer, I sat around and day-dreamed. Nothing happened. But suddenly I realised that I wasn't responsible for everything that happened around me. I'm just a small link in a huge chain. It felt really liberating and I often think back to that moment if things are getting on top of me.

ON THE WAY TO THE FRUIT SHOP

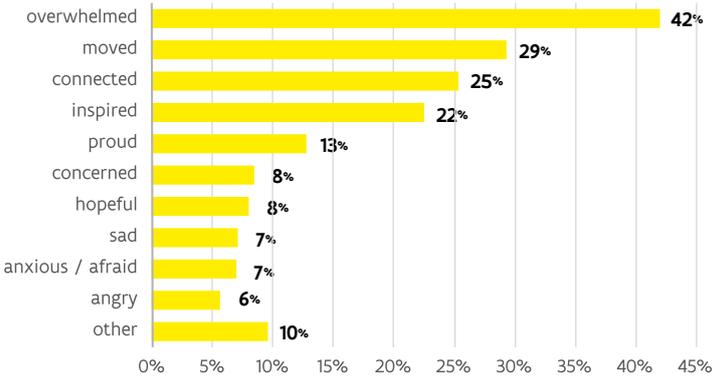
Looking for a fruit shop in Anmin, Jordan. Just keep looking... It can't be much further. Then I summoned the courage to ask the way, in this strange language. Straight away, a table and chairs were dragged outdoors. We were pushed down on the chairs and given a plate of cheesecake (korafa). Lots of questions and even more eating. We never found the fruit shop but now, I always ask the way. Even if I know where I'm going. You never know where you'll end up.



5.3. Emotions with these impactful experiences

An impactful experience goes hand-in-hand with strong **emotions**. People are often **overwhelmed**, **moved** or feel **connected**. Feeling **inspired** or **proud** come in at fourth and fifth place. In this video, Kristof Steegmans is inspired by the creative vibes of New York:

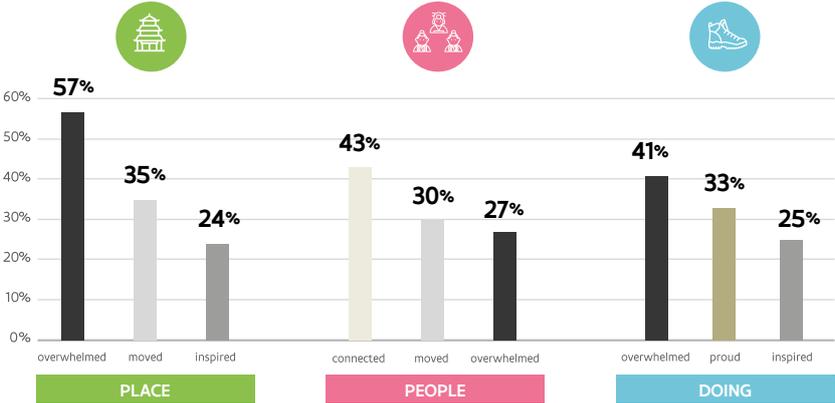
www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhVreavb-Rw&t=17s



Sometimes story-tellers also link negative emotions with their experiences; sadness, anxiety, anger. Anxiety is the most common, in relation to challenging activities, but this goes hand-in-hand with pride once the challenge has been overcome.

The emotions vary hugely, however, according to whether the impactful experience relates to the dominant aspect of 'place', 'people', or 'doing'.

TOP 3 FEELINGS LINKED TO IMPACTFUL EXPERIENCES FOR 'PLACE', 'PEOPLE' AND 'DOING'





Experiences which involve the nature, art or history of a 'place' are most commonly linked to being overwhelmed and moved. For the 3 'place' subcategories, we see little variation in the most important emotions.

Meetings with 'people' create connectedness and poignancy. Connectedness is most dominant in stories that relate to 'fellow travellers' (63%), but also with 'other travellers' (47%) and 'local population' (41%). With local service providers, 'connectedness' is less common (20%) but being 'overwhelmed' is more common (41%). People are often overwhelmed when an unexpected service is provided.

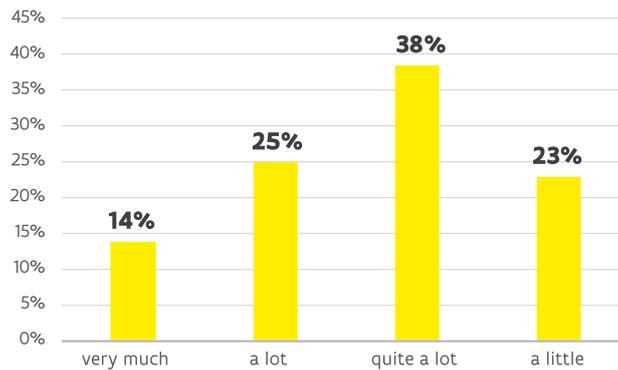
ONE HUNDRED YEARS (LATER)

Two years ago, my parents and I went to the Westhoek. The square itself fills the space between the Ypres Cloth Hall and the church at Ypres. Our destination, the museum of Flanders Fields, was in the Ypres Cloth Hall. The exhibition was an interactive wander around stories and artefacts from the Great War. After day-dreaming for a while, suddenly all of my thoughts came together and it was overwhelming. The Ypres Cloth Hall suddenly looked smaller and I moved to the edge of the Gothic building. I quickly nestled into the bench and grabbed my mobile. The faceless soldiers and anonymous victims suddenly gained identities, people who I knew, who I loved. Alone with my phone, I called my boyfriend at the time and told him: 'I'm so happy that I am alive today, that I can know you today. At the moment, I'm in a museum about the Great War and I'm thinking about how my life would have been 100 years ago. The fact that you, and so many others, could have died. I love you.' I gulped and hung up. My memory is perhaps vague, but it reminded me of my freedom and the sacrifice that had been made by people throughout Flemish history. How happy I was that I live today, a hundred years later.

In stories about 'doing', 'being proud of myself' came in at second place. In relation to 'challenging activities' in particular, 'pride' (50%) and 'overwhelmed' (50%) were dominant. People are proud of themselves for taking on the challenge and overwhelmed by the result, e.g. climbing a high mountain. In this subcategory, we see 'anxiety' (18%) at third place, a rather negative emotion that relates to the challenge.

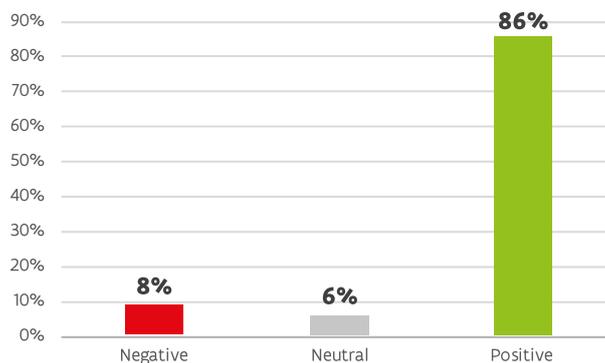
6 THE EFFECT OF THE 'IMPACTFUL EXPERIENCE'

The impact of the experience on the lives of the story-tellers varies. Four in ten experiences still have a 'very high' or 'high' impact. Almost four in ten have a 'reasonably high' impact. About 23% of stories were reported to have little impact today.



The story-tellers also indicated whether the ongoing impact was positive, neutral or negative. 92% of the stories have a positive or neutral impact; 8% a negative impact.

There were 109 stories whereby the story-tellers indicated that the experience had an ongoing negative impact on their lives. An analysis of these stories demonstrated that negative experiences during trips included sickness, accidents, being robbed, practical problems, arguments between companions, etc. There is a smaller number of stories that involve experiences which have led to ongoing negative associations and reflections due to issues such as being confronted with extreme poverty, or visiting locations that left a lasting impression (e.g. The Killing Fields, an association with a family member who died thereafter, etc.). Usually, this type of example of negative experiences that are still felt today, have a neutral or positive impact, as people draw positive insights from them.



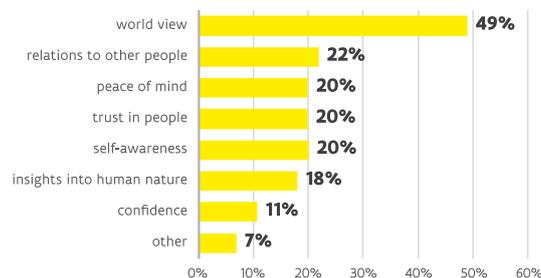
When quantifying each of the sub-segments, we disregarded stories that have 'low' impact and/or have an ongoing negative impact, in order to focus on experiences with a positive impact.

The story-tellers also indicated whether the impactful experience principally influenced their thoughts, feelings or activities, or a combination thereof. In relation to stories whereby people indicated that there is an ongoing, very high impact, we see that 26% state that the experience had an impact on their thoughts, feelings and activities. For all stories this share is 20%. The travel experience, in other words, brought about a deep-rooted change for the person concerned; it changed him/her significantly. In literature, people talk of a ‘transformational’ experience when it concerns these 3 domains.



If we look more deeply at the type of impact, we see that half of our story-tellers report that their ‘world view’ was changed. With the exception of altered ‘self-confidence’, all other categories are about the same size, i.e. between 17 and 22%: dealing with people, inner peace, trust in people, self-awareness and knowing about people. 1 in 10 say that their self-confidence changed.

TYPE OF IMPACT IN RELATION TO THE ‘IMPACTFUL EXPERIENCE’ (2 answers per story-teller)



Transformational travel experiences are experiences that have an impact after the trip itself and which bring about change in **who we are, what we think and what we do**. The stories show that travellers who have had an impactful experience:

- **Feel like they know themselves better** - ‘We leave to find out about the world and come home knowing more about ourselves’. Travel enables **personal development and improved self-awareness**. People take on physical and spiritual challenges and become stronger as a result, with greater **self-confidence**. People feel **more balanced**. The journey that people undertake also corresponds to an ‘inner’ journey, a journey to greater maturity and knowledge.

Video: Hoogtevrees (Fear of Heights) by Erik Hennes

www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcUZ9G8A7RA

- **Feel a deep connection with people and places** - Travellers can develop a deep sense of connection or identification with a place. They describe the feeling of ‘here, at this moment, everything is good’, I feel **at one with myself, the people around me and the world**. They describe moments of being moved, moments of happiness and (almost) spiritual experiences. People often return with an ongoing, more profound relationship with the people they met or their travelling companions.

MY HEART LIES IN AROSA

As a child, I went skiing every year for two weeks with my parents in Arosa, Switzerland! I know the place like the back of my hand and have thousands of great memories. Now, we take our children to other ski resorts because they love variety and were a bit bored of Arosa after our fifth visit! I had been to Arosa for six years in a row and it felt odd to change! For me, skiing means Arosa, Hotel Kulm, a De Bruycke family tradition. Two years ago, we went there again to celebrate my dad's 70th birthday and because it could be the last time he sees the place! I wanted to give him a last chance to see it! Together, we had a special connection to that place and that will always be with me! It was one of the most amazing trips ever with my father and I am delighted that I could really enjoy it and get the most from one of his last holidays!!!

- **Greater openness of spirit, new insights, broader horizons** - People talk about how travelling has made them aware of our consumer society and how they gain an understanding of other forms of society and work. They were touched by the contrasts between rich and poor, by the wealth of another culture; by other ways of dealing with life and through conflict and peace. They discovered the relativity of Western values and lifestyle or vice versa, and gained a greater appreciation of things ('how good we have it'). There was also a realisation of our dependence on technology. And they discovered the healing power of art, culture, calm, slowing down and hospitality.

ALMOST UNINHABITED ISLAND

When I went to the Dominican Republic last year, we travelled to an island where there was a small village, which was home to just 60 people. They lived in poverty and almost exclusively off what the island could provide. I was really shocked that people live in poverty in circumstances like that. It really made me think about the need for more balance between poverty and wealth.

- **Adapting values** after a transformational travel experience - our sensitivity for the essential issues in life increases: meeting others, peace, diversity, ecological awareness, hospitality, religion, preconceptions, how we spend our time. Nature, helping one another, being happy with the small things, simplicity, trust, humility and letting go. Awareness of finiteness and mortality.
- **Adapting lifestyles or situations and setting new goals** - People have got to know their partners better, made study choices on the basis of their travel experiences, changed jobs, or found motivation for business ambitions. They have built a more meaningful relationship with their nearest-and-dearest, started to live more intensively, or started being more hospitable. Others explained that they started doing more sport, learnt another language, let go of specific customs and patterns, and consciously made space for the good things in life. People live with enhanced passion and sensitivity.

A DAY IN THE OCEAN

During my work placement in Australia, I had a week's holiday in April 2015. During the week, I booked a plane ticket to Cairns to see the Great Barrier Reef. I'd heard how global warming meant it had been largely destroyed. I booked a snorkel trip and expected the company to only show us the best bits of the coral reef. But nothing could have been further from the truth. At some places, we saw how the coral had been affected by global warming. After the trip I decided to live in a more environmentally aware manner. Of course, it won't help if it's just me doing this, but all of the small changes in my life to protect the environment will mean I'm making a contribution.



7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These stories give a powerful voice to ordinary travellers. As a result of the more than 1,600 stories, we learnt what is important for travellers on holiday, what corresponding emotions there were, and what stayed with them after the trip.

Three elements are vital for an impactful travel experience: the experience of a **place**, meeting **people** and participating in **activities**, and travel formats that inspire, challenge or invite travellers to experience a place and its residents 'differently'. These three elements are often dominant in an impactful travel experience. However, we also see that many stories involve 2 or 3 of these elements and that they reinforce one another.



PLACE

- In half of the stories, the experience of a place is a dominant factor in the impactful travel experience that is described. Often, this concerns an intense experience of the culture (lifestyle and values) and the **social-political-economic situation (22%)** in a place. However, **nature (18%)** and **art/heritage (11%)** often leave a lasting impression too. Travellers are moved by the stunning beauty of the natural world, by the art created by people, and by the appeal of a lifestyle. They are also confronted, however, with poverty, war and terror, insecurity and environmental damage, which also have a significant impact.
- **'Being different/unknown'** plays a central role in the intensity of the experience. This is extremely important in relation to the experience of the place, in particular. Nowadays, tourist destinations increasingly look very similar, and tourist destinations are increasingly merging into one. It is therefore important that our locations are 'different' and 'unique' and that this is highlighted so that the traveller can see the authenticity for themselves. Repeat visitors should also be surprised by new places and experiences in Flanders.
- We market ourselves internationally as a 'cultural destination' rather than a 'natural destination'. It could be interesting, however, to see if **'our nature'** could gain a more prominent place in the tourism offering and how we could substantiate this and open up this area without exceeding the carrying capacity of the destination.
- The travellers' stories teach us to see ourselves differently, to look more closely at what surprises them and what they consider to be unique about our location. Our 'different' is often encompassed within **small things, that we regard as ordinary or everyday**, (e.g. learning to ride a bicycle in Flanders, a bag of chips on the street, watching the lively and multicultural street life from the steps of the Beurs). It helps us to appreciate these 'small' things that we no longer see and to give them a place in the tourist experiences of visitors.



PEOPLE

- You can't experience a place separately from the people who live and work there. In 30% of the stories, **meetings with people play a central role**. It is not necessarily grandiose experiences that create memorable moments, but smaller, 'warm' moments and meetings with residents, guides, taxi-drivers, other people from the tourism service sector, and other travellers. Despite the short-term contact, there can nevertheless be a strong connection between people and sometimes this can lead to bonds that last well past the holiday. What surprises and appeals is the difference in the people we meet but, primarily, also their geniality, the welcome they provide, and their commitment and willingness to help, which exceeds expectations.

The attitude of the host makes a huge difference. People who know their area, who are proud of it and who welcome their guests can leave a lasting impression. People who work in this sector can draw on their own travel experiences and use them to increase the quality of the visitors' experience. A genuine welcome, from person to person and not service provider to consumer/tourist, with an appropriate degree of curiosity about their story, and an enthusiasm to listen and empathise, to help and to solve problems. The listening exercise has shown that if you work in the tourism sector, you must love seeing people and also realise that every meeting could end up being a significant moment in the memories of a traveller. The personal touch is really important. Focussing on local ambassadors, creating space for encounters between local residents and travellers, and providing a warm and personalised welcome are significant challenges.

- A strong sense of connection **among a group of travelling companions** (family, friends) can also be created thanks to travel. Many stories concern a break with the usual routine, taking time for longer conversations, breaking down old roles/patterns and seeing different sides to people. This shift often lasts well after the return journey.



DOING

- The activity or travel format is the determining factor in the impact of the travel experiences in one in five of the stories. This will often be a reinforcing element in the impactful travel experience. This concerns activities that **challenge** us to push physical or mental boundaries, or which inspire us and **contribute towards personal growth or a better world**.

In addition, it's about **travel arrangements** that encourage us to slow down and relax, enable meetings with other people, **immerse us in nature and culture** and allow us to see **things differently**, whether it's a place or people; these go hand-in-hand with an impactful travel experience. This could involve, back-packing, long boat and train trips, cycling and walking, etc.

PLACE – PEOPLE – DOING

- You can often find a dominant factor in the stories. But we also regularly see that impactful experiences involve multiple elements that all work to reinforce one another: a combination of experiencing a uniquely powerful location, where there are genuine meetings and where activities inspire and challenge.

EMOTION

- An impactful experience goes hand-in-hand with **strong emotions**. Travellers are **overwhelmed, moved and inspired** by the beauty of a location, art and achievements, meetings, an appealing lifestyle, etc. **A sense of connection** is the dominant emotion with travel experiences, where meeting with people (locals, travel companions, other travellers) is central. Within a group of travellers, this makes the relationship more profound. Challenging activities then make people **proud**.
Negative emotions – concern, sadness, anxiety, anger – often come to the fore in relation to a confrontation with issues such as poverty, war and terror, or an unexpected hazardous or negative event. Nevertheless, these negative emotions can have a positive effect thereafter. Conquering difficulties and the lessons people learn from them as a result and the personal growth they experience often lead to the experiences being viewed in a very positive light after the event.
- The expertise that we gain about enriching and profound travel experiences can help **us work on powerful experiences in Flanders in the future**, which move and strike a chord with people: not everyone at the same time, but where and when the moment is right.

IMPACT

- Strong emotions mean that some travel experiences ‘stick’ with people for a very long time. We see that 22% have a story from over 10 years ago. Older people sometimes talk about travel experiences from their youth, more than 40 or 50 years ago. It is worth noting that the majority of **stories have a positive impact** on today. The possible explanation for this is that we love to talk about positive experiences and that we retain these for longer and/or that travel tends to offer positive experiences rather than negative. Just 8% of the experiences are seen as negative today.
- Impactful travel experiences let the traveller see themselves, other people and the world differently. People think differently, gain **new insights, gain more self-awareness and self-confidence**, and feel a **deeper connection with others**. In the listening exercise, people also indicated that travel experiences had impacted upon their **thoughts, feelings** and also behaviour. When these three elements are present (26% of the story-tellers that indicated there was still a significant impact even today), we can talk of a transformational experience, an experience that change peoples’ lives. We can thus conclude that travelling certainly has the **potential to be transformational. Approaching travel/tourism solely from the perspective of its economic importance ignores the power that it has to instil more strength in peoples’ lives**, and ultimately to contribute towards creating a healthier society where people can live together in relationships that better understand each other. From this perspective, it is interesting to gain deeper insights into the **changes that people bring about in their lives** on the basis of impactful travel experiences. Do people make more environmentally-aware choices after a confrontation with waste and the degradation of nature? Are people more hospitable and tolerant in relation to ‘foreigners’? How? Does this impact upon their voting behaviour? And so on. This could provide us with greater insights into the social relevance of travelling.
- What makes an impact on one person may not bother somebody else. Gender or nationality make no significant difference in experiencing an impactful travel experience. What is important is the **person’s personality and the traveller’s ‘baggage’**. Whether you’re young or old, the things you’ve seen in life, whether you’ve travelled a lot or are seeking something out for the first time, how **open** you are to what you may encounter while travelling, how you react to the unexpected, the courage you have to go outside your comfort zone... It all affects the impact of the experience. People often refer to **unexpected events** and coincidence. **These unplanned meetings and events frequently provoke a powerful experience**. This means that you cannot engineer or guarantee an ‘impactful or transformational’ experience. You can only create a few of the circumstances/conditions in which impactful/transformational experiences can take place. It is a **co-creative** process in which the traveller plays an active role. It is also, therefore, very important to know the guest/visitor very well, to examine what the travellers believe to be important, and to know what moves them.

- Often, we are not particularly aware of the impact a journey may have had. By allowing people to tell their stories as part of the listening exercise, and by asking questions, we are ensuring this awareness increases. If you really want to capitalise on the ability of travel to bring about positive change, it is important to encourage people to **share their stories**. Everything that encourages reflection and more mindful travelling – from preparation of the trip, experiencing the moment, and reminiscing thereafter – has a role in determining the impact of the travel experience. It is therefore important to think about how we can facilitate these different phases in the ‘traveller’s journey’. Updating a journal or blog during the trip strengthens the mindfulness of the experience and the ability to reflect. Conversations about travel experiences after the journey, diary notes and photos, a meeting with fellow travellers, books that may be written; these are all reinforcing elements. The phase after the holiday is very important in this context. The journey continues to have an impact when people get home. We allocate significance to experiences gained and create memories. The ‘leaching’ of these experiences into our thoughts and processes after our trips, is a fundamental part of being able to talk in terms of a genuinely impactful or transformational experience. It goes without saying that intense and positive reflections regarding a past holiday will have more significant positive consequences both for repeat visits and word-of-mouth advertising.
- Reflection goes hand-in-hand with having the time to slow down. Time to literally ‘stand still’ and experience events, but also unexpected meetings and profound conversations, and to just ‘go with the flow’. We learn that a travel programme does not have to be crammed full of activities from beginning to end, but must also provide time and space for experiencing the ‘place’. Ideally, it there should be room for peaceful moments and calm, quiet reflection.

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