

Book Review

Garden Tourism, R W Benfield. CABI, Wallingford (2013) 272pp., ISBN 9-781780-641959 £35.00 (paperback)

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Glancing over the preface, I noted the author's claim that "the story of visitors to gardens is a good one" (pvii). As someone who spent the best part of their early research career immersed in the study of garden visiting, I considered this a pertinent observation, and thus approached this text with eagerness. Garden visiting is hugely popular worldwide, yet as a form of attraction that draws millions of visitors throughout the world, the omnipresent garden somehow remains a modest component of experience-driven entities in the attractions sector. As *Garden Tourism* reveals, gardens open to the visiting public are found in every continent, representing an immense range of styles, sizes and tastes to, as Benfield suggests, in the region of 5000 sites (p80). The development and presentation of these gardens are influenced by a complexity of historical, social and cultural antecedents, natural and physical conditions and associations with artists, aristocracy and innovative designers both historic and contemporary. Collectively, gardens form a tourism resource that has universal appeal yet one of limited interest in tourism academic literature. As such, this book is a welcome contribution.

Garden Tourism represents a concerted effort to bring together the disparate elements of study of garden visiting into one neat volume. The book is composed of ten chapters, providing thought-provoking coverage of the major elements of gardens and garden-related tourism, events and management practices. One of the strengths of this book, and something which I have not seen accomplished to the same extent elsewhere, is the attempt to construct a global appraisal of gardens with a focus on geographic distribution and regional distinctiveness within a broad tourism management context. By its nature, many garden studies in the published literature tend to be case study based and therefore geographically specific, so this wider spatial appreciation is of value.

On the whole, the book provides comprehensive coverage, if a little superficially, but overall is a worthy text. The text is full of cases and examples, alongside data and evidence from a wide variety of sources to demonstrate issues and kindle interest. It is encyclopaedic in places, with a great deal of documentation of specific gardens and garden events. One criticism of this book though is that there remains very little academic sense-making of the garden environment. To some extent, the book falls between two stalls in that it is not thoroughly academic in its framing of gardens but it is similarly not quite oriented to the broader public with a more general interest. For example, Chapter 1 establishes the general context of garden tourism and the types of environments where garden visits take place, recognising not just historic houses and botanic gardens but more unusual locations such as hotels, casinos and cemeteries. I found the section on 'What is a Garden?' comprehensive but rather descriptive and limited. The focus on botanic gardens somewhat took away from a deeper exploration and theorisation of gardens.

Chapter 2 presents a valuable potted history of gardens, commendable for its simplicity although perhaps a little too minimal in places. For example, there is no discussion of the changing political context concerning land reform in late 19th and early 20th century Britain, particularly of the Lloyd George administration (1906-1914), and the effect of death duties on country house owners (see

Mandler 1997; Connell 2005). Changes in the tax regime in effect created a new supply of gardens open to the public through bodies such as the National Trust. This would have been a story worth telling. Chapter 3 is full of data of varying age but provides a useful catalogue of activity and some of the material here helps to supplement Chapter 1.

While the international significance of gardens as a cultural and visitor resource could no doubt be the subject of an entire volume, Chapter 4 provides a concise summary, and this global approach is one of the strengths of the book. This chapter admirably raises the profile of gardens in parts of the world less renowned for their gardens by first world audiences, such as sub-saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union. Despite this, Benfield notes the asymmetrical distribution of gardens, with a dominant skew towards North America, Western Europe and East and South-East Asia. The author's keen attention to detail in cataloguing visitor data and other material from reports, from academic studies to newspaper reports serves a useful purpose in illustrating a range of points.

I do wonder to some extent whether the term 'tourism' is always appropriate in the context of this book, given that many garden visits are leisure day or half-day visits, with many made by local residents on a frequent basis. Despite this observation, management issues raised by visitors per se within the physical environment of the garden may make this issue one of greater or lesser significance depending on the nature and type of garden and its positioning as a tourist facility (compare for instance a private garden open to the public for charity once a year or by appointment with an all-year round commercial venture). In the true spirit of garden tourism, discussion of commercially operated garden holiday tours is quite short (pp183-185), although granted there is little in the way of published research on such activity.

The structure of Chapter 5 I find slightly erroneous in that it sets out to explore the multiple roles of gardens alongside the importance of indoor flower festivals, which seems illogical especially given that Chapter 6 focuses on outdoor flower festivals as a discrete entity. Chapter 6 starts with some reference to the hallmark events literature but it is all too brief, and I felt that gardens needed to be more strongly conceptualised within the events literature to make better sense of this perspective. With both Chapters 5 and 6, which are quite descriptive, I am left wondering what implications arise. I could not find any reference to the UK Garden Festival movement which would have provided a valuable conceptual discussion to the role of gardens and regeneration.

Chapter 7 provides a useful framework for the basic issues involved in garden management, and like in previous chapters, there is much data and exemplars to support the narrative that "gardens need to be managed to ensure maximum visitor revenue, numbers and satisfaction" (p141) together with sustainability principles. The mention of garden personalities in Chapter 8 does not make mention of the renaissance of public interest in gardening, visiting gardens and attending garden events, arguably stimulated by TV personalities (see also Chapter 7), the media more generally and garden entrepreneurs. One good example is that of Sir Tim Smit, where the power of the story behind the restoration of Heligan (see Smit 1997), led by a strong media savvy and charismatic entrepreneur, captivated the public and paved the way for the development of the Eden Project, now one of the UK's most visited paid attractions. In my view, the absence of the Lost Gardens of Heligan in this book is an ignominy given its huge international success as a garden tourism destination and a brand.

Perhaps the most compelling parts of this book are the two final chapters. Chapter 9 focuses on the contemporary problems and issues in gardens, among which include theft, vandalism, weather-related impacts and a range of management issues including carrying capacity and community involvement, while Chapter 10 reflects on the future of garden tourism. In a more academic mood, Benfield looks at the issue of contested space in Chapter 9, where 'inappropriate' land uses, segregation of visitors and battles between biodiversity and tourism goals serve to frame the garden as a site of conflict.

Clearly, a book on garden management needs to focus on climate change, a theme that has been embraced by the world's most influential gardening organisations with a significant number of projects and programmes worldwide to assess the impacts and implications for gardens and gardening techniques. I feel this has been somewhat neglected and the section on climate change in Chapter 9 is rather rudimentary, while the related issue of the effects of weather phenomenon (in a more generic sense) are treated in a separate part of the chapter. Chapter 10 is well-conceived, thoughtful and relevant, reflecting on the need for public gardens to evolve and adapt to shifting pressures to assure their viability. Benfield identifies ten trends in garden evolution, relating these to a range of international cases and concluding with some commentary on managing gardens during global recession.

Undeniably, despite some rather descriptive content and superficial coverage, *Garden Tourism* is likely to open up a whole new understanding of the management of gardens within an international context. To some extent, this book sets out to cover a great deal of ground and often leaves the academic reader with more questions. Perhaps this is a positive aspect in that it may stimulate more detailed research, as Benfield purports. What is abundantly clear is that this book is written by a true garden enthusiast, whose broad knowledge and passion shines through the pages. The production values are good, with a very good range of black and white illustrations, some colour plates, and an array of maps, tables and figures that complement the very accessible text, despite a rather unhelpful index and a rather short bibliography given the length of the book.

Garden Tourism is as likely to appeal to the educated garden visitor as much as students engaged in academic studies of garden visiting. Despite this, the book offers a good foundation for students in visitor attraction management and events management seeking insights on the garden environment, as well as those studying landscape architecture or garden management who want to understand more about visitor perspectives.

References

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Smit, T. (1997) *The Lost Gardens of Heligan*. London: Victor Gollancz.