

## **The backpacker's guide to the prison: (In)formalizing prison boundaries in Latin America**

Jennifer Fleetwood and Jennifer Turner (University of Leicester)

Ordinarily the vast majority of visitors to prisons across the world consist of prisoners' friends and family, legal advisors and social workers. However, during the 1990s and 2000s prisons in Latin America admitted a large number of backpacker prison tourists under the guise of visiting fellow westerners imprisoned for drug trafficking. This chapter examines this novel form of penal tourism in Garcia Moreno prison in Quito Ecuador. Unlike most penal tourist sites such as the historic prisons of Alcatraz and Robbin Island, Garcia Morena was a working prison. Tourism was not facilitated officially, but was an informal, uncommodified practice established and continued by inmates. In this chapter we take this unique example of backpacker prison visiting, which disrupts conventional notions of penal tourism that typically take place in closed, disused former prison spaces, offering new insights into penal tourist experiences.

The chapter draws on two sources of data: textual analysis of big data sources (consisting of backpackers' accounts of prison-visiting posted on website blogs) and an extended period of ethnographic research conducted by Fleetwood. We first contextualize our argument by reviewing the recent literature on penal tourism, before offering a brief account of our methodology. In the sections to follow, our analysis describes penal tourism in Garcia Moreno prison paying special attention to boundary crossings that occur as tourists enter the prison and those that happen once inside prison. Accordingly, we describe the complex negotiation of the prison boundary

which produces novel forms of 'inside' and 'outside' space that challenge conventional notions of prison boundary management.

### **Literature review**

As part of an ever-diversifying tourist landscape, penal visitor attractions such as former-prison museums and hotels are growing in popularity and recent scholarship has attended to the variety of ways in which individuals participate in 'penal tourism'. Strange and Kempa (2003) illustrate the prominent examples of Alcatraz in the United States and Robben Island in South Africa that now serve as museums and heritage sites. Similarly, Welch and Macuare (2011) note the Argentine Penitentiary Museum in Buenos Aires, which operated as a prison until 1947. In Australia, Wilson offers an in depth examination of decommissioned prisons as sites of dark tourism (2008). Ontario, Canada has used its penal history to the great advantage of its tourism economy (Walby and Piché 2011). Similarly, a variety of sites exists across the UK which have attracted academic attention (see Turner 2016; Turner and Peters 2015a, 2015b).

There are two noteworthy omissions from current discussions. First, visitor experiences tend to prioritize engagement with a historical 'site'. Material cues are taken from the remnants of former-prisons where exhibitions draw attention to significant architectural features or artefacts reclaimed and put on display. Equally, performances of tour-guides or costumed interpreters take influence from their material surroundings to bring to life the characters they may be portraying (Turner and Peters 2015a). Naturally this is a practical limitation. Prisons are generally fiercely regulated spaces, usually premised on a strict regulation of traffic between inside and outside. The processes by which many of these museums and hotels come

into being is often situated within the wider economic climate of the penal system. Many prison buildings rendered obsolete and unfit for purpose, owing to their architectural degradation and the cost of maintenance, are sold to private investors. In this case, there has been a trend towards the transformation of these decommissioned buildings (many marked as heritage sites) for alternative purposes such as hotels and museums (Morin and Moran 2015). Subsequently the ‘natural’ order of prison tourism is via the consumption of a curated space, dwelling on the material remains of the former-prison site.

Research has attended to occasions where individuals visit working prisons, nonetheless, tourism is not the primary purpose. In the case of The Clink – a charity that has opened working restaurants inside the walls of UK prisons - the restaurants downplay the spectacle of the prison architecture and the presence ‘within prison’ (see Turner 2016). Although currently-serving prisoners work as chefs and waiters, these enterprises are reframed as rehabilitation programmes in which visitors are encouraged to become regular diners, enjoying high-quality food, rather than one-off tourists. Indeed for the most part, invitations are extended to, for example, individuals and groups from charities or restaurant owners who might speculate upon employment of prisoners upon release. [Additionally, there is much vigorous concerning so-called pedagogical and research tours of operational prisons \(see, for example, Pakes 2015; Piché and Walby 2010, 2012; Smith, 2013; Wilson et al. 2011\); although these arguably serve an educational, rather than touristic purpose.](#) As such, missing from the discussion is an appraisal of tourist activity involving visiting prisoners – as opposed to merely the site of a prison.

A rare, contemporary example is the Angola Prison Rodeo, where members of the public pay to watch the spectacle of inmates competing in rodeo activities at a

nearby arena (Adams 2001, Schrift 2004). Here, the attention still remains upon the rodeo element of the events. Admittedly, although visitors reportedly relished the opportunity to witness the participation of friends and family members in the activities, the primary purpose was attending the contests. It is also notable that the Rodeo is highly organized and interactions with prisoners tightly controlled by the prison. Likewise, much work has drawn attention to the visiting room as a space of interaction (see Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2002; Moran 2013a, 2013b for examples). Signifying the importance of visitors in the rehabilitation process, the presence of individuals such as friends and family members within carceral spaces is notably paramount within such literature (inter alia Bales and Mears 2008; Comfort 2002). However, although these are examples of visiting individuals, their purpose is arguably not touristic [either](#). It is not about *experience* nor is it driven by consumer desire. Nor do visitors actually enter the prison proper, but rather a space separate to the main prison maintaining the integrity of the prison boundary.

Second, where there are such examples of individuals visiting prisons, they are usually orchestrated via formal mechanisms. Whether considered touristic or otherwise, formal links (for example between prisoner and prison visiting centre) establish protocol such as completing a visiting order, require identification and instil other organisational ramifications that limit the presence of certain people. Moreover, visitors likely visit one specific prisoner – a friend or family member, for example. Prison visitors – a service engineered in the UK for prisoners (such as elderly prisoners or those located in facilities not geographically proximate to their families) who may not have regular visitors – may visit more than one inmate, but their purpose is very much to offer friendship and support. Where there is room for further discussion is an exploration of sites that differ dramatically: where prison(er) visiting

is a much less regulated practice. This regulation extends to surveillance, and guidance over the kinds of interactions inmates and visitors can have.

The following examines an example of penal tourism that sits outside of those usually studied. Visits to Penal Garcia Moreno in Quito, Ecuador have become a popular destination for backpackers visiting Latin America. Beyond both commodified tourist experience and organized prison-visiting infrastructure, visitors to Penal Garcia Moreno participate in a unique kind of tourism. Drawing on Turner's geographical work (2016), which seeks to make sense of the spatial and temporal boundary crossings intrinsic to penal sites (tourist ones or otherwise), this chapter explores tourist engagements with a space unique due to its status as a working prison. Here we posit a situation whereby the boundary crossings between 'outside' and 'inside' lack the formality usual to a working prison setting in the global northwest. Instead we demonstrate that, in this context, the prison boundary was malleable; instead of binaries of inside/outside we describe a patchwork of insides/outside. We highlight instances where both visitors and tourists exploit tourist practices to engage in a complex experience that challenges fixed notions of 'inside' and 'outside' (as visitors experience an 'inside' that is atypical (such as prisoner-organized parties) and prisoners access the 'outside' through the visiting practices of tourists). Accordingly, this chapter describes the ways in which backpacker penal tourism relied upon, and produced novel forms of 'inside' and 'outside' challenging conventional notions of prison boundary management.

### **Research methodology**

This chapter draws on ethnographic research in prisons in Quito, Ecuador conducted by Fleetwood (see Fleetwood 2009, 2014) and analysis of big data sources, drawing

on tourist blogs describing their prison visits by Turner (see also Turner and Peters 2015a, 2015b). The former offers in-depth observational data in one prison, the latter supplements this with rich first-person reflections that could not be captured through ethnographic observations.

Fleetwood undertook ethnographic research in prisons in Ecuador between 2003 and 2010.<sup>1</sup> Whilst researchers rightly note the limitations of ethnographers to truly become ‘insiders’ (Stevens 2012), the data that follows draws on auto/ethnography (Jewkes 2012) of personal entre into prison as a tourist, and continued presence as visitor/researcher. Whilst most prison ethnographers occupy an odd position defined as neither prisoner, nor guard (Jewkes 2012), visitors were an important ‘third’ role in this prison. Observations of other visitors and tourists were undertaken throughout fieldwork; and Fleetwood also brought visitors into the prison. Analysis focuses exclusively on prison tourism in the men’s prison, Garcia Moreno. Backpackers also visited the women’s prison but the two are very distinct precluding a single analysis of both prisons<sup>2</sup>.

Ethnography is supplemented with analysis of blogs and journalistic accounts of prison visiting in Latin America, stimulated from Turner’s research interests in using a range of textual data to understand experiences of penal tourism. Data were selected through internet searches for articles describing visits to Garcia Moreno prison in Ecuador as well as the more well-renowned San Pedro prison in Bolivia, as the two main sites of backpacker penal tourism in Latin America. This analysis enables a wider analysis of prison visiting beyond Garcia Moreno prison. These data contain rich, first person data offering insights into the attractions and realities of tourist encounters with the prison (including reflections after leaving prison which could not be captured through ethnography) (see also Madge 2010 and Mkonzo 2011

for the merits of using online data sources). More than mere reports on experiences, blogs are arguably integral to the process: for many it seemed that writing about it was an important motivation for visiting in the first place.

### **Backpacker penal tourism in Latin America**

Given the informal nature of backpacker penal tourism, it is hard to estimate its scale. Searches of the Thorntree forums hosted by the Lonely Planet website include several reports of visiting prisons in Nepal, Thailand, Russia and, accidentally, an open prison in Finland. Most accounts relate to prisons visits in Latin America, especially Bolivia and Ecuador. In his factual account of visiting the San Pedro prison in La Paz, Bolivia, *Marching powder*, Rusty Young reports reading about visiting inmates in the Lonely Planet Guide (Young and McFadden 2003). Although his book is often credited with popularizing visiting prisons as a tourist attraction in Latin America, the practice of visiting long precedes it. San Pedro prison in Bolivia is probably the most famous prison tourism site in Latin America (see Horgan 2014 amongst others), touted as “the most bizarre tourist attraction” by journalists (Baker 2009: no page). In San Pedro prison tours were relatively organized and inmates charged visitors for the tour, including the chance to take cocaine and/or stay overnight for “the best party in Bolivia” (Young and McFadden 2003). Prison authorities cracked down on penal tourists but the challenge of access seemed to add to its cult appeal (Horgan 2014). San Pedro prison was decommissioned in 2014, as was Garcia Moreno.<sup>3</sup> Backpacker penal tourism was, for a time, an established (although rare) part of the ‘gringo’ trail in Latin America, from the mid-1990s until 2014. Backpacker tourism may be over in these sites (for now), but stands as an exceptional example of penal tourism.

Prison visiting was not organized *per se* in Garcia Moreno, nor was a set fee

ever charged. At the very outset, this draws attention to the informality of the boundary crossing between inside and outside in this instance. Yet, the prison is listed as a specific tourist destination on a variety of tourist information websites, second only after “visiting the equator” in the two options listed under “Things to Do” (Woodward no date). Most prison tourists in Quito report reading information about visiting (including the names of prisoners happy to receive visits) posted on a couple of hostel noticeboards. References to prison visiting can also be found on multiple websites. In this respect, prison visiting was the worst kept ‘insider tip’ on the backpacker trail. Men in Garcia Moreno prison received about one or two visits from groups of tourists per month (mostly in the summer months).

Our attention is focused here on backpackers as a specific category of tourist. Originally emerging from 1970s counter culture (Richards and Wilson 2004: 3; O’Reilly 2006), contemporary backpackers are typically western, middle class, young, and on their summer break from higher education (Ibid: 18). Backpacker tourism is characterized by a search for authenticity, adventure, freedom and risk, sometimes in tension with familiarity, convenience and a degree of safety (Noy 2004; Richards and Wilson 2004; Elsrud 2001). Open-mindedness, including the desire to become open-minded can also be considered important backpacker values (Binder 2004). Meeting new people (other backpackers and ‘locals’) is another key feature (Binder 2004; Welk 2004). Backpacker subculture is often referred to as a ‘community of strangers’, characterized by temporary, sometimes intense interactions (Adkins and Grant 2007).

Visiting prison ticks many of the boxes of backpacker ideology: prisons in Latin America are widely known to be dangerous and visiting one is definitely “off the beaten track”; meeting prisoners demonstrates open-mindedness; and as an



uncommodified experience, prison carries a degree of authenticity. Indeed, prison visits feature on bucket lists for many other sites around the world, see White (2014)<sup>4</sup> for example, who ranks “Getting a foot massage by a prison inmate” at the Women’s Correctional Institution at number two in her Bucket List of 19 Things to Do in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Such motives are clearly outlined in many backpacker blogs:

I had just reached Quito and knew almost nothing about it. Nevertheless, only an hour or so after arriving at a hostel and having a brief conversation with a fellow backpacker, I knew exactly what it was I wanted to do in the city.

(Smith 2011: no page)

For many tourists, there is motivation to visit the prison for more than simple curiosity. There are also self-confessed desires for adventure, risk, drugs, and more besides, all contributing to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not to be missed. Indeed, Jowett describes how he was influenced by a fellow tourist who described the prison as “the maddest place you could visit in South America” (Jowett 2007: no page). The uniqueness of the prison also appealed to his adventurous side and finalized his decision to undertake the trip:

‘Everybody goes to see Machu Picchu,’ John chimed in, ‘but how many people get to see a place as mad as Quito jail’? Good point, we concurred.

(Jowett 2007: no page)

For others, there is a clear recognition of the thrill of entering such a purportedly dangerous place. For Globetrooper Todd, the notoriety of the prison as uncontrollable made it enticing:

Once I arrived in La Paz, it became my sole mission to gain entry into San Pedro Prison; a prison that *even the guards don't enter*. (Globetrooper Todd 2010: no page, emphasis original)

Here, tourists enact a boundary crossing. Yet, it not just the crossing from inside to outside, but as indicated here, crossing from the known to the unknown; safety to risk; from formal law abiding to drug-taking informality – all part and parcel of a backpacker ideology. These factors combine to make visiting a prison an ‘unmissable’ experience. Missing it would render them being “unable to forgive [themselves]” (Horgan 2014: no page).

Other accounts profess more honourable motives. For some, the possibility of visiting foreigners in prison, many of whom were Brits, ‘banged up abroad’ for drug trafficking offences was interesting. As Sinclair explains:

I woke up after a rather heavy night and was looking to do something a little different. As in many city hostels in this part of the world, pinned to the notice board were letters from foreigners incarcerated in local jails, in this case Garcia Moreno prison, inviting people to drop in, drop off some essentials and help alleviate their boredom. Naturally, many travellers feel sympathetic with the guys behind bars, knowing all too well that with a touch of misfortune they could suffer similar misfortune. Dave, Jez, Mike and I decided to take up the

invitation, jumped in a taxi and asked the driver to take us to Garcia Moreno.

It was to prove to be an educational experience. (Sinclair 2011: no page)

In outlining these various motives for visiting functioning prisons, we acknowledge the numerous simultaneous experiences of such visits. In the latter half of this chapter, we draw upon just the experiences of just one such visitor (Fleetwood) to explore the ways in which Garcia Moreno and its prisoners become hosts for tourist motivations and expectations. In doing so, we explore how visited prisoners accommodate this variety of tourist needs by managing visitors experiences of the 'inside'. What is revealed is a complex negotiation of the prison boundary unlike most other instances of penal tourism; and by which prisoners themselves subvert conventional notions of the tourist and prisoner experience.

### **Formal crossings: entering Garcia Moreno prison**

Garcia Moreno prison is located in downtown Quito, about ten blocks from the presidential palace in a poor neighbourhood rarely visited by most residents of Quito, let alone tourists. Originally built to house 271 men in 1879, Garcia Moreno is star shaped, closely resembling London's Pentonville. Built of heavy brick like its sister, its corridors are dark and cold in contrast with the Equatorial sun outside. , Visitors entered the prison every Wednesday and at weekends between 10am and 4pm. At the gate, guards painstakingly searched visitors and unpacked their suitcases full of clothes, stab birthday cakes, and tubs of food to check for contraband. As will be seen, visitors took supplies directly into the prison. Inmates were reliant on visitors for everything from cash, clothing, food, medicine and more.

Access to the prison was formally controlled by guards on behalf of the Ecuadorian National Directorate of Prisons. The bureaucracy was minimal: national identification cards (which Ecuadorians are required to carry), or a passport for foreigners were handed in and the name of the prisoner to be visited was recorded. Unlike the UK, for example, the inmate has no part in formal bureaucracy. Aside from searches for contraband, the prison estate exercised little control over visiting interactions. Visits take place inside the prison itself: there are no visit rooms, no timed visits; no guards present to end conversations or embraces.<sup>5</sup> Rather than being held separately, hermetically, in a visit room apart from the body of the prison, visitors functioned as a regular circulation of people from outside to inside. They can be imagined as the life-blood of the prison. Unlike elsewhere, where visitors are encouraged to bring little more than news, company and small change for a cup of coffee, visitors to Garcia Moreno brought food, money, sex, news, drugs, company and all sorts of intangible things that kept the prison functioning.

### **Informal crossings: entering inmate-controlled spaces**

Domains of inside and outside were not binary, nor were they straightforwardly produced by formal control by guards and bureaucrats. Once inside, visitors were subject to control and surveillance by inmates, comprising a patchwork of public and private domains under the control of the prison to greater or lesser degrees.

The prison is large, and inmates help visitors to find their way. At the gate, I was met by a short, scruffily dressed man who led the way to *el Britanico*, the British man: up two flights of stairs, along the second floor balcony to the end, banging noisily on the cell door.

A small metal grate slid to the side and two eyes frowned back at me. ‘I’ve come to visit’, I said, holding up my bag of gifts – cigarettes, chocolate and toilet roll. He mumbled something and a moment or two, the cell door clanked open.

‘I’m Paul, he said. ‘Have you got 25 cents for this kind gentleman here?’ After some negotiations, my escort left with 25 cents and three cigarettes, smiling and bidding us a *buena visita* as Paul invited me into his cell, closing the door behind us. It wasn’t scary or threatening to be locked in his cell, and was more like being invited into someone’s dorm room. We quickly settled into polite ‘getting to know you’ chat.

As well as being quizzed about who I was, Paul told me about himself. He had been in prison for about a year, and had recently been sentenced to 6 years for trafficking cocaine. Although he *had* been trafficking cocaine, he was sentenced for carrying six kilos, not the single kilo he had bought himself. The state afforded him just ten minutes with his lawyer immediately before the trial began. I listened attentively and we got along well enough.

(Fleetwood, ethnographic diary)

Closing the cell door created a private space away from the gaze of guards and other prisoners. It was both of the prison but also apart from it. The inside of a cell appears to be deep inside the prison but at the same time, it was a shelter from the regime that normally comprises the prison as institution. Thus, in addition to the surveillance and control operated by guards at the gate, prisoners like Paul operated their own surveillance patrolling access. Cells were controlled by a select group of inmates who owned their cell. Cells were managed through a formal market managed by inmates

(see Nuñez 2006). As the owner, Paul controlled who could enter his cell and when. Like all cell owners, Paul owned a padlock and key. He shared his cell with 3 other men, but they usually only present during lockdown between the hours of 9pm and 6am, during which Paul's cell reverted to a space of confinement.

After a cigarette and a chat, Paul offered to show me around:

‘Shall I give you the tour?’ he asked. Off we went.

First stop was pavilion A, inhabited mainly by foreigners, almost all of them drug traffickers. He pointed out the ‘guard’ at the gate, a prisoner checking who entered the pavilion. Evidently Paul – and me by association – was allowed to pass through. This was the most expensive pavilion: cells were pricier, as were the month dues which paid for painting, decorating and maintenance of essential services and common areas, all organised by the committee of inmates. In comparison to his pavilion it was recently decorated and cleaned.

Outside in the patio, men sat on concrete benches entertaining wives, daughters, family and friends. Paul asked me if I was peckish (not so much), but he persuaded me to buy him a hamburger and I drank a *gaseosa* which we enjoyed sitting under a parasol at a stall owned by a young Colombian man.

Over lunch, Paul patiently answered my questions. Like cells, inmates also managed food kiosks and shops in the prison. All manner of world cuisine was available reflecting the fact that the prison hosted drug traffickers from all over the world. Sitting under the parasol was a pleasure reserved for customers and after lunch we joined everyone else on the concrete benches.

Few guards were present - Paul pointed out the guards patrolling the roof with

machine guns, and asked me if I'd seen any guards in the prison (no!). Few guards entered the prison - usually around five. Paul estimated there were about 1,000 men in prison. It is often said that prisons are run with the consent of the inmates, and this was especially true here.

Prison life had many hardships, especially bad food and boredom. Violence was common too. 'Could he apply for deportation?' I asked. Paul emphasised the liberties he had her – he could receive visitors and had a girlfriend and daughter who sometimes visited (although not as much as he would like). There was no prison regime; he could smoke weed in his cell, when we could afford it. Speaking of which, maybe I could lend him a dollar for a smoke this evening? (Fleetwood, ethnographic diary)

Prisoners moved freely through and between most areas of the prison except for some areas requiring special permission.<sup>6</sup> Some prisoners with privileges could move freely between the prison and administrative offices where they worked. Others ran errands between the front gate and the rest of the prison. In addition to the fact that inmates largely controlled the prison, there were no guards present in prison during their daily lunch-break between 12 noon and 1pm. During the hour, traffic was halted between all wings as each pavilion was locked from the centre of the 'star' (locking in inmates, visitors and backpackers). Being in a prison with no guards may be considered reckless, but that assumes that guards had responsibility for the welfare of visitors. Backpacker visitors themselves note that "[r]isk is an essential aspect of adventure" (Jowett, 2007: no page). This crossing from safe to dangerous space was arguably an important part of [visiting the inside of this prison](#).

~~Echoing their control of physical space, the 'tour' was run by inmates, albeit in a rather ad hoc fashion.~~ In contrast to [the tours often a key feature of formalized sites of penal tourism sites](#), which tell the 'straight' story of discipline and punishment, here inmates' tours offered an 'insider' critique of the regime and notions of punishment and rehabilitation. [Furthermore, unlike the majority of the aforementioned researcher or student tours to working establishments, the 'tour' was run by inmates, albeit in a rather ad hoc fashion, echoing their control of physical space.](#) The tour reversed the surveillance gaze and scrutinized the surveyors. Prisoners noted its flaws and its harms; the lack of hot water, adequate plumbing; the chronic lack of space; the corruption and the violence. They pointed out the traces of recent protests on the prison walls: prisoners' graffiti; scorch marks from recent protests; bullet marks in the walls from the guards taking back control of the prison. Inmates also criticized the almost total absence of any attempt to rehabilitate them. Prisoners the world over develop sophisticated critiques of the regimes in which they become entangled, but uniquely here, the presence of outsiders allowed them to be heard. It might seem obvious, but performing this critique of the prison was dependent on having an audience of 'outsiders'. The production of the tour was dependent on the presence of outsiders, and can perhaps be understood as an element of 'outside' inside the prison. Interestingly, the tour also emphasized the 'good' things, especially their relative freedom inside the prison compared to regimes elsewhere. Paul summed it up neatly:

[we have] free thought, free range, free action. Within the premises, you can do what you want, where you want until lockdown.' (Fleetwood, ethnographic diary)



Whilst the prison estate controlled who could get inside the prison, inmates themselves controlled who could come inside their cell or wing of the prison. Cells were inmate-owned and they could do more or less what they liked in them, more or less within the bounds of the law. Other areas were under collective control: recall that pavilion A had a guard stationed at the gate. Even common areas such as the patio were divided up between public areas (the concrete benches) and areas under the control of private businesses. In keeping with inmates' control of prison space, inmates controlled the narrative about the prison via the tour; these narratives were produced for outsiders.

### **Outside space, inside: prison parties**

Arriving with gifts for prisoners initiated an informal exchange – each bag of goods was swapped for a 'tour'. The gains from giving tours were small: these gifts probably cost less than US\$5 and the hamburger another dollar or so. In short, the tours were not about the money. After the 'tour', visitors were often invited to someone's cell to hang out, chill out and have a party together. Arguably, this was the real benefit of hosting visitors. These were great fun, celebratory, irreverent, and transgressive.

We were sitting in Paul's cell with some backpacker tourists. Someone (a prisoner) offered to share one of his cherished stash of 'blunt' wrappers with his friends and guests to make a special joint. A couple of dollars were pooled and someone was sent out to buy a couple of dollars' worth of weed. Paul unpeeled the newspaper and set about building the joint. He called for a knife

and someone took out a sharpened butter knife. Then, wordlessly, another inmate casually stood up and pulled a foot long machete from his trouser leg. Everyone fell over laughing. (Fleetwood, ethnographic diary)

Parties transformed cells into a site of leisure and freedom, rather than punishment and discipline. Inmates loved to host, providing a place to hang out, offering visits juice, coffee, snacks and, often, drugs as well. For the afternoon they became generous hosts and fellow travellers. Good parties shut the door on the prison and offered an escape from the monotony and boredom of daily life in prison. Although to backpacker visitors, they probably represented the most authentic, deep kind of engagement with the prison, for inmates they held the opposite meaning: escape and contact with the outside. Thus prison parties represented different kinds of boundary crossings for inmates and backpacker tourists. Nonetheless, they also offered a chance to transgress together: from legal to illegal.

Drugs were a particular feature, partly because alcohol was expensive (about \$30) and usually had to be pre-ordered well in advance. Illegal alcohol was available costing about \$5 for about 100ml of home-distilled spirit, but 'bad' batches were fairly common.<sup>7</sup> Marijuana could be bought quickly and easily for less than \$1. Smoking marijuana was a common way to pass the excess of time on their hands. Cocaine was also used by inmates, although less commonly and less often due to its high cost. Both were offered to backpacker tourists; some probably entered the prison with an expectation of being able to access drugs. Although drugs were often present, it was by no means an essential ingredient in the party. Meeting new people and swapping stories over coffee and cigarettes was a lot like being outside. Another ways of creating a sense of being 'outside' whilst on the inside included creating intimacy.

This included having sex, especially during the fortnightly sleep-overs for visitors. Some women backpacker visitors became romantically involved with men on the inside, usually, but not always, over a series of repeat visits. Prison parties were far more common.

### **Commodifying backpacker tourism**

Visiting prison appealed to backpackers as a kind of uncommodified, uncommercialized experience. Although prison tours were informal, they were nevertheless carefully managed to create a particular kind of experience, maximize potential benefits and maintain the long-term sustainability of tours. As seen above, backpacker prison tourists were a resource of many things (as seen above), including drugs and gifts.

Inmates' relationship with backpacker tourists reflecting the wider relationship the prison had with visitors: prison was a cash economy in which visits played a vital role in the circulation of cash, goods and services. Writing about a women's prison in Peru, Campos describes how the prison was a vital part of the economy of the neighbourhood (Constant 2014) in which it was located. Family members supplied inmates with almost everything, from money to food, clothes and even a mattress to sleep on. Visitors played an important role in the financial life in the prison as importers of necessities, as well as money. Much could be said about the economics of prisons in Latin America, but suffice to say that, in general, they were dependent on a constant supply of money and goods brought in by visitors. This constant flow appears to contravene assumptions about control and prison regime that tend to equate prison discipline with hermetic visits in which *no* goods are passed. Nevertheless, friends and family do provide for inmates, albeit within the strict conditions on

property set out by the prison. Arguably, the flow of goods to prisoners from friends and family is necessary for the functioning of the prison, not only in Latin America, but in the north-west too.

The flow of goods into the prison probably occurred on a much greater scale than most prisons in the global north. A further distinction is that visitors came to prison with a view to making exchanges and money, rather than solely depositing it. Prostitutes worked in prison, including during the bi-monthly *quedada*, or stay-over during which visitors could stay on a Saturday night. Some women visited in the hope of finding a foreign boyfriend/husband, but even strategic relationships could become real ones. One especially well-regarded woman collected money transfers from western union for foreigners, taking a percentage for her trouble of course. As is the case in most prisons, visitors were not searched on their way out of the prison.

Prison tourists were a special kind of visitor. Neither there for business nor truly family/friends, they were nonetheless bound up the prison's economic relationship with the outside world. Inmates who hosted backpackers sought to strategically maximize benefits. These exchanges were sometimes implicit through the pooling of money for things to share, including drugs, but also cigarettes, fizzy pop and food:

Eventually we decided we were hungry, so we got some food delivered [to Graham's cell]. I asked for a fried egg roll, and the girls got plates of chicken and rice and a little salad. It looked nice. It was really nice to sit down to eat. I don't think we'd realised how hungry we'd been. After, sat and smoked a little, and chatted some more: drugs and life in prison, how life is for foreigners... (Fleetwood, ethnographic diary)

Explicit financial exchanges often took place. Frank made and sold apple pies to prison visitors – mainly Ecuadorians and Colombians, but especially to backpackers when they were around. Paul sold his light bulb bong and plans for a homemade tattoo machine to backpackers as souvenirs. Although some foreign prisoners were relatively well off in the prison, others received no support from friends or family.<sup>8</sup> Some were, at times, close to being quite destitute and selling goods to visitors was a survival strategy. Selling handmade goods echoes wider practices of backpacker consumption. Nonetheless, it was taboo to ask visitors for money outright. Prisoners who received visits were careful to keep visitors away from one of their group who used drugs, and was usually resident in the debtor's wing, since he often begged or tried to scam visitors for money to buy drugs. They considered him bad for business: this kind of experience (no matter how authentic) was likely to put off visitors. Inmates also protected visitors from other inmates or experiences they thought could be unpleasant. As such, benefits from visits were closely guarded, and only available to a select few:

On the way out of the prison, a homeless-looking black man came towards me making a begging gesture. From behind me Paul said 'HEY!' to him in a warning tone and they went and had a quick 'chat'. The guy put his hands up defensively although nothing happened. (Fleetwood, ethnographic diary)

Whilst inmates gratefully received donations and gifts, visitors' attempts to help them were met cautiously. Prisoners' management of visitors resisted charity, recognising it as a form of judgement and even objectification. One visitor brought a

caseload of condoms (donated by the needle exchange where she volunteered). Inmates pocketed some and instantly started to sell and trade the rest (completely ignoring the expectation that they would be given out for free according to need). She was also a law student, and asked about their legal situation:

They bombarded her with stories of torture, lack of legal representation and ill treatment by the guards... She talked about shining a light on their case... Paul seemed hesitant to kick up a fuss while in prison, and seemed worried he could be sent to the *calabozo* [observation/punishment cell]. (Fleetwood, ethnographic diary)

Whilst they appreciated her genuine concern, they were hesitant to ‘kick up a fuss’, perhaps realistically. Most visitors would come only once or twice. Whilst the possibility of international attention on the prison was slight, they had much greater control over what happened inside the prison. Perhaps surprisingly, inmates preferred to extend hospitality than seek help with their legal situation (or rather, the former preceded the latter). Although visitors were valued, company and parties were the most important, offering a chance to escape prison through a taste of life outside.

### **Conclusion: boundary crossings and penal tourism**

Scholarship on penal tourism has generally emerged from the global northwest and so, perhaps inevitably, is concerned with decommissioned prisons. Our analysis sheds light on penal tourism beyond these historic sites through examining informal penal tourism in Ecuador, run by inmates. These [visits](#), were neither formally organized nor commercialized. Our analysis reports on a complex negotiation of the prison

boundary because unlike most other instances of penal tourism, the boundary crossing in question involves a working prison. Boundary crossing took various forms, including, most obviously, from outside to inside. We have outlined the ways the prison boundary was crossed by visitors in general and backpacker tourists in particular. Unlike other penal tourist sites, inmates acted as gatekeepers to both public and private areas of the prison. Thus, the boundary crossing into the prison did not solely occur at the gate (by purchasing a ticket as in most penal tourist sites, or by passing bureaucratic controls as in many working prisons), but also occurred inside the prison. As such, the working prison can be understood as a patchwork of spaces, more or less inside or outside and sometimes simultaneously both. This is most clearly illustrated by parties in cells. For backpackers, these represented an authentic journey into the secret heart of the prison, yet for inmates they were a temporary escape from prison, a space outside of the normal prison regime.

Another important boundary crossing took place: from safe outside space, to risky inside space. We report here on backpackers as a specific group of tourists who sought out risk, adventure and authenticity. To our knowledge no backpacker prison visitors came to harm, particularly during Fleetwood's five years of fieldwork. Visiting a functioning prison (especially an inmate-controlled prison) is inevitably more risky than visiting a decommissioned one. Connectedly, visiting prison involved crossing from law abiding to illegality especially through buying and using drugs in prison. Although not all backpackers did this, some did enter prison with intention of buying and taking drugs.

Backpackers may have been drawn by risk and danger, but this was not the distinguishing features of their visit, from an academic perspective. Unlike almost all examples of penal tourism elsewhere, prisoners were present and ran the tours

themselves. This agential role fundamentally shaped the kind of tourism that occurred. Wilson notes that penal museums have “the potential to play an influential role through the de facto endorsement of harshly punitive carceral regimes” (Wilson 2008: 181). Here, inmate-led tours offered a much more critical take on the prison as physical institution, as well as notions of punishment. Prison visitors played an integral part of the critique due to their importance as outsiders, temporarily present in prison, rather than being neutral observers. Collaboratively, prisoners and tourists subverted notions of punishment and discipline through prison parties, turning cells into spaces of freedom, leisure and pleasure.

Finally, our chapter raises some critical questions for scholars of penal tourism. Our focus on backpackers raises questions about different kinds of prison tourists. [Although a significant wealth of literature has focussed upon](#) the diversity of prison tourists ([Dewar and Frederickson 2003; Ferguson et al. 2015; Naidu 2013; Smith 2012; Wilson 2008](#)), this unique site makes explicit the blurry boundary between prison visiting and tourism, usually studied quite separately. Researchers are a particular kind of prison visitor/tourist. Academics who undertake fieldwork in prisons may well be driven by similar kinds of curiosity (dare we say voyeurism) as penal tourists. We wonder to what extent this blurred boundary exists for others who cross the prison gates in the global north. Aside from legal officials, many others also journey into prison, including those running rehabilitation programmes (increasingly so in England and Wales due to the introduction of the payment by results scheme). Other prison visitors may include university students studying criminology. Another parallel genre of tourism worth exploring might be penal ‘voluntourism’. Voluntourism describes a wide variety of gap year type activities which claim to offer ‘authentic’ experiences through volunteering positions (such as teaching English,



aiding in the construction of buildings or environmental activities). Critiques of voluntourism are well worn, particularly regarding the outsourcing of labour to untrained students when the alternative could be to pay local tradespersons. Yet, our article points to the potential of tourism to also subvert prison, including through the transgression of inside/outside boundaries.

## References

Adams, Jessica. 2001. The wildest show in the South': Tourism and incarceration at Angola (Louisiana State Penitentiary rodeo). *The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 45/2: 94-108.

Adkins, Barbara and Eryn Grant. 2007. Backpackers as a community of strangers: the interaction order of an online backpacker notice board. *Qualitative Sociology Review* 3/2: 188-201.

Baker, Vicky. 2009. Prison Break. *The Guardian Online*  
<[theguardian.com/travel/2009/jan/17/prison-tour-la-paz-bolivia](http://theguardian.com/travel/2009/jan/17/prison-tour-la-paz-bolivia)>.

Bales, William D. and Daniel P. Mears. 2008. Inmate social ties and the transition to society: Does visitation reduce recidivism? *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 45/3: 287-321.

Binder, Jana. 2004. The whole point of backpacking: anthropological perspectives on the characteristics of backpacking. In Greg Richards and Julie Wilson (eds.) *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*. Clevedon: Channel View Publications.

Camacho Margarita, Z. 2007. *Cuerpos encerrados, cuerpos emancipados: travestis en el ex penal García Moreno [Imprisoned bodies, emancipated bodies: transvestites in Garcia Moreno prison]*. Quito: Abya-Yala; El Conejo.

Constant, Chloe. 2014. Economía del espacio carcelario amplio: una cárcel limeña en el centro de múltiples operaciones informales. *BIFEA: Bulletin de l'Institut Français D'etudes Andines*. 43/1: 93-110.

Casey-Acevedo, Karen and Tim Bakken. 2002. Visiting women in prison: Who visits and who cares? *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 34/3: 67-83.

Comfort, Megan. 2002. 'Papa's house' The prison as domestic and social satellite. *Ethnography* 3/4: 467-499.

[Dewar, Mickey, and Clayton Fredericksen. 2003. Prison heritage, public history and archaeology at Fannie Bay Gaol, northern Australia. \*International Journal of Heritage Studies\* 9/1: 45-63.](#)

Drake, Deborah. H and Rod Earle. 2013. On the inside: prison ethnography around the globe: Deborah H Drake and Rod Earle introduce the articles in the themed section. *Criminal Justice Matters* 91/1: 12-13.

Elsrud, Torun. 2001. Risk creation in traveling. *Annals of Tourism Research* 28/3: 597-617.

Fleetwood, Jennifer. 2009. Emotional work: ethnographic fieldwork in prisons in Ecuador. *E-Sharp Special Issue: Researching Hidden Communities* 28-50.

Fleetwood, Jennifer. 2014. *Drug mules: Women in the international cocaine trade*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

[Ferguson, Matthew, Justin Piché, and Kevin Walby. 2015. Bridging or fostering social distance? An analysis of penal spectator comments on Canadian penal history museums. \*Crime, Media, Culture\* DOI: 1741659015596111.](#)

Garces, Chris. 2010. The Cross Politics of Ecuador's Penal State. *Cultural Anthropology* 25/3: 459-496.

Globetrooper Todd. 2010. HOW TO: Survive an Illegal Tour of San Pedro Prison, Bolivia. *Globetrooper Online* <[globetrooper.com/notes/how-to-get-into-san-pedro-prison-bolivia](http://globetrooper.com/notes/how-to-get-into-san-pedro-prison-bolivia)>.

Horgan, Micha. 2014. My Weird Dinner Party at Bolivia's Cocaine Prison. *Vice Online* <[vice.com/en\\_uk/read/my-dinner-party-at-bolivias-cocaine-prison-854](http://vice.com/en_uk/read/my-dinner-party-at-bolivias-cocaine-prison-854)>.

Jewkes, Yvonne. 2012. Autoethnography and emotion as intellectual resources doing prison research differently. *Qualitative Inquiry* 18/1: 63-75.

Jowett, Jack. 2007. Quito Prison, Ecuador. *Jack's World: At Large Around the World Online*. <<https://antijack.wordpress.com/2007/07/04/quito-prison-ecuador/>>.

Madge, Clare. 2010. Internet mediated research. In Nick Clifford, Shaun French and Gill Valentine (eds.) *Key Methods in Geography*. London: Sage.

Mkono, Muchazondida. 2011. The othering of food in touristic eatertainment: a netnography. *Tourist Studies* 11/3: 253-270.

Moran, Dominique. 2013a. Between outside and inside? Prison visiting rooms as liminal carceral spaces. *GeoJournal* 78/2: 339-351.

——— 2013b. Carceral geography and the spatialities of prison visiting: visitation, recidivism, and hyperincarceration. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31/1: 174-190.

Morin, Karen and Dominique Moran. 2015. (eds.) *Historical Geographies of Prisons: Unlocking the Usable Carceral Past*. London: Routledge.

[Naidu, Maheshvari. 2013. Anthropology of experience: Touring the past at Robben Island. \*Journal of Human Ecology\* 43\(1\): 51–60.](#)

Noy, Chaim. 2004. This trip really changed me: Backpackers' Narratives of Self-Change. *Annals of Tourism Research* 31/1: 78-102.

Nuñez, Jorge. 2006. *Cacería de brujos: drogas “illegales” y sistema de cárceles en el Ecuador [Witchhunt: “illegal” drugs and the prison system in Ecuador]*. Quito, Ecuador: FLACSO, Ecuador; Abya-yala.

[O'Reilly, Camille. 2006. Mainstreaming backpacker travel. \*Annals Of Tourism Research\* 33/4: 998-1017.](#)

[Pakes, Francis. 2015. Howard, Pratt and beyond: assessing the value of carceral tours as a comparative method. \*The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice\* 54/3: 265-276.](#)

[Piché, Justin and Kevin Walby. 2010. Problematizing carceral tours. \*British Journal of Criminology\* 50/3: 570-581.](#)

[Piché, Justin and Kevin Walby. 2012. Carceral tours and the need for reflexivity: a response to Wilson, Spina and Canaan. \*The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice\* 51/4: 411-418.](#)

Richards, Greg and Julie Wilson. 2004. Drifting towards the global nomad. In Greg Richards and Julie Wilson (eds.) *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*. Clevedon: Channel View Publications.

Schrift, Melissa. 2004. The Angola Prison rodeo: inmate cowboys and institutional tourism. *Ethnology* 43/4: 331-344.

Sinclair, James. 2011. Locked up in Quito: exploring Ecuador's darker side. *TravelMag Online* <[travelmag.co.uk/2011/08/locked-up-in-quito-the-dark-side-of-ecuador/](http://travelmag.co.uk/2011/08/locked-up-in-quito-the-dark-side-of-ecuador/)>.

[Smith, Hayden P. 2013. Reinforcing experiential learning in criminology: definitions, rationales, and missed opportunities concerning prison tours in the United States. \*Journal of Criminal Justice Education\* 24\(1\): 50-67.](#)

Smith, Jason. 2011. The People in Between | Ecuador: Cake with Criminals. *Ceasefire Online* <[ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/people-in-between-ecuador/](http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/people-in-between-ecuador/)>.

[Smith, Laurajane. 2012. The cultural 'work' of tourism. In Laurajane Smith, Emma Waterton, and Steve Watson \(eds.\) \*The Cultural Moment in Tourism\*. London: Routledge.](#)

Stevens, Alisa. 2012. *Offender Rehabilitation and Therapeutic Communities: Enabling Change the TC way*. London: Routledge.

Strange, Carolyn and Michael Kempa. 2003. Shades of dark tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30/2: 386-405.

Turner, Jennifer. 2016. *The Prison Boundary: Between Society and Carceral Space*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Turner, Jennifer and Kimberley Peters. 2015a. Doing Time-Travel: Performing past and present at the prison museum. In Karen Morin and Dominique Moran (eds.) *Historical Geographies of Prisons: Unlocking the Usable Carceral Past*, London: Routledge.

—— 2015b. Unlocking carceral atmospheres: designing visual/material encounters at the prison museum. *Visual Communication* 14/3: 309-330.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2002. The curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration. *Ethnography* 3/4: 371-397.

Walby, Kevin and Justin Piché. 2011. The polysemy of punishment memorialization: dark tourism and Ontario's penal history museums. *Punishment & Society: International Journal of Penology* 13/4: 451-472.

Welch, Michael and Melissa Macuare. 2011. Penal tourism in Argentina: bridging Foucauldian and neo-Durkheimian perspectives. *Theoretical Criminology* 15/4: 401-425.

Welk, Peter. 2004. The beaten track: Anti-tourism as an element of backpacker identity construction. In Greg Richards and Julie Wilson (eds.) *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*. Clevedon: Channel View Publications.

White, Annette. 2014. Bucket List of 18 Things To Do in Chiang Mai, Thailand. *Bucket List Journey Online* <[bucketlistjourney.net/2014/06/bucket-list-things-to-do-in-chiang-mai-thailand/](http://bucketlistjourney.net/2014/06/bucket-list-things-to-do-in-chiang-mai-thailand/)>.

[Wilson, David, Roy Spina, and Joyce E. Canaan. 2011. In praise of the carceral tour: learning from the Grendon experience. \*The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice\* 50/4: 343-355.](#)



Wilson, Jacqueline Z. 2008. *Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Woodward, Rob. no date. Quito, Ecuador, *Southamerica.cl Online* <[southamerica.cl/Ecuador/Quito.htm](http://southamerica.cl/Ecuador/Quito.htm)>.

Young, Rusty and Thomas McFadden. 2003. *Marching Powder: A True Story of Friendship, Cocaine and South America's Strangest Jail*. Sydney: Macmillan.

---

<sup>1</sup> This included month-long visits in 2003 and 2007 and one long period of fieldwork presence lasting 16 months during 2005-6. Despite the alleged 'eclipse' (Wacquant 2002) ethnographic observations and participation continue to be important methods for researching the reality of imprisonment in international scholarship (Drake and Earle 2013), including Ecuador (Nuñez 2006; Camacho 2007; Garces 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Visits to the women's prison tended to take a distinctively humanitarian character. Rather than 'dark' tourism, these kinds of visits were arguably closer to 'voluntourism'.

<sup>3</sup> In Ecuador, inmates have been moved to purpose built prisons out of town. Inmates wear uniforms, have limited visits and contact with the outside world is limited. The future of Garcia Moreno Prison is uncertain. Ironically, possible plans include conversion into a museum, or a hotel.

<sup>4</sup> Bloggers have not been anonymized since their accounts are in the public domain. Prisoners and prison visitors have been given pseudonyms.

---

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, the stairwells in the women's prison are guarded to ensure that only visitors with the correct paperwork for an 'intimate' visit can go upstairs to the cells, but in practice this is barely enforced.

<sup>6</sup> There was a special wing for debtors and vulnerable prisoners, an overcrowded 'observation' cell holding prisoners as punishment, and a maximum-security wing which was administrated by the police rather than by the Ecuadorian Prison Directorate which ran the rest of the prison.

<sup>7</sup> Illegal alcohol, known as *chamber* was rumoured to cause temporary and permanent blindness, and even death.

<sup>8</sup> They received a small stipend from prisoners abroad, which was essential, but barely covered the basics.