

**OVERLAND TOURISM IN THE ISTANBUL TO CAIRO ROUTE:
'REAL HOLIDAYS' OR MCDONALDISED NICHE TOURISM?**

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Travel, particularly across cultural or political frontiers, is always exciting
(Gosch and Stearns, 2008: 1)

The journey, not the arrival, matters
(Commonly attributed to T. S. Eliot)

1. Introduction: post-Mass tourism and cross-frontiers cultural routes

Since the beginning of the 1990s tourism scholars and academics have been claiming that tourism has changed. By and large the mid-1980s is generally considered the moment when that transformation occurred, or, at least, when it became noticeable. Urry (1990), one of earliest theorists who lead this debate, built an all-inclusive theory which frames the new trends in the tourism industry in the broader context of social transformations in the 'Late Capitalism' period, and consequently, tourism has been repeatedly considered to have changed because new forms of post-Fordist (or post-Modern) consumption have emerged.

Mass tourism is commonly regarded as the typical Fordist (or Modern) mode of tourism consumption. As Shaw and Williams (2004: 115) summarised, mass tourism involves 'large number of tourists related to a circuit of mass production', thus consisting in a large-scale collective consumption of undifferentiated tourism products by equally undifferentiated tourists. Mass tourism is supposed to embrace highly standardized services and experiences dependent on scale economies, while mass tourists, on the other hand, are supposed to demand familiarity under an elusive appearance of novelty and strangeness. As efficiency, calculability, predictability and control are critical

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issues in mass tourism, it can thus be straightforwardly considered as a part of what Ritzer (1996) called the 'McDonaldization' of society. The Fordist tourism industry is said to create a world where the experiences offered to its customers are everywhere similar, or, as Bauman (1996: 29) expressively proclaims, where 'the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens'.

Post-Fordist (or post-Modern) tourism is apparently something quite different. In fact, it is even described sometimes as the opposite. Post-Fordist tourism is said to be softer and lighter, involving less structured and more independent forms of travel and accommodation, corresponding to a new mode of consumption that literature depicts as much more individualised, segmented, and critical than the former (see Shaw and Williams, 2004). It is also said to respond to a wealthier, better educated, and more independent-minded demand. Thus, while the 'package holiday' was the archetypal form of McDonaldized Fordist tourism, the 'real holiday' appears now as the paradigm of the post-Fordist tourism, which means, along with Urry (1990: 95), "visiting somewhere well away from where the mass of population will be visiting" and making use of small specialist agents and operators in order to guarantee the required specialized and differentiated tourism experiences that traveller-makers are supposed to demand.

The significant increase of the service class in the post-industrial societies is usually referred as the deeper cause for the emergence of this new mode of tourism consumption. The rise of the white-collars in late-capitalist economies brought indeed important cultural changes which impacted in tastes and lifestyles, opening way to what Bourdieu (1985) called a new cultural hegemony ruled by the 'new petty bourgeoisie'. The observance of a certain 'aesthetic-asceticism' in lifestyles and the use of 'ostentatious poverty' as a sign of distinction, as well as the tendency for consuming culture-intensive products and services, are said to be some of the most distinctive marks of the emergent service class (Urry, 1990: 89). In the leisure realm that translates in a tendency to favour the culturally most legitimate and some of the economically less expansive leisure activities like, for instance, museum-going, hiking, and walking.

As a consequence of these social changes, tourism tends increasingly to be evaluated in terms of being pleasing, but also, at the same time, of being enriching and adventuresome, as Craik (2000: 114) argued. Being a route-based tourism product in which different cultural and politics frontiers are crossed, 'overland tourism' epitomizes much of this, since it offers to the travel-makers an illusion of discovery and of adventure, of cross-cultural contacts and exposure to otherness and difference, normally under the false impression of great or even entirely autonomy and independency.

This article intends to situate and discuss overland tourism in this context. Our main goal is to examine whether this tourist product may be considered as a genuine post-Fordist (or post-Modern) niche tourism (see Novelli, 2005) and to what extent it actually corresponds to the 'real holiday' paradigm. In fact, there are some authors who have alleged that all these apparently new forms of post-Mass tourism consumption are not substantially different in terms of the

experiences they provide. Ritzer and Liska (2000: 98), for example, have suggested that *'Today's tours may be more flexible than their forerunners described by Urry, but they are still highly McDonaldized'*, adding that even the apparently more 'deviant' tours are standardised, since *'the future of McDonaldization lies in being able to apply its principles to smaller and smaller market niches'* (ibid.: 101).

We also intend to explore the potentialities of the concept of cultural route and the importance of the route-based tourism to rediscover and reinvent spaces which in the past have been neglected and despised. Routeing is in fact something inherent to tourism since tourism is inescapably 'kinaesthetic'. Routes are spatial geometries that attract millions of tourists. They are expressed in different ways and at different scales. As Murray and Graham (1997) point, route-based tourism may include pedestrian and cycling trails in a town or city, motorised journeys in rural settings based on one or more cultural or economic products or lengthy and intercontinental rail and river journeys – such as the 9288 km long Trans-Siberian Railway from Moscow to Vladivostok, or the trip through and alongside the Mekong river. To a large degree, what all these tourist routes have in common is the cultural consumption along the way associated with permanent re-workings of place and culture, which draws inspiration from nostalgia, memory and tradition, but also mystery and venture (Murray and Graham, 1997; Tirasatayapitak and Laws, 2003; Zoomers, 2008)

Route-based tourism also covers different models of trip and holiday organisation. Along with the conventional packaged route journeys arranged and commercialised by agencies and tour operators, nowadays there are many other forms of independent and self-governing route tourism. Backpacking is one example, and although to a large degree its importance is often downplayed by authorities, planners and many involved in the tourism industry, literature has shown that this sub-sector of international tourism may be economically and culturally important especially in developing countries and regions, since it makes use of more diffuse, locally based and simpler tourism infrastructures and services (Hampton, 1998; Richards and Wilson, 2004). Furthermore, route-based tourism can also constitute an opportunity for putting on the map some 'forgotten spaces'. Murray and Graham (1997: 512), for instance, remember that the reawakened interest in the mythical *Route 66* from Chicago to Los Angeles *'has reinvented a route, formerly condemned by functional obsolescence'*.

In this article we will focus specifically in the Istanbul to Cairo route. This route can be understood as a long distance cultural itinerary which, in harmony with other cultural routes throughout the world, has the potential to establish coherence on diverse and separated manifestations of contemporary Middle East heritage, by creating historical, economic and cultural linkages between individual sites, smaller towns, tourist-historic cities and regions. We engage in an exploratory analysis of a sample of 12 companies that commercialise the route, attempting to interrogate the extent to which the niche market of overland tourism on this route is a 'real' or a 'McDonaldized' tourism experience.

2. An historical account of the Istanbul-Cairo route

The Middle East, a geopolitical and geo-cultural designation¹ for a region stretching from Eastern Turkey to Iran (for some as far as Afghanistan), from the Caspian Sea to the Gulf of Aden, has one of the oldest histories of travel on earth: from Phoenicians to Persians and from Greeks to Romans (see Gosch and Stearns, 2008). Herodotus, Alexander the Great, the Christian apostle Paul, Marco Polo, the fourteenth century traveller Ibn Battuta, are just some of the most famous historical travellers that for different reasons voyaged, spoke and to different degrees wrote about these lands. Therefore, it is the long history of travel on this route that constitutes one of its great attractions. Old cities, for example, have for long been a magnet to travellers: Byzantium (present Istanbul), Ephesus, Miletus, Ancyra (present Ankara), Side (East of Antalya), Antioch (present Antakya) and Tarsus, all in Turkey; Aleppo and Damascus, in Syria; Beirut, Byblos and Tyre (about 80 km south of Beirut), in Lebanon; Amman, Petra (only rediscovered in 1812) in Jordan; Jerusalem and Jaffa (nowadays part of Tel Aviv-Yafo municipality) in Israel; Issus, Pelusium, Alexandria and Cairo, in Egypt. There are also numerous sites drawing large numbers of tourists which are related to temples, ruins, and so on, such as Palmyra in Syria or Luxor in Egypt. Sites of a religious significance, such as Bethlehem or Jericho, are also critical to the cohesion of the route.

To a large degree, until the mid nineteenth century, travellers' modes and styles of travel were somehow similar. Alexander's troops were extremely mobile and they travelled quite 'light' and with a minimum of carts which would inevitably slowdown the party. When St. Paul travelled overland, he probably walked, accompanied by one or two people and a donkey which carried his belongings (Gosch and Stearns, 2008). Similarly, Ibn Battuta's approximately 120,000 kilometres long travels were mostly made by foot, on a donkey or by ship. Although travel was dangerous and often travellers tried to be in large groups, throughout the centuries very particular routes were established. From the seventh century onwards, Muslim pilgrims on their way to Mecca became one of the more important groups of travellers on the Middle East. Just like many merchants, numerous pilgrims travelled lengthy journeys on caravans, composed mainly of donkeys and camels. Their starting point, as well as their route, varied, but some sites were key on the way to the religious and cultural centre of the Muslim world and the destination of the compulsory pilgrimage for every Muslim. The *rihla* (Islamic travel narrative, journal or travelogue) of Ibn Jubayr, an official for a Muslim governor in Spain born in 1145, shows that, starting from Cairo, not only he travelled to the most holy cities such as Mecca and Medina, but he also went to Jerusalem, Damascus and Bagdad (Ibn Jubayr, 2004). Jerusalem is also be regarded as a prime destination of many pilgrims. The city is a focal point for the Jewish religion (which unlike other religions does not have major holy places outside Jerusalem), and there are several spaces in the city which are regarded to be of key importance, namely

¹ See Daher (2007a) for a brief discussion on the colonial or neo-imperial '*imagineering*' and makings of a region such as the Middle East or even the *Levant*.

the religious site of *Kotel Ma'aravi*, the Wailing Wall where Moses' tablets are reputedly located (see Coles and Timothy, 2004).

Organised tourism and even mass tourism arrived to the region over a century ago, and in the words of Withey (1997), the Grand Tour moved East. After the regulation of international traffic in 1866, 'scheduled tourism' materialized, and it was possible to travel along the river Danube as far as the Black Sea and then reach Istanbul by land. In 1869, the same year as the opening of the Suez Canal², Thomas Cook followed on the footsteps of some older organised religious tours, and took his first tourists to Egypt and the Holy Land: 'A typical journey from Europe covered Egypt's ancient monuments, the Nile, the holy sites in Palestine and prime locations in major cities such as Beirut, Jerusalem, and Damascus' (Daher, 2007b: 263). Around this time, a new type of travel was facilitated – the round-the-world journey. The increasing popularity of the traveller that goes 'round' instead of going straight 'to' coined the new term of the 'globe-trotter' (Murray, 2008). This bourgeois re-visioning of the globe, the inclusion of technological monuments such as the Suez Canal in the tourist trail, the emergence of the round-the-world literary genre (see Murray 2008), all contributed to create what Virilio (2006) names a 'mobile public', that is, an idea of a mobile West and an immobile East.

3. The Contemporary 'Overlanding' Istanbul to Cairo

Despite being a region with a tremendously rich history of travel for more than two millennia, we could only identify two comprehensive contemporary travel guides including all countries from Istanbul to Cairo: Stedman's 1997 *Istanbul to Cairo Overland* (still in its first edition) and Lonely Planet's 2000 *Istanbul to Cairo on a shoestring* (also on its first edition). Obviously there are plenty of historical as well as contemporary guides to one or more countries in the region. These two guides are specially targeted at independent travellers or those engaged in what is commonly named as 'alternative' tours in the region, and help to construct a similar spatial route and experiences. As Munt (1994) argues, it is deeply ironic that individual travellers are largely indistinguishable from each other by virtue of their discourse, dress codes and informal packages they follow through travel guides.

To a large degree the Istanbul to Cairo route consists of a collection of sites, many of which have a significant historical importance. Although the route, as well as the length of time in accomplishing may vary, there are a number of sites that 'have to' be visited, in order to achieve the status of 'I did the...'. At a macro scale these sites can be referred to as a particular significant city (Palmyra in Syria), or built heritage (Shobak Castle in Jordan) or natural wonder (thermal springs at Pamukkale in Turkey or the landscapes at Wadi Rum in Jordan for example). Yet, on a more detailed scale, the sites may include very ordinary places, such as a specific coffee shop or a restaurant (a

² Also relevant for the growth of world travel was the opening in 1869 of the Pacific Railway and in 1870 of the Indian Peninsular Railway.

nargileh break at a café overlooking Pigeon Rocks in Beirut, for example). In Urry's (1990) terms, this is part of a de-differentiation process whereby the ordinary is celebrated and becomes the subject of the tourist gaze.

Geopolitics are central to travel, and perhaps more than any other aspect, they dominate the atmosphere in which tourism does (or does not) operate. Although it is widely accepted that at present travel in the Middle East is safe, security dimensions, terrorism, wars, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and all geographical imaginations that come with these issues, do not contribute to shaping the willingness and numbers of tourists to visit this region. With a sharp decline in early 2009, the Middle East³ accounted for 6% (5,6 million) of the total number of international tourists worldwide in 2008 (UNWTO). The geopolitics of the route are very much present in the establishing of the starting and ending points, and consequently in the direction in which the route should be travelled. Since anyone with a passport entry or exit stamp from Israel is denied entry in Lebanon and Syria, if travellers want to visit Israel, they must start in Istanbul, cross Syria (optionally go to Lebanon), then enter Jordan, and from there go to Israel (to Jordan again) and finally to Egypt. Doing the route anticlockwise is possible, but Israel (and consequently Jerusalem) should be left out of the tour.

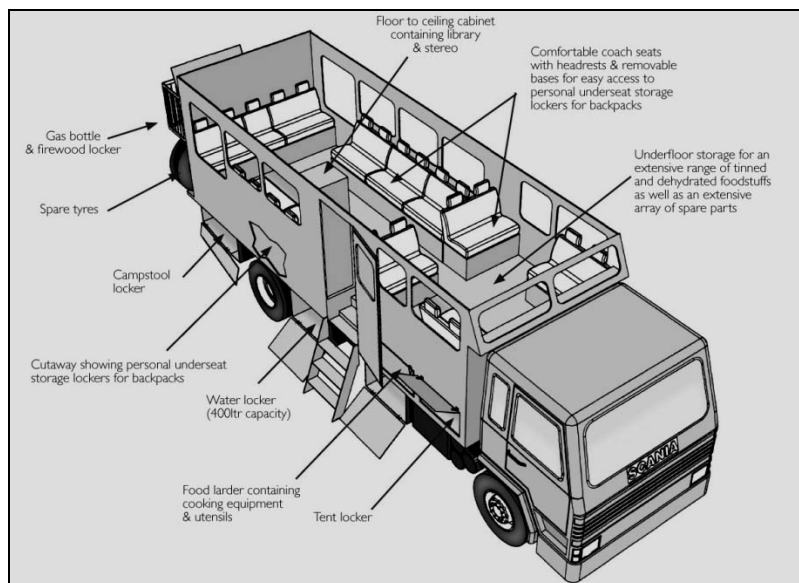
The consumers of this 'Istanbul to Cairo cultural complex' include a *mélange* of niches with varied characteristics: pilgrims (notably related to the Hadj), tourists on bus tours journeying part of the way, independent travellers and tourists engaged in 'alternative' organised tours 'doing' all the way. Weber (2008: 62) identifies a market segment which she names the 'overland tourist', where the physical movement along the transit route constitutes the key adventure element. While many people engage in overland trips independently (London to Cape Town, the 'South American circuit', parts of the Silk Road, the Trans-Siberian, and so on), there is an increasing number of travel agencies that specialise in the overland market. Here we want to focus the attention on a sample of 'alternative' organised tours of the Istanbul to Cairo route, on the spatial practices and discourses they engage in. The sample of 12 companies (tourist agencies as well as tour operators: six from the United Kingdom, four from Australia, one each from the United States and South Africa) was selected by using a simple search for images in Google with the sentence 'Istanbul to Cairo' (see Table 1). Many of these companies have regional offices in other continents. All maps of tours from 'Istanbul to Cairo' were selected, looking at the first 20 pages. Using a different language could have resulted in a sample which included companies from other countries than English speaking ones. Other search strategies could have different results as well.

In some cases, the product on offer is slightly different. Islamic Tours, for example, caters for a specific Islamic market, and its tours have a clear religious and educational nature. This is also the only company from our sample that includes a flight on the route from Istanbul to Cairo, and where tourists travel in a bus the rest of the way. Half of these agencies are specialised in Overland

³ According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, the 'Middle East' region, excludes Turkey and Israel (which are part of 'Southern Mediterranean Europe'), Egypt (part of 'Africa'), and Iran (part of 'South Asia'). It includes Libya.

expeditions or adventures or tours, where tourists (or travellers) travel in a specifically prepared truck (see Figure 1), and camp most of the nights. The other five companies use a mix of modes of transport, from private to public buses, to shared taxis and mini vans.

Figure 1. Particularities of an overland truck



Source: Oasis Overland Adventure Travel corporate site, October 2009

The profile of the tourist that these companies are trying to attract is a young (some companies mention a minimum age of 18 and a maximum of 45), single (many also state that most of their clients are single and therefore there is no single supplement), and physically fit adventurous person. As an example, *Gecko Adventures* stresses that it 'is aimed at younger travellers who prefer a fun; independent; convenient and responsible way to travel' (corporate web site, July 2009). Some of the web sites provide forums or blogs, and solo travellers not only can ask questions about their future trip, but can engage with their traveller companions before the travel takes place.

Although offering similar tourism packages and routes (see further discussion), all companies engage in strategies of differentiation. *Gecko Adventures* remarks that 'what makes us different from every other travel company is that we only use local leaders'; *Flatdog Adventure* underlines 'what makes us different from every other travel company is that we supply a range of products from some of the best independent operators in each region we visit'. The companies offering 'truck overland adventures' attempt to find a niche in-between the more lonely and strenuous individual and independent travellers – 'If you have limited time, safety or language concerns, or just want someone else to take care of all the nitty gritty,

Gecko's is a great alternative to doing it on your own and won't cost much more. (Gecko's Adventure corporate web site, July 2009) – and the rigid, more ordinary and average package holiday (see figure 2).

Table 1. Characteristics of 12 tourism agencies offering the tour 'Istanbul to Cairo'

	Name	Base	Age	Length (days)	Price (€)	Max. no. Tourists	Transport	Starting year	Other
1	Tucan Travel	UK	18-60 (max. 65)	29	1050	18 (8-12 average)	Mix	1987	
2	Travel in Africa	South Africa	16-45 years	21 or 35	600 + local	20	Truck	1995	
3	Islamic Tours	UK	All	21	1200 All inc.	40	Bus	1999	Educational tours for the Islamic community
4	Best Adventures	Australia	18-35s	39	740 + local	34 (10-20 average)	Mix	-	
5	Imaginative Travels	UK	-	36	1715 + local	18	Mix	1991	
6	African Trails	UK	-	28	600 + local	30	Truck	1980	Both ways
7	Flatdog Adventure	Australia	18-55+	42	850 + local	10-26	Mix	-	Starts in Cairo; Day trip to Beirut
8	Bootsnall	US	18-45	21	1000	20	Truck	1999	
9	Gecko Adventures	UK	Physical fitness	27	2085 + 400 local	Aimed at travellers aged 20 to 40	Mix	-	Starts in Cairo
10	Kumuka	Australia	18-45	21	1395	24	Truck	1983	Both ways
11	Intrepid Travel	Australia	-	21	1225 + local	14-24	Truck	1989	Starts in Cairo
12	Footprint Adventures	UK	Physical fitness	37	750 + local	-	Truck	1988	Both ways

Source: Various companies' web sites, July 2009

Figure 2. Image of an 'alternative' overnight



Source: http://www.oasisoverland.co.uk/overland_adventure_trucks_africa_and_middle_east/

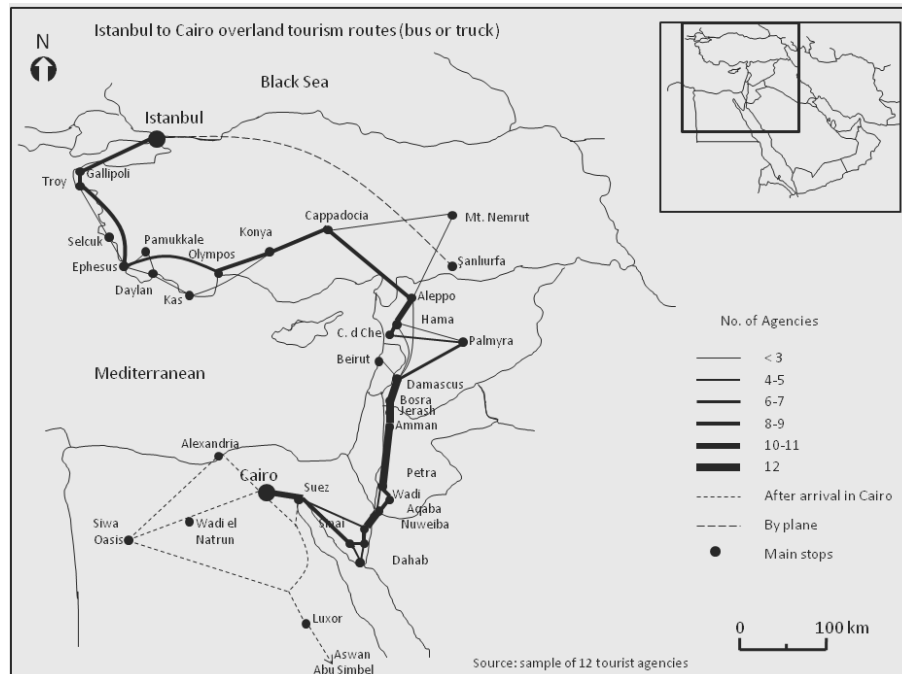
These trucks, mostly Mercedes-Benz, Scania or M.A.N., are self-sufficient purpose-built and well over 7,5 tons vehicles, that cannot discreetly drive through villages and peaceful environments. They represent the opposite of the mode of transport we have in mind when thinking of responsible travel, environmentally sensitive travel. They can also be understood as tourism metawords (see Hottola, 2005), safety bubbles for travellers, or mobile tourism metaspaces. Tourists (or travellers), can go through the most rough environments feeling safe, behind the robust and trustworthy truck. At the same time, these vehicles present tourists with a wide range of commodities ranging from certain voyeuristic aspects such as large windows and 360 degree roof seats providing panoramic views, to stereo systems with MP3 and fridge for cold drinks. Interestingly, some companies introduced a certain segmentation offering different categories of trucks, such as Deluxe, Superior and Standard. According to some, these vehicles clearly distinguish a particular type of tourism: *'the famous blue Kumuka overland truck which is recognised all over Africa as the very symbol of outdoor adventure'* (Kumuka corporate web site, July 2009). The safety of the mode of transport is complemented by the promise of a knowledgeable guide or leader that can *'speak the language, can read the menus, understand the day to day world around them [, knows] the best time to visit the sites, the best way to get from A to B, the best backstreets to explore (...)'* (Gecko Adventures corporate web site, July 2009).

It is quite interesting to note that the Istanbul Cairo route offered by the majority of companies is significantly different from the historical route which developed throughout the centuries. Perhaps the clearest difference is that fact that none of these advertised routes enters in Israel and Palestine, and therefore none includes Jerusalem, a key site in the history of the Istanbul to Cairo route. To a large degree this is understandable if the tour develops anticlockwise (visa situation as already mentioned), but when the tour starts in Istanbul (9 out of 12 companies) it can only be explained for the delays and instability of the borders with Israel at the King Hussein Allenby Bridge and at Sheikh Hussein Bridge. Apart from 'missing' Jerusalem, all tours skip important places in Israel and Palestine such as Jaffa (one of the most important sites of the route when sea travel was the most important), Nazareth, Jericho and Bethlehem. As White (1997: 233) describes in relation to the 1840s, 'the typical tour of Palestine and Syria covered, at minimum, Jerusalem and environs (including Bethlehem, Jericho, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea), followed by a journey north from Jerusalem to Nablus, Nazareth, and the Sea of Galilee, usually ending at Beirut'. Nowadays, these companies include visits to the Dead Sea on the Jordan side (an area which is being heavily developed and where large scale resorts flourish), and might include Bethany-Beyond the Jordan (where Jesus was baptised), and Jerash or Madaba. All of these attractions are heavily visited on a daily basis by hundreds of tour buses. Also suggestive of the geopolitical instability of the region is the fact that only one out of twelve companies includes Lebanon, and only Beirut, on the route, and still, this optional and

side trip only takes place 'if politically permitted'.

In some cases (5 out of 12), the Istanbul to Cairo route is complemented by a journey up the Nile, the *raison d'être* of an Egyptian tour in the late nineteenth century (White, 1997). The route is similar to those of the 1880s: 'sailing upriver to Aswan, stopping at Thebes, Karnak, Luxor, and the Valley of Kings. Those with sufficient time and money might continue as far as the second cataract and the great temple at Abu Simbel' (White, 1997:241). No doubt the 'alternative' overland expeditions continue their journey through the most visited places in Egypt, while leaving aside other less travelled sites, such as the Port Said or Ismailia.

Figure 3. Istanbul to Cairo overland tourism routes (bus or truck)



Alexandria as a port of entry to the 'Grand Tour of the East' is only included in two tours, and seems to be somehow marginal to the tour. Port Said in Egypt is also no longer part of the contemporary 'Istanbul to Cairo' Route. The reason is the complicated situation at Rapha, the border with the State of Israel. At present, the border is closed to individual travellers, and it is only possible to cross from Israel to Egypt at Tebas. Also significant for the establishment of this route via the maritime border between Egypt and Jordan (Aqaba to Nuweiba) is the location and importance of the ancient town of Petra, designated a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1985. The site was visited by 800,000 people in 2008 (a rise from 500,000 in 2007), which

generated over 15 million euros, but for many, this gigantic number of tourists, coupled with weathering, decay, insufficient care and lack of conservation are putting the archaeological site at risk (Icomos, 2005). One other important site which attracts tourists via this route is the region and landscapes of Wadi Rum, which work on the geographical imaginations of the Bedouin deserts, framed and constructed to a large extent via the Hollywood industry in films shot on location such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) directed by David Lean.

Illustrating a certain western and more specifically Anglo-American dominance of this niche tourism (tourists origin, guides editors, tour companies, languages spoken, and so on), Gallipoli in Turkey has become an almost compulsory stop for every tour (it is included in eight of the routes). The battlefields where thousands of Australians and New Zealanders lost their lives in World War I are now regularly visited, and the site where the allies lost their access to Eastern Europe is now an attraction just as Damascus or Petra.

4. Final considerations

Unlike the strong economic commodification that is present at the Camino de Santiago in the context of contemporary Spanish tourism promotion (Murray and Graham, 1997), the Istanbul to Cairo cultural route is still in its infancy. The length of the way, the complex geopolitical environment of the countries which it crosses, the underdeveloped nature of tourism infrastructure in many of the regions, and the geographical imaginations of danger associated with the Middle East, may explain this situation. Although the empirical work here presented refers to a preliminary study of overland truck tourism, it is possible to note that this type of tourism appears to be highly McDonaldized. Despite a certain corporate discourse of reaching the off-the-beaten track – *‘For travellers with a yearning to get off the beaten track, Intrepid opens up a whole new world’* (Intrepid corporate web site, July 2009) – our sample of companies illustrates that truck overland adventures in the Middle East are rigid tour packages which offer very similar routes in a very safe and hermetic environment – the overland truck. As the Stedman’s (1997: 7) *Istanbul to Cairo Overland* guide argues from the beginning, *‘most of this route is a well-trodden path and you’ll come across fellow travellers nearly everywhere you go’*. It is nonetheless sensible to close this paper with careful words, by stressing that the boundaries between what is defined as ‘real holidays’ and ‘Macdonaldized niche tourism holidays’ are not only artificially constructed but repeatedly blurred. It is precisely this overlap, so delicate to sense at times, that is symptomatic of most contemporary tourism or travel experiences.

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