

GHOST TOURS AS A FORM OF ALTERNATIVE TOURISM

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The export of American popular culture on an international scale has made Los Angeles a sort of secular pilgrimage site for tourists looking for a piece of Hollywood. Most tourists are aware of Los Angeles' major landmarks, especially in Hollywood – the Hollywood sign, the Chinese Theater, and the Walk of Fame, to name a few – but not everyone is content with this experience. Participating in a ghost tour is one possible way to experience Los Angeles in an alternative way.

Los Angeles may not be quite as well known for its ghosts as it could be. Some other cities are better known in this respect; like New Orleans – where popular imagery of Voodoo queens and tormented, disembodied souls pervades the air – or Edinburgh – which is fraught with stories of medieval torture, plagues, and ancient mysteries. In these places, there is a greater variety of ghost tours available. Searching “ghost tours Los Angeles” on Google leads to just a few options. According to Richard Carradine, the president of GHOULA, a “social club for Southern Californian ghost-enthusiasts,” Los Angeles could do a better job at promoting its ghosts. “Other than the Queen Mary (and maybe the Roosevelt Hotel), people don't think of LA in terms of ghosts. Let's face it, we could be the number one Ghost destination, if enough people got behind the effort. We don't just have ghosts, we have celebrity ghosts!”¹

The purpose of this paper is to look at ghost tours and their relationship within mainstream tourism. In my research, I began by looking at popular sources – Google searches, guide books about local hauntings, and – perhaps surprisingly – the use of iPhone apps as tools for locating haunted places. Having attended several ghost tours prior to this (in San Francisco, Chicago, London and Edinburgh), I already had a sense of what it is like to attend one, but I was interested in getting a more complete sense of what ghost tours look like to potential tourists who are looking for something beyond the more generally-oriented sightseeing tours. These sources can form a guiding perspective to potential tourists. What remained was the bulk of my research, which consisted of attending additional tours, interviewing tour guides and collecting survey responses from guides and tour attendees.

Based on my interviews with tour guides, survey results, and personal observations, I have found that ghost tours are structured in a similar way to mainstream, sightseeing tours; however, they are intentionally set up to contrast with the mainstream version, providing an alternative experience for tourists. Perhaps because of this approach, ghost tours are often

¹ Quoted from an email exchange

equally popular with locals as well as tourists. As Marilyn Motz ("The Practice of Belief," 1998) said of traditional knowledge, legends can in fact "humanize physical spaces." Locals may associate their day-to-day lives with specific landmarks, forming an entirely personal sense of geography compared to tourists' more simplified, sightseeing perspective. Attending a ghost tour provides an extra layer of meaning for locals, as well as for tourists. Additionally, the presence of locals may have a reflexive effect on tours. Tour guides' knowledge is often founded in books, paranormal investigations (conducted by themselves or by organizations such as the International Society for Paranormal Research), personal experiences, and collected stories. They may interview restaurant employees, security guards, homeowners, and so on, to collect these stories; although, sometimes these stories come from the tour attendees themselves. Locals may share personal experiences during a tour, or relate stories they heard from others, which may be incorporated into later tours.

Ghost tours share traits with mainstream tourism in several important ways. Firstly, by looking at the act of "sightseeing" in tourism, ghost tours feature two types of sites: major landmarks that could be just as well featured in other, more broadly-centered tours (e.g., the Hollywood sign, the Roosevelt Hotel, movie star homes); and sites that are known primarily for their haunted history. To various degrees, ghost tours also engage in material culture – with gift shops, souvenirs, and the pervasiveness of photography and "snapshots." Photography is a form of visual consumption, in which a specific cultural aesthetic is reinforced (MacDonald 2002: 60). As a type of souvenir, snapshots adhere to certain well-known cultural norms. Snapshots of tourists participating in a ghost tour may well resemble a separate image of tourists posed beneath the Eiffel Tower; smiling, gesturing, performing faux surprise or silliness – these expressions are expected in either kind. Among many things, snapshots represent "indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had" (Sontag 1977: 9). Additionally, collecting snapshots "fills the same need for the cosmopolitans accumulating photograph-trophies of their boat trip up the Albert Nile or their fourteen days in China as it does for lower-middle-class vacationers taking snapshots of the Eiffel Tower or Niagara Falls" (Sontag 1977: 9).

The search for authenticity is just as much a concern in ghost tours as it is in mainstream tourism. Just as general sightseers may occasionally wander off the beaten path in search of an "authentic" French café or a gritty, local hangout, tourists who attend ghost tours may be in search of a more "authentic" experience in ghost tours. The alternative quality and the mere mention of being "off the beaten path" automatically lends to a sense of being more "authentic" in ghost tours. Furthermore, the immersive quality of ghost tours – the experience of being a part of something, being taken in through the art of storytelling and the possibility of experiencing a real haunting – gives attendees a sense of an embodied experience. Attendees are expected to participate; not only as tourists, but as active participants in a dramatic experience – through reactions and other types of feedback expected by tour guides.

Escapism is an idea that appears to be widely synonymous with tourism. This idea is consistent with Victor Turner's idea of release in pilgrimage, in which "the pilgrim seeks temporary release from the structures that normally bind him" (Turner 1995, p. 9). Escapism implies searching for something that is out of the ordinary, mundane sense of routine and familiarity. This is true of tourism to a varied extent. For some tourists, familiarity is necessary for comfort. This could mean access to basic things, like a similar standard of hygiene, similar social expectations, or the availability of medical assistance. Or for some others, the greater the distance from their ordinary lives, the better.

In 18th and 19th century Britain, one form of escapism included a tour of the Scottish highlands (Inglis & Holmes, 2003). Because of its proximity and relative cultural similarity to England, Scotland was a convenient escape from what was then perceived to be an increasingly staid, Industrial-scientific version of reality. "The popularity of Celtic-inspired tales in England at this time was part of a general Romantic reaction against the rationalist modes of thought associated with the intellectual project of Enlightenment" (Inglis & Holmes, 2003). Romantic images of Scotland filtered into English consciousness through popular literature; Sir Walter Scott was particularly influential in this respect. Literary tours based on Scott's stories became a popular style of travel then, just as movie-based tours today have become in Los Angeles and other major cities. Images of Scotland's romantic past have filtered into present-day consciousness, but in a different way. In the 18th and 19th centuries, tourism was primarily focused on rural places. In the present, Scottish tourism is focused in urban centers (Inglis & Holmes, 2003).

Ghost tours can be seen as a type of "heritagization," in which cultural resources are converted into products for consumption (Inglis & Holmes, 2003). For example, Scottish ghost tours represent a type of the heritagization of a mystical, romanticized view of Scottish history. The assumed presence of ghosts asserts a connection to the archaic past, and by extension, implies authenticity. Ghost stories were included in guidebooks and tours of castles and regal country estates during the 18th and 19th century, but they were never the primary focus of the tour until the 20th century (Inglis & Holmes, 2003). In Edinburgh today, several ghost tours operate along the Royal Mile.

During my own visit to Edinburgh, I attended one tour in which a costumed guide told stories about the city's grisly past (this included stories of witch trials, torture, plague, and – perhaps equally frightening – ghastly, medieval hygiene!). We stood alongside various landmarks on the Royal Mile and other places nearby, viewed an exhibit on torture (including such little gems as a finger-smashing device), and walked along a stretch of some underground corridors that had until recently been closed off for centuries. While underground, our guide told us stories about the merchants who used various adjoining rooms for storage, the poor who sought shelter there, a present-day Wiccan coven that was occupying a room (where we glimpsed candles, colorful fabrics, and a large pentagram), and the poltergeist that still haunted the room at the very end. The last room contained a circle

of stones, which we were warned not to enter (but we were dared to anyway – no one tried it, incidentally). With the lights off and the story reaching a frightening climax, we were suddenly “attacked” when another tour guide rushed into the room and touched several tourists – causing them to scream and set off a chain-reaction of fright among the others. After the tour, we were led upstairs and into a pub. We were given coupons for a free drink, and some of us (including myself) stayed behind to enjoy a drink and socialize.

INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS

Over the course of this project, I interviewed four sources connected with ghost tours and three members of a ghost-hunting organization. Additionally, I received survey responses from ghost tour participants. This survey was initially limited to the Los Angeles region; however, because this did not elicit any responses, I revised the survey and presented it for participants of ghost tours in any region – resulting in 36 responses.

I. GHOST TOUR PARTICIPANTS

This survey was created through Survey Monkey, with the objective of obtaining an understanding about others who have attended ghost tours, to assess their impressions and get a sense of their various backgrounds of belief. I posted links to the surveys on several travel forums (Lonely Planet, City-Data, Yahoo!, Travelers Point, Frommers, Yelp, Fodor’s Travel Talk, Outdoors Adventure, and Trip Advisor), regional Craigslist pages (Los Angeles, New York City, Boston, San Francisco, Savannah, Chicago, Philadelphia, London, and Edinburgh), and a paranormal-themed forum (Ghost 2 Ghost). I avoided posting my survey on more paranormal forums because I hoped to get responses from people with more general, touristic interests. I chose those particular cities on Craigslist for a few reasons: 1) to include cities with large populations (New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago are the largest in the US); because I couldn’t post on every city (each ad had to be worded a little differently, as Craigslist prohibits similar posts; plus, there are currently more than 700, about a third of which are in the US), I chose to be a little subjective here, favoring cities where I have attended ghost tours myself and have heard mentioned as destination cities for ghost tours (there are several ghost-themed iPhone travel apps for New Orleans and Savannah; top Google results for “ghost tour” also guided my choices).

1. What ghost tour(s) did you attend, and how did you find out about it/them?

Of 36 replies, only 28 indicated sources where they had first heard of the ghost tour(s) they attended. Different sources include: online (10, or 35.7%), guidebooks (1, or 3.5%), friends or family (6, or 21.4%), a hotel employee (3, or 10.7%), TV (1, or 3.5%; this respondent also read about the tour online), newspaper (3, or 10.7%), radio (1, or 3.5%), and printed, promotional materials (4, or 14.2%; this included posters and brochures).

Three respondents to this survey had not actually attended guided tours; these included a self-guided tour (they simply searched “haunted places in San Jose” on Google), a paranormal investigation, and an actor who has played the part of a ghost during a tour. Five others did not indicate where they first heard about their tour(s).

Places of tours attended include:

Savannah, GA (five total); Edinburgh, Scotland; Chicago, IL (three total); Boston, MA (four total); San Jose, CA (self-guided); New York City, NY; Seattle, WA; San Diego, CA; New Orleans, LA; Moundsville, WV; Key West, FL; Williamsburg, VA (three total); St. Augustine, FL; Providence, RI; Newport, RI; Plymouth, MA (two total); Concord, MA; Salem, MA; Paris, France; Gettysburg, PA; Estes Park, CO; Bath, England; Philadelphia, PA; Charleston, SC; Port Arthur, Tasmania; Sydney, Australia; Long Beach, CA; San Francisco, CA; Ireland (city not stated); Bennington, VT; Geneva, IL; Alexandria, VA; London, England; and New Hope, PA.

A majority of respondents attended only one tour, although five had attended two or three tours; two had attended more than three (6 and 10 tours).

2. Please describe your background in terms of your beliefs (supernatural phenomena, religion, skepticism, etc.).

I purposely worded this question fairly openly; I hoped to elicit some broad responses. The question of “belief” can be a complex one, and I could not assume at that point that belief in ghosts is even a necessary link to ghost tours, as I would say of any particular spiritual/religious choice. Accordingly, I received a variety of interesting replies, although almost all respondents mentioned belief/disbelief in ghosts and/or religious backgrounds.

Regarding belief in ghosts:

- Only seven respondents stated that they did not believe in ghosts (19%).
- Fourteen stated that they definitely believe in ghosts (38%).
- Eight others said that they’re unsure, but open to the idea (22.2%).

Regarding religion:

- Eighteen described a religious background, almost all of which (14, or 77.7%) were a version of Christianity. It was also interesting to note that of this group, exactly half were Catholic. Of other religions, one was Wiccan and two did not state a particular religious preference.
- Among religious individuals, eight (57.%) expressed a belief in ghosts.
- Also within this group, five (27.7%) declared a disbelief in the existence of ghosts.

Four respondents (11.1%) identified themselves as skeptics, although this in itself does not infer a sense of belief or disbelief (among this group, only one stated disbelief, and another described an open-minded approach to the supernatural).

3. Have you had any supernatural experiences? Please explain.

With regard to supernatural experiences, there was a nearly even divide among those who said they had experienced something (18, or 50%) and those that had not (17, or 47.2%).

Considering that the results for belief in ghosts were so varied, I was surprised to find this, especially as some of some affirmative responses came from those who had earlier claimed to have no belief in ghosts. However, many took this question to include any kind of unexplainable circumstance, which does not necessarily conflict with statements of disbelief.

4. If the ghost tour was in your home town, please describe your background as a local:

- a. Where did you grow up?
- b. Which places have a particular significance to you as a resident?
- c. Would you visit the places included in the tour under different circumstances?

More respondents skipped this question than any other; however, as the question's phrasing implies that responses are dependent on ghost tours being in one's home town, it may be safe to assume that all or most of those who skipped this question did so because it didn't apply to their experience. With that assumption in mind, the numbers change. A full count results in 33.3% having taken the tour in their hometown (12; otherwise 46.1%) and 53.8% having taken the tour away from home (14; otherwise 53.6%). A few respondents indicated that they would visit the places included in the tour under different circumstances.

5. What makes a place ideal for tourism?

Most responses here mentioned a sense of escapism, history, and culture; food was often mentioned, as was the importance of tourist destinations having a wide variety of the above (as well as a number of other practical concerns – convenient placement, inexpensiveness, etc.).

6. What tours have you experienced before? This includes general (sightseeing, art history, etc.) and supernatural.

Most respondents have attended numerous other guided tours that were not supernaturally-themed. Some examples include general sightseeing, historical walking tours, architecture tours, nature tours, and museum tours; results seemed to encompass a wide variety, with

some emphasis on sightseeing and history. A minority (5, or 15.1%) said that they generally prefer a non-structured approach to sightseeing during travel.

7. Have you visited supernatural/haunted places before? Please explain.

More than half (18, or 52.9%) of respondents said they had visited supernatural or haunted places outside of tours, either with the intention of seeking a supernatural experience or with full knowledge of the place's reputation.

8. Please describe your impressions of the tour(s) you attended.

- a. What did you expect? How did the outcome compare?
- b. Did you experience anything you would consider supernatural?
- c. Would you consider going on similar tours? In other cities?

The survey showed that a positive experience is generally not dependent on actual supernatural/paranormal experiences occurring during the tour. Rather, the key to a good tour is a balance of entertaining stories and historical context, with some elements of sightseeing. Interestingly, the respondent who had attended the most tours was a self-described skeptic. In this person's own words, "A guide who knows the history of the area and is also a great storyteller is the most important thing on a good ghost tour."

Respondents who expressed disappointment in tours generally had the following reasons: 1) they had hoped for a supernatural experience to occur during the tour; 2) the tour was too cheesy; 3) the tour was too expensive; or 4) the guide was not entertaining enough.

As with most experiences, impressions of a single tour can vary; for instance, for some respondents, a tour's main appeal can be the very thing that repelled others – cheesiness, for example. Also, for someone attending a tour with the primary goal of coming face-to-face with a ghost, the best example of storytelling might not be enough to inspire more tour-going.

II. GHOST TOUR PROFESSIONALS

For the purpose of this project, I attended three tours – the Hollywood Forever Cemetery tour, Haunted Hollywood, and a tour through the Comedy Store in Hollywood (led by the guide from Haunted Hollywood). These tours were led by Karie Bible and Brian Sapir, respectively, whom I interviewed on separate occasions. I also interviewed Michael Kouri, who leads ghost tours through multiple regions (especially Pasadena), and Alf LaMont, who was responsible for a Halloween ghost tour through the Comedy Store, where he is currently vice-president of marketing and development. All the interviews consisted of the same twenty questions. Each interviewee provided me with a wealth of information, the highlights of which I will present below in profiles and in summary.

BRIAN SAPIR (HAUNTED HOLLYWOOD TOURS)

After attending Brian Sapis's Haunted Hollywood Tour and his tour of the Comedy Store in Hollywood, I had gained a strong impression of his preferred tour style. After the second tour, I interviewed him from the Comedy Store's basement, where evidence of the Store's previous incarnation was scattered. About forty years ago, the Store was Ciro's, a popular nightclub frequented by celebrities like Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr.; it was notorious for its mafia connections – setting the stage for many of the ghost stories associated with the Store.

Brian's tour groups are mainly comprised of tourists, most of whom choose his tour because they want to experience something other than a "typical" tour. A majority are women in their 20s, and many have come from places as far as Australia and the UK. He attributes the fact that more are female to his belief that women have a stronger psychic connection than men. They may be seeking to experience something supernatural, and Brian says that about a third have claimed to have had some kind of supernatural experience in the past. Occasionally, he gets "partygoers" on his tour, who might merely be seeking something random to do on a given Saturday night.

Coming from an unreligious mother and a father who followed the Baha'i faith, Brian doesn't identify himself with one particular spiritual background, but he does believe in the existence of unexplainable phenomena and spiritual energy. His first supernatural experience occurred when he was very young, and he spotted a ghost in a mirror. He doesn't think that ghosts can attack – but he believes that they can move objects, and to some extent, possess people (in subtle ways).

Before guiding the Haunted Hollywood Tour, Brian had existing ties with Starline tours through his family. Because of his interests in supernatural phenomena and his connection to the ISPR, Brian was invited to guide the tour, which was not popular at the time.

Born and raised in West Hollywood, Brian has a long-standing personal connection with the areas featured in his tours. He believes that tourists want to feel connected to the things they are familiar with – that they deliberately seek experiences inspired by things they have seen on television and in movies.

When asked about his tour's relationship with the tourism industry in Los Angeles, he conveyed a sense of the competitive nature of tourism. He described ghost tours as a "new genre" and reflective of the evolving industry. Brian says that tourists are constantly looking for different things to do; people are seeking a greater level of intimacy (as opposed to larger, impersonal tour groups) and opportunities for interaction. Depending on the time of year, maintaining a tour company can be more difficult; during the summer, for example, business

practically “takes care of itself”; it’s especially during the colder months when it becomes necessary to build on “niche” tours. It takes more creativity and drive to keep busy during this season, and as Brian described it, you can have ten great ideas and only one will work.

Brian has not visited other tours like his own, excepting the more theatrical version of a ghost tour that exists onboard the Queen Mary in Long Beach. He has expressed a willingness to attend others, but says that he hasn’t had the time. He generally avoids tours when he gets the chance to travel – he prefers to explore on his own.

Brian’s tours are created based on “popular demand,” although he only asks for requests toward the end of the tour. Many people are already familiar with the more notorious sites, and they would ask for them by request. He considers that places are more haunted based on several variables, including the severity of violence that may have occurred at a site, the number of people that died there, and the unsolved nature of a death. Also, the presence of a physical connection with the past – whether bones or objects once connected to a dead person – can lead to a place being more haunted than another. He first became aware of the sites featured in the tours mostly through the ISPR, but also through books and talking to people – “ordinary people who work in places that are haunted,” including security guards and park rangers. Places he generally avoids in his tours include unsafe neighborhoods, cemeteries (excepting the Westwood Memorial Park; Marilyn Monroe’s grave is a popular request), and certain movie star homes (because of residents’ complaints).

He hopes that people gain a sense of connection through reflection upon their own mortality during his tours, and that they take away historical knowledge about the places they visit. People who are “more proactive” and take the initiative to participate during the tour stand to gain more. An unsuccessful tour is reflected in attendees not engaging, being “there for all the wrong reasons,” but he would mainly attribute an unsuccessful tour to the guide. According to Brian, “The best tour guide is one that does every tour like if it was their first tour – and their last.”

ALF LAMONT (HAUNTED MIDNIGHTS AT THE COMEDY STORE)

Alf LaMont’s professional connection to ghost tours is primarily limited to the Halloween season, when he organizes the Haunted Midnights event at the Comedy Store. He summarized his beliefs as follows: “I was raised Catholic; I am now an atheist. I do not believe in an afterlife, I do not believe in ghosts, I do not believe in the Loch Ness Monster. I believe in the power of suggestion. I believe in our desire to see things that do not exist to prove that we are special somehow, that we’re not as blatantly carbon-based and mortal as we are... I have seen things that I personally could not explain, but I owe those to the power of suggestion and my desire to add human features to things that I couldn’t readily explain away.”

Alf says that the Comedy Store is an ideal place to look for a “haunted” experience because of the building’s “scary” atmosphere, old age (here, physical defects such as bad wiring can mimic a supernatural effect), proximity to the hills (wild animals may wander in and simulate mysterious footsteps and unexplained shadows) and violent history. He says that during the Comedy Store’s forty-year history, many extraordinary stories have been collected, adding to a “solid mythology” of ghost stories that have been used in tours of the Store. He also emphasizes that some of these stories can only be traced as far as the Comedy Store’s existence.

He has personally attended a ghost tour in London and said that he enjoyed it for its ability to entertain: “Usually you get in a van and you make stops; say, ‘this is where that horrible thing happened,’ and people say that once in a while something is seen here. And it’s usually pretty vague. It piques our interest because especially if there’s some sort of gory story it adds to... You know, it’s fun, it’s exciting. It creates that electricity that there’s something beyond our immediate reality and it’s something that we might be able to touch.”

He admits that he had an early fascination with ghosts, but had changed his mind about their existence after failing to experience any proof: “As a little kid, I wanted desperately to believe. I mean, I lost sleep; I would read ghost books and I would really freak myself out into thinking that it was imminent – that something’s going to present itself to me. And my desire to see that and be a part of that eventually turned into a real disappointment in the sense that I didn’t want to accept ‘Oh, what was that?’ as being a haunting or a ghost. I wanted to see something tangible, something real. I’ve always been like that. You’re not going to convince me with just a shadow walking across the main room.”

Alf has found himself affected by ghost stories especially when he finds himself in a more suggestible state, which he has experienced multiple times in the Comedy Store. For instance, this year’s Haunted Midnights included dramatic music, a pre-tour magic show, and a great deal of scary storytelling. He believes that these factors worked with his imagination to produce a temporary suspension of disbelief.

As opposed to ghost hunting, in which Alf feels there is a “sense of desperation” to find something, ghost tours are all about a sense of showmanship: “In haunted tours, there’s a real sense of spectacle, of the presentation of storytelling that helps aid you in being a part of that. And that’s really what’s important. You feel like you’re privy to information that nobody possesses – something magical. You’re Harry Potter and you’ve been chosen to be in Hogwarts. And so you’re taking this tour – and you’re part of Hogwarts!”

Regarding others’ beliefs in ghosts, Alf had a more dismal view: “It’s a little bit terrifying to see how much people are really putting into the idea of hauntings and ghosts. It shows a trend of escapism and easy answers to things that we should be over. And it shows that times

are difficult and that it is desperate, and I think I find it disconcerting that that's where we chose to go when things get hard, rather than buckling up and moving forward, and saying 'Okay, there's no proof... let's just put that in the background.' I personally find that tragic."

MICHAEL KOURI (ICGHOSTS.COM)

I interviewed Michael Kouri at Fortune Chinese Cuisine, a restaurant in Pasadena. Prior to meeting with him, Michael told me that he often includes the restaurant in his tours, both as a haunted place of interest and a place for reasonably priced, gourmet Chinese food. Michael says that he is the only psychic medium who conducts his own tour – and can confirm it because he made up the title himself.

During our conversation, I got a definite impression that he contrasts his tours with others that appear to be more "touristy" – that is, less personal, less in-depth, and more removed from their physical locations (i.e., in a bus). He mentioned the Haunted Hollywood Tour, because of its connection with Starline Tours, as an example (note: Michael has led his own tours through Hollywood as well). Although I have personally attended the Haunted Hollywood Tour and can attest that its format was not without some interaction (also, it was in a vintage Cadillac, not in a Starline bus), there is a definite difference between these two tours.

As was the case with Brian Sapir's tour, Hollywood was ever present in my interview with Michael. Another professional interest of his has been selling antiques and vintage items once featured in films and movies. Many of these items have been sold for the celebrities that wore them on screen, with whom Michael says he has developed continuing relationships. His interview was punctuated by a long list of A and B-listers from the film industry, many of whom have attended his tours and/or used his services as a professional psychic. Furthermore, Michael's career has a direct relationship with mainstream media, having appeared on a number of television and radio shows. He has also published a number of books about various regions, in which he shares his research on local history and hauntings. Michael's business also extends into lectures, séance sessions, and as of March 2010, a "seminar-at-sea" featuring lectures, séances, and a "real Haunted House Investigation in the historic Mazatlan."

Michael characterized participants of his tours as mostly female, of various ages – although all participants of his evening tours have been at least eighteen years old. He believes that most of his guests are women because they are generally more interested in the "romance" of ghost stories, based on the kinds of questions that they ask during tours. His guests have come from all over the world, and he says he has hosted a number of famous personalities over the eight years of his tours' existence, most of whom heard of him because of his

appearances on television and radio. At the beginning of tours, he asks participants questions that influence kinds of stories shared during the tour. His primary tour locations have been in Pasadena, Orange County, Alcatraz, and Gettysburg; furthermore, he has made a point to guide tours in whatever location he happens to be visiting, allowing a great deal of flexibility. Michael limits the types of locations featured within tours based on whether or not he considers the spiritual activity to be benign, in addition to basic practical concerns.

Michael's first influential experience with the supernatural occurred at age 21, when the ghost of a Catholic nun appeared to him in his parents' house. The ghost told him that he was going to accomplish great things in his life, but that he was also going to experience a tragedy. Weeks later, he was hit by a car; he recovered from the incident, but after that experience he began to see colors around people and other living things. Michael had been seeing other unexplainable figures appear during church services while growing up, but it wasn't until this pivotal moment that he believed they were ghosts. He has a background in opera singing and as a performer, which he feels has lent well to his ability to tell ghost stories; this, and his ability to see ghosts, are possibly the single most important selling points for his tours. His tours incorporate not only the ghosts' stories, his own first-hand accounts of contact with the supernatural as well. Michael describes his present experiences with guests during tours. "I'm like a ghost magnet; and when people take pictures with me, sometimes they'll get impressions of spirits in between us, or behind me, behind them, or next to them – it's very, very interesting when that happens."

History has been a top interest for Michael over the years, in several respects. His curiosity began at an early age, starting with his mother's collection of antique dolls. More significantly, Michael worked as a docent at the Doctors House in Glendale for many years, where he also played a role in researching and purchasing antiques for the house. This presently fits into his own business selling antiques and celebrity memorabilia, as well as his research for haunted history books and ghost tours. "All these things go hand-in-hand; even the ghosts fit into that – they're a part of history. And the memories of their lives are all a part of history, too." Furthermore, he recognized the necessary physical connection of the past to current hauntings, which may come from any kind of object connected to a ghost. In this respect, having a complete historical perspective is necessary for the ghost's story to be completed. As Michael said, "You need the history to help substantiate the possibility of why a place is haunted."

KARIE BIBLE (HOLLYWOOD FOREVER CEMETERY TOUR)

Although Karie Bible's cemetery tour did not contain ghost stories, my initial impression was that her tour attracts a similar type of audience. I interviewed her some time later, and found that my impression was true. Of course the obvious connection is that her tours have a macabre appeal – being in a cemetery, it simply can't be avoided. As I have found

repeatedly true of ghost stories, history plays a significant role in her tours. Her tours are primarily history tours, and the headstones are each a sort of “talking point” for sharing stories about classic movie history and the complicated lives (and deaths) that were a part of it. Equally significant – and less obvious – is the tour’s connection to Dearly Departed Tours, a ghost tour company. Karie has often referred her tour participants to this tour, and their attendees have come to Hollywood Forever for a tour as well.

INTERVIEW CONCLUSIONS

I found several main commonalities during each interview, mainly including 1) a sense of showmanship; 2) a strong interest in history; 3) an understanding that the ultimate goal in their tours is entertainment; 4) an overarching theme of paranormal/supernatural stories (other individual themes – like a “crime tour” or a “murder tour” were not regularly scheduled); 5) an emphasis on specific childhood experiences having a dramatic effect on their beliefs/career choices; and 6) tour guests’ reflexive effect on tours.

Each interviewee conveyed a sense of showmanship, to some degree. Costumes are the most prominent display of showmanship, and while some guides choose not to wear them, each had a strong opinion on the matter. For instance, Michael Kouri emphasized a refusal to wear costumes, despite being requested to on multiple occasions. Brian Sapir only occasionally wears part of a costume – mainly either a hat or a cape – and while it was his opinion that wearing a full costume would direct tour participants’ attention away from the stories (and more so upon himself), he expressed an awareness of costumes’ effectiveness as a marketing tool. (The car he uses to transport guests in, however, could be interpreted as an example of showmanship; its distinctly vintage look combined with paintings of Frankenstein, the Wolfman, and John Wayne, stirred up a lot of attention during the tour.) Karie Bible, by contrast, always conducts tours while in full Victorian or vintage (1920s-1960s) costumes. She said that her costume is an effective addition to her storytelling approach, as a way of “bringing history to life.” While this applied the least to Alf LaMont, he expressed that having a sense of showmanship may be the most important aspect of ghost tours.

III. GHOST HUNTERS

The public image of ghost hunters is synonymous with popular television shows, such as TAPS, Ghost Hunters, SyFy Investigates, Scariest Places on Earth, and Most Haunted, and their popularity may even account for some tourists’ initial interest. Amateur ghost hunting groups explore haunted places in ways the average tourist would not be able to. They form alternative experiences around well-known and obscure locations and perform time-consuming investigations not for profit, but as a public service and for their own edification.

GHOST HUNT AT THE COLORADO STREET BRIDGE

I participated in a ghost hunt with three members of Ghost Study Los Angeles. We visited the Colorado Street Bridge in Pasadena, where apparently hundreds of suicides have taken place over the bridge's 97-year history (although about 150 suicides have been reported, many more are rumored to have taken place – possibly as many as 500).

Three of my friends agreed to come with me, and we arranged to meet the Ghost Study group at 9 PM, near the east end of the bridge. After some confusion about the meeting spot (after driving around in a loop, we got there about 25 minutes past nine), we met the group by their shared car, a black SUV. We met with Bobby (the group leader and honorary historian), Paul and Yvonne.

Our first objective was to cross the top of the bridge until we reached its highest point, at the center. As we walked, Bobby explained some things about the bridge. He told me about the estimated number of jumpers, the period in which it was built, the time period that the bars were added (in the 1980s, metal bars were added above the concrete barriers, possibly to dissuade would-be jumpers; the existing barriers were only about four feet high), and a little about how to find unusual photos (they tend to be near the center of the bridge). He also pointed out a place where footprints were visible on the outer ledge (I took pictures). As we stood by the center, the three of them answered my questions and described the history of their group and their involvement.

Bobby founded the group several years ago, and though the other two had been a part of other ghost hunting groups before, they didn't "jell" as well with those other groups as they have been able to in this group. Paul explained that the other groups didn't seem as passionate about ghost hunting as this group has been, that there hadn't been the same amount of constant involvement in investigations. Also, according to Yvonne, some groups seem to be more interested in the excitement of ghost hunting rather than finding results. She emphasized that what they are really passionate about is finding truth, and of finding answers to larger questions (about the afterlife, presumably).

The Ghost Study of Los Angeles group's members participate in investigations throughout the Los Angeles area, as well as outlying cities (they recently did one in San Diego, which took more planning because of arranging accommodations and so forth). Sometimes they coordinate with other groups to complete investigations.

One point that Paul brought up that I thought was particularly interesting was the difficulty ghost hunters have with being perceived separately from thrill-seekers. He contrasted their work with the teenagers that break into places and perform rituals for excitement and prestige among friends; he said that practices like these make their own activities appear

suspicious to police and outsiders. As a rule, they always seek permission for access to private properties; also they don't perform "rituals" of any kind. According to Yvonne, people are careless when they do this – "they don't know what they'll bring back!"

After taking some pictures on the top of the bridge, we followed Bobby and his group and re-parked our cars a short distance from a park area beneath the bridge. The surrounding area is mostly residential, though we parked next to an army reserve building.

Bobby explained a little about the park's history as we walked. The stream that now flows through the park used to be much fuller before it was dammed, many decades ago. The stream was full of boats and the park was vibrant with activity. In the 1920s, stone terraces were built into the sides, and people would have picnics on them. The stones remain, although it's been many decades since they were maintained. The stone walls are overgrown and crumbling now, though they are still numerous. The area where we walked (we primarily stayed on the wide dirt path beneath the bridge) has been where most of the jumpers have met their tragic end. Bobby also told me about a jumper who went over the edge with her baby – she died, but the baby survived, getting caught in a tree.

Bobby also showed me some of his equipment. He always uses a "Zoom" recorder, the same device musicians use to record demos. It's most useful because it is extremely sensitive; though we were well below traffic, I could hear every car with it. I could also hear insects, leaves, wind, airplanes, whispers, and so forth – which is why the ghost hunters are careful to take note of each of their own noises when using it. Paul told me that he uses spoken notes during recordings to keep track of every sound they produce themselves during an investigation, especially when indoors. Paul showed me his and Yvonne's EMF testers; Paul's serves a dual purpose – in addition to recording electromagnetic changes, it shows the temperature. He explained that these readers are important not only in detecting the unusual, but in establishing what is normal for an area. Many things can produce high levels on these devices – phones, old wiring, etc. – and they make a point to take measurements throughout a location before looking for supernatural activity.

Once norms are determined, ghost hunters use "triggers" to provoke level spikes on their equipment. They may directly ask the ghost to change the temperature, or they may ask provocative questions or use items that could bring about a reaction. At the beginning of an investigation the ghost hunters would research the location, using property records and other historic documents to form a framework on which the rest of the investigation will depend. This will determine the sorts of questions they will ask, or the trigger items they will use. For example, if the place was once an active spot for children or if many child ghosts had been reported at a place (as was the case with the Colorado St. Bridge, surprisingly enough), they would bring things like toys and candy.

For the next two hours, we mostly stayed near the base of the bridge. Bobby told me about the voices that had been recorded during previous excursions (there have been about a dozen trips in total). For example, on the path on the way down, he once heard someone say “red” very distinctly. Another time, the group heard a voice say Yvonne’s name, quite loudly. After ruling out each other, they checked the recording and heard an unfamiliar voice. Most of their recorded activities were found below the lowest arch of the bridge. Bobby said that this wasn’t because there was actually more activity there than anywhere else; it’s because sound is better recorded there. I stood there myself with the headphones on, and it was in fact quieter there.

Ghost hunting is very time consuming. In addition to completing their own daily chores, errands, and day jobs, the Ghost Study group spend a lot of time doing research, interviewing clients (they do this for free), investigating sites, and poring over hours of recordings and making comparisons. The whole process can take days. When I asked what they thought about popular ghost hunting TV shows, the three of them all agreed that these shows leave out all the boring, time-consuming parts that happen off-camera. While the shows may generate interest for some people with a legitimate passion for the field, they also attract people with lesser, passing interests to go on ghost tours or go on one or two ghost hunts before quitting. Yvonne also pointed out that these shows often cast handsome men into the lead roles, like other popular shows would; she says that women are the primary audience. When I asked whether they thought the shows’ producers off-camera were in any way enhancing the levels of excitement, they all agreed that this was definitely the case.

Despite the group’s numerous excursions over the years (and countless hours of recordings), positive results are rare. According to Paul, most of their work actually results in debunking stories of supernatural activity. They spend a lot of time doing background work and tracing the origins of supposed unusual activity, so that when they find something they cannot explain, it appears genuine. One key statement was when Yvonne said they’re working to find proof to something they already know.

CONCLUSIONS

I found that the presence of a historic perspective plays an important role in ghost tours, in several ways. Quite often, ghost tour guides, ghost hunters, and paranormal organizations are aligned with historical societies. Guides have also expressed an interest in history, rooted in their formative years. A historic background is considered crucial to paranormal investigations. The research and use of historic narratives gives a face to haunted happenings; alternatively, it can serve to debunk some reported hauntings (e.g., older buildings have faulty wiring, creaking walls, etc.). History is also an important part of storytelling, contributing to hauntings' narratives. Also, historically-inspired costumes may be said to add to tours' immersive quality. By extension, tour participants are becoming a part of the sites' history; their experiences during the tour give them an embodied sense of history, especially when they have their own stories to add to the tour. In addition to other aspects shared with mainstream tourism, such as sightseeing, escapism and entertainment value, ghost tour participants are interested in the presentation of historical information during tours. Ghost hunters share common interests with ghost tour guides and participants, but they encounter potentially haunted places in an alternative way, emphasizing freedom of space, in-depth information, and a sense of community among fellow group-members.

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