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Walking Through

An exploration of long-distance hiking

Tourism Development

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Methodology.....	2
Literature review.....	4
<i>Contrasts of tourism</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Constructions of nature</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Experiential understanding</i>	<i>6</i>
Theoretical framework	8
<i>Phenomenology</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>LDH as a Form of Serious leisure.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>LDH as the Embodiment of Heidegger's Spielraum.....</i>	<i>11</i>
Data collection.....	12
Data analysis	13
<i>In contrast with the urban and the everyday.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Symbolism, meaning and the inner world</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>The allure of simplicity and freedom in natural conditions</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Empowerment through physicality and shifts in perception</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Discussion.....</i>	<i>22</i>
Conclusion	23
Positionality.....	24
On the use of generative AI	25
Literature	26

Introduction

With the rapid commercialization of travel, numerous alternative forms of tourism have emerged over the past century. A growing body of research suggests that long-distance hiking is gaining popularity. Due to the complex factors that define it, long-distance hiking has attracted scholars from various disciplines and given rise to a wide range of academic discussions.

Depending on their focus, researchers have defined the activity in diverse ways—some equating it with “multiday sports walking,” (Happ, Hofmann, and Schnitzer, 2020) while others distinguish it from “long-distance walking” by emphasizing that hikers typically camp along the trail (Fondren and Brinkman, 2019). Another point of discussion is the minimum distance required for a hike to be considered “long-distance.” Some studies examine trails as short as 55 km (Heimisdóttir, Sæþórsdóttir, and Gísladóttir, 2019), while others focus on extensive routes exceeding 2,000 km, such as the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail (Fondren and Brinkman, 2019).

The ambiguous nature of long-distance hiking also extends to its categorization. It is often placed under broader umbrella terms such as sports and recreational tourism, nature-based tourism, and slow tourism. Some researchers explore the unique social dynamics that emerge within hiking communities (Lum, Keith, and Scott, 2019), while others focus on hikers with goal-oriented mindsets and a preference for fast-paced (Mayer and Lukács, 2021).

It is important to recognize that modern long-distance hiking has evolved from a historical practice. For centuries, people have undertaken extended walking journeys for a variety of reasons (Happ, Hofmann, and Schnitzer, 2020). A clear example is the pilgrimage: a long, often cross-country walk with a religious purpose, ending at a sacred destination. Pilgrimages remain a popular form of long-distance hiking. As many of these old paths are revitalized and improved, hikers’ motivations are no longer strictly religious. As observed in Nidaros, Norway, “*pilgrims search for something that differs from everyday life, not only through religious or spiritual experiences, but also by enjoying slow travel.*” (Vistad et al., 2020, p. 2) As the religious motivation behind pilgrimage has shifted—or rather, come to coexist with a range of other motivations—scholars have begun to study long-distance hiking through the lens of identity-building and leisure subcultures. As one study notes:

“As identities become increasingly fragmented and fluid in contemporary society, it is not surprising that individuals are constructing identities from multiple sources, including sport and leisure lifestyles” (Fondren and Brinkman, 2019, p. 404)

Regardless of disciplinary focus, a recurring theme in the literature is the significance of spending time in nature and its therapeutic effects. This importance is argued to have grown in response to industrialization and the resulting alienation of individuals from the natural world (Atari and Feldman, 2023, 23). A common motivation among tourists is the desire to “get away from it all” and reconnect with nature (Ólafsdóttir, 2013). This escape is often linked to the pursuit of authenticity—living in alignment with one’s true self (Wang, in Atari & Feldman, 2023, p. 24). In contrast to everyday life, shaped by societal expectations and rigid routines, such experiences offer an opportunity to return to a more genuine way of being (Brown, 2012, p. 177).

This project acknowledges the multifaceted nature of long-distance hiking and the many perspectives through which it can be studied. However, it places particular emphasis on authenticity, transformative experiences, and the role of nature. By exploring personal narratives and individual reflections, it aims to understand the relationship between the self, the natural world, and the social world through long-distance hiking as a form of both slow and nature-based tourism. Thus, the guiding question of this project is: *How do individuals connect with and interpret their experience of long-distance hiking?*

Methodology

To validly address the research question, this project seeks to combine both width and depth in its exploration of long-distance hiking experiences. While broadly situated within the domain of individual experience, this study specifically focuses on underexplored aspects of the phenomenon, particularly that of long-distance hiking as a potential catalyst of personal change and reflection.

The research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, as it emphasizes understanding over explaining. It aims not to establish laws, but to grasp the subjective, lived experiences of individual hikers. The intention is to explore how people make meaning of their journeys, their interactions with nature, solitude, and society - rather than to generalize these meanings across populations.

Given the nature of the inquiry, the phenomenological approach is most suitable, as it centres on understanding how individuals experience and interpret a specific phenomenon, which is in this case, long-distance hiking. The relationship between the researcher and the participants is interactive and participatory, rather than distant and objective, reflecting the researcher's own connection to the topic and presence in the interpretive process.

This study primarily follows inductive reasoning. It draws meaning from the data itself — allowing patterns, emotions, and insights to emerge through in-depth interviews. For example, repeated emotional responses to memories of social interactions, or the number of instances when simplicity was mentioned, may point toward underlying themes.

The data consists of 5 semi-structured interviews with long-distance hikers — some conducted in person, others online, a process which will be further explained in the data collection section. The data is analysed using thematic analysis, supported by open coding. The process involves identifying patterns, assigning codes, and categorizing them into broader themes that appropriately present the findings, as well as connect them to the relevant literature and theory. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, as well as the recording of the interview, and gave their informed consent to participate. Anonymity has been preserved by removing names and identifiable details from transcripts. Sensitive information shared during the interviews has been handled with care, and participants were reminded they weren't obliged to answer anything, and that they could refuse to answer if the question made them uncomfortable.

This project contributes to the growing body of qualitative research on slow and experiential forms of tourism, particularly long-distance hiking, by emphasizing its personal, emotional, and existential dimension. It provides insight into how these experiences impact individuals' relationships with society, with themselves, and with the natural world. More specifically, it explores the value and meaning that the participants ascribe to their experience of walking in nature, and the subsequent impact it has on their lives.

Literature review

“I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil - to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that.”

(Thoreau 1862, 1)

In his famous essay, American philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau celebrates the therapeutic and spiritual benefits of walking in nature for extended hours. Although Thoreau lived in the 19th century, the phenomenon of walking in nature and its effects has remained a widely discussed topic across different fields. In the opening paragraph of his essay, Thoreau makes a clear distinction between two types of freedom: natural and civil. The discussion of this “natural freedom,” although not explicitly stated, permeates research on long-distance hiking.

Contrasts of tourism

In *Hiking the Via Alpina*, Atari and Feldman (2023, 23) pose the question: “Can long-distance hiking present an alternative to the mechanization, uncertainty and alienation of contemporary European life?” In the paper, the authors present Wang’s theory of modern ambivalence in tourism, one in which “Logos” elements of modernity—such as the rational organization of life, navigation, and planning—stand in contrast with the “Eros” nature of tourists’ desires, such as sensuality, freedom, and spontaneity. As such, “Logos” elements serve as tools that can not only enable but also enhance the Eros, or the search for personal satisfaction, which plays out in different forms (Atari and Feldman, 2023).

In similar terms, the contrast between modern life and the natural world is also prevalent in research on LDH. When inquiring into the motivations of tourists, a recurring motive of getting away can be found—a need that Olafsdottir (2013) termed “to get away from it all” and “get back to nature.” One of the crucial aspects of this getting away, closely linked with getting back to nature, is the notion of authentic living, or living in accordance with one’s real self (Wang, cited in Atari and Feldman, 2023, 24). Wang argues that these experiences enable

people to live authentically, in contrast to everyday life, where the authentic self is sabotaged by a whole myriad of societal norms, obligations, time schedules, etc. (Brown 2012, 177).

However, of importance to this project is the argument that LDH is not only a temporary relief—which many would find insufficient—but that some will actively work on abandoning their old lifestyles in favor of what they perceive to be authentic living (Brown 2012, 179). Building upon previous research on existential authenticity and tourism, authors propose that tourism does not have to serve only as a temporary relief but also as a catalyst for authentic living.

Olafsdottir (2013, 210) points out that the reason behind prolonged experiences in nature resulting in such profound changes is not well known, and that naturalists such as Thoreau, who celebrate nature's therapeutic effects, do not explain how this happens. It is proposed that these transformative, therapeutic effects are linked exactly to the contrast that nature gives in response to urban life—thus indicating the importance of experiencing the self in different settings (Olafsdottir, 2013, 210).

Furthermore, the authors suggest another key point: people set out into nature with existing notions, ideas, and expectations. These thoughts are largely shaped by prevalent ideologies and paradigms. Building upon theoretical propositions, their study of a group of hikers in Iceland indicated the effect of culture on the way we interact with the world around us. It is concluded that positive projection towards oneself and nature was key to experiencing the therapeutic effects, and that everything fell into place once reality aligned with expectations (Olafsdottir, 2013, 221). These findings indicate a view of nature that is socially constructed, as they suggest that human relation to it is largely determined by cultural beliefs and preconceptions.

Constructions of nature

In his breakdown of the many forms that social constructivism has acquired, Demeritt (2002, 776) points out that many critics have condemned—and thus generalized—social constructivism as a “flight from reason and reality,” for its use of “construction as refutation.” However, as nature is often portrayed in contrast to the urban and cultural within the discussion of long-distance hiking, it cannot escape social construction, and thus merits examination through the different ways in which it is conceptualized.

Demeritt (2002) points out that the difficulty of constructivist debates on nature lies in the complexity of the word itself. According to literary critic Raymond Williams, nature has three specific meanings:

1. “The essential character or quality of something,” closely related to the ideas of “real” and “essential.” Social constructivism does not question the existence of nature, but rather its defining quality—what “real” is.
2. “The inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both”—a sense of universal and abstract nature. Here, constructivism questions whether the nature of something is determined universally or is social in origin.
3. “The external, material world itself,” related to reality as opposed to the imaginary or conceptual. Closely related to this understanding is the discussion of whether humans are inside or outside this nature. A recurring depiction can be found that portrays primitive people as part of it, and modern civil society as having fallen out of the natural world, turning instead to the ideology of dominating the external natural environment. (Williams, cited in Demeritt 2002, 777–778)

Although the discussions within social constructivism on nature go much further, for the sake of this research it is important to address these fundamental meanings. Considering these definitions, the previously discussed motivations of long-distance hikers—“getting back to nature” and “getting away from it all”—can be understood as a need to experience essential reality. Furthermore, the third definition of nature is of particular importance to the discussion on LDH; long-distance hikers temporarily leave modern society to reconnect with the material reality from which society has fallen away, and which it seeks to dominate as something outside of itself.

Experiential understanding

A recurring theme in literature on experiences in nature is that of the “sublime,” a philosophical term that describes the divine experience in nature. Many philosophers connected it with the perception of nature, while Nietzsche offered an explanation for the feeling of awe that awakens in people in the face of natural powers—these powers cannot be put into a logical context for people to understand them (Heimisdóttir, 262).

Building on this reasoning, Matthieu (2020, 6) suggests that it is perhaps our inability to communicate what we have witnessed in nature that is the defining factor of the sublime.

As much as it is important to broaden our understanding of nature as a concept, social constructivism perhaps risks falling into the realm of the “imaginary” and “conceptual” by trying to understand nature through intellect only. Due to the phenomenon of the sublime, understanding the experience of nature could be problematic as it is—especially without the experiential approach. In “Teaching Thoreau,” Holtzman (2021) describes how she approaches her environmental ethics class by combining a trip to a natural area with a simultaneous reading of Thoreau’s essay *Walking*. Without experiencing nature themselves, students would have a hard time understanding Thoreau’s experiences and descriptions of his long walks in nature.

“The “right” way to walk is to be drawn to Nature without preconceptions of what it is, but open-minded to what it will reveal to us about itself.”

(Holtzman, 2021, 5)

Theoretical framework

In the previous section, several topics that permeate the discussion on long-distance hiking have been reflected upon. Freedom, authenticity, and the need to get away from modern life have been explored as crucial terms that often appear in research on outdoor and nature-based tourism. The contrast between the natural and the cultural, between life on a long-distance hike and the regular, routinized life in the city, is an important part of this research and has been explored as such. This contrast, however, wouldn't be possible without our efforts to understand what "natural" is. Thus, three meanings of nature were presented, as well as their connection to LDH. Lastly, the term *sublime* has been introduced as a concept that seeks to explain the experience of awe in nature as "beyond logic," which calls for an experiential understanding of this phenomenon.

Phenomenology

"What is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others."

(Rogers 1961, 26)

Due to the growing need to study the tourist experience—a phenomenon encompassing the lived existence of tourists, locals/hosts, and all other stakeholders—phenomenological approaches have gained significant popularity in tourism research (Pernecky and Jamal 2010, 1056).

*"As a methodology, it does not explain or control the world but offers the opportunity to gain credible insights into the world as it is experienced by humans to understand one's
"lived experience."*

(Husserl, cited in De Guzman et al. 2020, 271)

Because of its focus on the lived, subjective experience, it has proved a valuable tool in tourism research (De Guzman et al. 2020, 270). However, it has also received criticism. Szarycz (2009, 48) stresses that many reports "devote more page space to the procedure than to the philosophy which purportedly guided them." Furthermore, they draw on resources that include phenomenology but also incorporate other theories such as social constructionism or postmodernism (Szarycz 2009, 48).

Szarycz's main point of critique is that researchers who embrace phenomenological thought and emphasize subjectivity, experience, and meaning are too quick to make claims about "reality" and to generalize from sample to population. This highlights the paradox of the phenomenological approach in tourism research: although the nature of the method "suggests an almost biographical intensity and a form of research in which generalities and abstractions are beside the point," its proponents are quick to move from subjective rhetoric to claims about the objective world (Szarycz 2009, 51).

Furthermore, the author critiques phenomenological studies in tourism that aim to categorize the tourist experience. While acknowledging the importance of categorization, he questions the discrepancy between the method's biographical uniqueness and such generalizations.

Szarycz validly stresses the dangers of the phenomenological approach in tourism studies. However, he also undermines the possibility that human experiences, no matter how subjective, often share many commonalities—and that categorization, although it generalizes, also aims to explain patterns within individual experiences. As a social science, it is unavoidable that social constructivism intersects with phenomenology in tourism. As a result, most tourism phenomenologies inevitably carry traces of "representationalism, or discursive idealism," with a key focus on what things symbolize and what values they defer or refer to (Jensen, Scarles, and Cohen 2015, 4).

Although this argument should not be used to justify scientific fallacies, I would argue that there are noticeable patterns in subjective tourist experiences that cannot be ignored.

Studies of LDH have shown consistent patterns in individual motivations to undertake such a trip (Basil 2022, 284), in perception and meaning-making (Heimisdóttir, Sæþórsdóttir, and Gísladóttir 2019), as well as in the therapeutic effects and creation of online LDH communities (Happ, Hofmann, and Schnitzer 2020, 2).

Henceforth, phenomenology—or the understanding of a phenomenon through subjective, lived experiences—lays the foundation of this project. The aim is to uncover the most personal and unique aspects and to establish whether patterns exist. Keeping the critique in mind, special care will be taken to construct valid categorization when analyzing and presenting subjective experiences.

LDH as a Form of Serious leisure

In the book *Serious Leisure and Individuality*, Stebbins (2013) explores the possibilities of realising oneself and exploring freedom in today's era of leisure. The author presents the theoretical framework of the "serious leisure perspective", which distinguishes three forms of leisure: serious, casual, and project-based (Stebbins, 2013, 37). Serious leisure is defined as "the systematic pursuit of an activity sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling for the participant to find [a leisure] career there, acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience" (Stebbins, 2013, 37). There are six distinguishing characteristics of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2013, 39–40):

1. The occasional need to persevere, accompanied by positive feelings from the activity
2. Finding a career in the leisure activity
3. Significant personal effort
4. Several durable benefits, of which self-fulfilment is the most powerful
5. A unique social world
6. Strong identification with the activity

These characteristics may very well indicate LDH as a serious leisure activity. They may also not. Not all long-distance hikers pursue a career-like connection with the activity, nor is it a regular hobby for many. Furthermore, it can be said that these characteristics vary considerably from one individual to another, and that they can be completely absent—or perhaps entirely present. However, many of the findings on LDH indicate the presence of these characteristics: a unique social world and the creation of online communities, as well as a devotee identity, are notable traits of LDH (Basil 2022, 2).

Happ, Hofmann, and Schnitzer (2020, 2) apply serious leisure to LDH as "an activity where participants invest significant personal effort such as skills, knowledge, and sporting ambitions and experience durable benefits as a result, with a unique social ethos that ends in social identification with the activity".

Insofar as this project is concerned, LDH cannot be observed through a strict definition of serious leisure. It could be a misrepresentation to present the experiences of some interviewees through these lenses. However, in more general terms, the discussion highlights the participants' willingness to spend their free time on a mentally and physically challenging activity

“From time to time, a bud of freedom emerges in a sudden pulse of leisure within a structured schedule, out of the established and dense agenda”

(Stebbins 2013, 14)

Studying “serious leisure” and the modern-day search for individuality, the author further provides an example of Franz Kafka’s description of a sudden decision to, at the end of his daily routine, just as he was about to engage in the usual evening practices, follow the urge to go out and walk. He experiences a renewal of energy, selfhood, and freedom in his bodily sensations.

Although Kafka went for a walk rather than a multi-day hike, parallels can be drawn. It is this liminal space of freedom within an organised structure that interests many scholars of long-distance hiking. Atari and Feldman (2023, 25) argue that the hikers of the Via Alpina “inhabit a smooth space-time in which they orient their bodies to the path and their rhythms to nature.” On the trail, they do not seek “an escape from the pressures of modern life but an alternative to the anxieties of daily life that re-centres their identity, sustaining it with meaning and hope.” The concept of such a liminal place in space and time is further developed by Brown, who connects tourism with Heidegger’s term *Spielraum*, a hiatus from routine and the everyday which allows freedom of thought and action:

“Tourism offers a break from routine; in Heideggerian language, it permits a kind of ecstasy, a movement outside of stasis, allowing tourists (if they choose to do so) to stand away from their routine life and to ponder matters of existence.” (Brown, 2012, 183)

However, Brown goes further, arguing that this experience does not have to stand as an alienated authentic existence within an otherwise inauthentic life. Tourism doesn’t only have to be a temporary relief, only to plunge back into the inauthenticity of everyday life, but can serve as a catalyst for existential authenticity and long-term life changes. It is important to note that this is only one way of understanding LDH. Not all endeavours have an existential purpose. For example, some researchers have demonstrated that long-distance hiking has come under the grip of consumerism, as some hikers show off their expensive trail equipment and engage in status competition (Atari and Feldman 2023, 25). Furthermore, some may be satisfied with the trip as a temporary relief, and some may not feel the need to substantially change their way of life (Brown, 2012, 186). Yet, I would argue that the previously discussed

unique characteristics of long-distance hiking - such as the prolonged stay in a natural environment, time spent in solitude, simplicity of walking, physical challenge, therapeutic effects, and reported benefits—make it highly suitable for a discussion on tourism as a catalyst for profound changes. Based on the previous discussion, I lay out an understanding of long-distance hiking as the ideal embodiment of *Spielraum*, within which the individual is free to explore authenticity, or whatever else one finds to be of importance. Such a view will guide this project, which allows a perspective on LDH as a unique niche of tourism juxtaposed to “everyday” life.

Data collection

A total of five interviews were conducted for this project. Four out of five interviews were conducted via video call, and one in person. Video calling provided the closest experience to an in-person interview, as spontaneity, emotional reactions, and expressions could all be considered.

The interviewee group is a homogenous one, sharing several general characteristics:

- All five interviewees are European and have completed long-distance hikes (LDH) in Europe, of which four have undertaken the famous Camino de Santiago.
- Three interviewees have also walked the Fisherman’s Trail in the south of Portugal.
- Four interviewees have completed more than one LDH in their lifetime.
- Four interviewees fall within the age group of 25 to 34 years old.
- All five interviewees are highly educated, having attended a higher education programme.

Despite this homogeneity, several factors also distinguish the participants:

- One interviewee stands out significantly in terms of age, being 69 years old. This factor should be considered, as differing belief systems, values, and life situations may influence their responses.
- Three interviewees are female, while two are male. Although gender-related factors are not the focus of this study, some interviews did reveal gender-related issues that will be presented.

- All five interviewees come from different European countries. However, it is difficult to assess how this diversity may impact the findings, or how it contributes to the differences and similarities in the interviewees' depictions of the experience.

The interviews were conducted during April and May of 2025, with a significant amount of time having passed since the last LDH for all interviewees. This time distance enabled a clearer perspective and perhaps a deeper reflection on the experience.

An interview guide was created, including the following types of questions:

- Several closed questions regarding general information about the experience – when, where, for how long, type of accommodation, distance walked, etc.
- Fifteen open-ended questions that explored various aspects of the experience, which can be divided into three main categories: the inner world (thoughts, feelings, fears, challenges, needs, and motivation), the social world (family-related issues, interactions during the hike, attitudes towards the urban environment), and the natural world (landscape and being in nature).

This categorisation serves only to illustrate the structure of the interview guide. In practice, it was impossible to separate these themes, as they were deeply intertwined in both questions and responses. The interviews evolved organically into the directions interviewees were most drawn to, with follow-up questions aimed at digging deeper into their experience.

Data analysis

I think we're born to walk, and I think we are born to be in present and with nature, and not against nature. And when we feel the wind and we see the moon, we see the stars, we see the sunrise and the sunset, each day. And you feel really that you're part of it and not just taking the resources of mother nature. I think you feel happy and you feel connected to your ancestors in some way. Because all we did back in the days was walk, walk, walk, walk. ”

(Frederik, 26, Germany)

The emerging patterns, or codes, are categorised into four main themes through which they will be presented. Although each has distinguishable characteristics, it was difficult to categorise these patterns, as all are deeply interconnected. These four categories seemed to most accurately describe the outcomes of the analysis, as well as connect them to the theoretical framework.

In contrast with the urban and the everyday

Several patterns across interviews indicated that the experience of long-distance hiking was, in several ways, a significantly different experience — not only in comparison to the participants' "everyday" life, or the life back at home where the work-leisure separation dominates the routine — but also to other types of travel that the participants had experienced. This contrast permeated three aspects: **the nature of interactions, the environment, and routine.**

Firstly, three interviewees depicted a stark contrast between the interactions they had during the hike and those they would normally have in the urban environments in which they resided: *"It also feels, in one way, that you really connect with people... Like here (referring to living in Belgium), if someone asks 'how is it going?' And a lot of times you just say it's good, you don't really say how it really is. And there (on the trail) it's like, you open up quite easy and I have the feeling a lot of people do that on the Camino."* (Joanna, 34, Belgium)

This indicates that the interviewee found it easier to act authentically during her LDH experience than in her place of residence. Another interviewee might have provided an explanation for this phenomenon:

"I think we're too distracted with all these advertisements. We have always our phone, so if you go into a subway and you analyse the situation, it looks super strange because everybody's just watching like movies, or listen to music, or like, just looking at their phone. And on the Camino, I think it's different because you, you really want to be present, present and want to live in the moment. And therefore, you will have more the feeling to connect with each other than just stare at your phone." (Frederik, 26, Germany)

Furthermore, all of the interviewees expressed appreciation for the natural parts of the trail, especially in comparison to the urban sections through which they occasionally had to pass — particularly on the Camino de Santiago:

"I did not like very much going out of a town because you get through suburbs and dumps, you know, rubbish dumps, big areas, industrial areas. I like it better when I get out, you know, to fields and forests." (Kirsten GP, 69, Denmark)

Secondly, the contrast between life on the trail and everyday life extended to the difference in ambience between natural and urban environments:

“and I know from the times before, when I went to Norway and I came home. It's really like, it's so busy. And especially in Norway, where I could go five kilometers away, and you're in the mountains and you hear nothing. But actually like, nothing. It's like, you cannot, in Belgium, you cannot find it.” (Joanna, 34, female)

While three out of five interviewees directly addressed the ambient difference, all of them demonstrated a clear affection for the natural world, which seems to be the antidote to the “busyness” and “all that noise” of urban environments. This affection could also be interpreted from the repeated “need to get away” mentioned in the interviews. Kirsten put it as follows:

“It's a space to think about other things, you know, to get away from all the noise and all the chaos and everything that's going on. Possibly also switch off from the news if you can a little bit. I think that's what at least some people get from it. Time of reflection and the simple way, you know, not... Having to go to work to do all the things that fire you up. Mainly break from, yeah, from all the activities and all the demands on you, all the things that you have and everything. You think all these things are necessary, but if you don't have them, you might not even miss them.” (Kirsten GP, 69, Denmark)

For Kirsten, the contrast between what could be called two different realities is so powerful that it would always take her two weeks to “get back” after a long-distance hike. Aside from the physical exhaustion, this suggests the emotional and cognitive adjustment required to return to everyday routine. Her train of thought aligned with Joanna (34, Belgium), who said she *“tried to give myself time to see what I wanted to do (after the Camino).”*

The urban wasn't only depicted negatively. Amelie also described a positive image of being in a city after the hike — albeit still while travelling. For her, visiting Paris was enjoyable because of the cosy Christmas, the winter ambience, and spending time with friends she had met during the Camino.

Lastly, another positive image emerged when comparing life back at home with life on the trail. Two interviewees expressed that they looked forward to finding jobs, establishing financial security, and achieving some form of stability:

“It was kind of nice (to be employed and home) because I was like, not officially employed last few years before I found this job. I had some sources of income, but I didn't have a job that you go to every day, like a full-time job.” (Pawel, 28, Poland)

Symbolism, meaning and the inner world

“I think, as they say, in Spain, everybody walks their own Camino, so it's what you get from it.” (Kirsten GP, 69, Denmark)

Thoughts on the essence of the Camino de Santiago among those participants who had hiked it were unanimous. It was agreed that the Camino wasn't the “most beautiful” trail, but neither was its purpose simply to enjoy nature. The previous excerpt indicates the strong individual purpose of the hike. “Everybody is on their own way” is an underlying belief among those who have walked the Camino. Although shaped by a heightened individual purpose, the simultaneous encounter with the same people “over and over” created strong bonds and connections. Building upon the previous thematic section concerned with the differences in interactions between everyday life and the experience on the trail, the cause of these strong bonds with fellow hikers was the emergence of deep questions, such as “why are you on the Camino”, often at the very start of a conversation.

The ascribed symbolism and individual importance of LDH extends beyond the Camino de Santiago. Speaking of her experience of group hiking in Sweden, Kirsten stated that the hike is not only physical, but that *“it's also an internal walk. You know, the sort of things going on inside yourself as well.”* Regardless of the trail, experience, or whether hiking alone or in a group, all participants ascribed a high level of importance to their inner world. For Suncem, walking the Fisherman's Trail in Portugal was a time *“to dive deeper, dig deeper. Or to just take some time to really be with yourself, see what's good, what's not good.”* Similarly, Pawel described the challenge of spending such a long time completely by himself and with his thoughts, but also the possibility of overcoming negative patterns:

“at the end of the day, you are looking through all of the day and all of your thought patterns that were active in your head from a distance. And at the same time, you feel satisfied from all the physical extortion. So it kind of helps you to overcome your negative thoughts, patterns, or to just see them in a different kind of way.”

Although the interviewees were seeking time to think deeply, reflect, and make space for difficult questions and answers, there seems to be a threshold — a point where the thoughts would go “too far”, and become “chaotic”. Because of the limitless nature of the inner world, it was crucial to have some sort of anchoring that would keep the thoughts working for, rather

than against, the individual. For Kirsten, it was having a daily theme to think about, e.g. simplicity — *“sort of an anchor to return to, if your thoughts were flying everywhere.”*

For others, visual reminders served as anchors:

“I also followed the signs, all these little shells, the sign of the Camino. Because sometimes you're like, in your zone and you're thinking about things, you don't really think, okay, where am I going?” (Frederik, 26, Germany)

Interestingly, the purpose of the Camino's iconic sign extended beyond a visual reminder to be present. Ever since she was 16, Joanna kept a copy of the Camino's sign, indicating both a symbolic and emotional connection to the idea of the Camino. Just before starting the hike, Joanna found herself in an ambiguous life situation — one in which she wasn't sure what to do next. The only thing she was sure of, however, was doing the Camino. Whether this could be called intuition or not, all participants expressed a strong appeal they had towards the idea of LDH before starting it.

It is important to point out a small yet powerful detail shared by all participants: a commonality in their character. Immediately at the start of the interview, just after introducing herself, Kirsten stated that she prefers calling the phenomenon a “walk” rather than a “hike”. For her, hiking was a term signifying a purely physical experience, and more than that, it reminded her of boisterous people who compete in distance walked, show off expensive equipment, etc. Walking, on the other hand, is a walk in the landscape — an activity that connects the inner and the outer world, and does not concern itself with competition or ego.

Contrastingly, Joanna referred to the Camino de Santiago as “the hike”, although not because of a competitive mindset, but rather due to the Camino's not-so-beautiful landscape and the required physical and mental endurance.

Lastly, another strong attitude emerged in response to the question of whether the participant had been in an “in-between” period at the time. Although she described it as a period after her studies — a gap year in which she was travelling and taking time to decide what to do — Suncem expressed a dislike towards the term. For her, *“it wasn't an in-between, it was the realest thing.”*

The allure of simplicity and freedom in natural conditions

“I’m looking at the most beautiful view in the world, but I still have my thoughts inside me, so then all the things that you are doing are making you happy and you have this strong view of this negative stuff. But the contrast is that you are in that most beautiful place and it will help you with your mental space, and also you are far away from home, so you can also see all that from another perspective. And I think it’s really helpful, if you are in those conditions, to look at the negative stuff.”

(Pawel, 28, Poland)

The previous excerpt exemplifies the connection between the inner world of thoughts and feelings and the outer world of nature—a connection that all participants touched upon in one way or another. This connection is also present in another pattern: the ever-present natural conditions that shaped the experience for the participants. For Suncem, who camped along the trail, the only daily goal was to reach the next campsite before sunset. At difficult moments, this proved to be a strong motivation: *“I had to go get to the campsite by sunset, so I’m doing it, whether I like it or not, I’m doing it anyway to get there.”*

Similarly, Frederik, who was also camping along the trail—although wild camping in a hammock—reflected on his experience:

“I was laying in my hammock at six and at six it gets dark. So I didn’t have the freedom to say, Okay, I will scroll through my phone and watch a movie or something. I was just laying there because I didn’t have battery or anything. But man, then I was just happy to wake up when the first light came.”

Furthermore, weather was another important factor to take into consideration. Rain, the cold of the night, and the heat all played a role in shaping their perception of a particular day on the trail. The harsh reality of LDH also had an attractive character. When talking about what attracted her in the first place, Kirsten said: *“Simplicity, simplicity. Okay, one foot in front of you and that’s all. And it took me a little while to learn that, you know, to get up in the morning, put on the same clothes as yesterday and just walk. But that is what’s pulling me now as well, wanting to do that.”*

Similarly, the challenge of minimal packing was something she grew fond of, as did two other interviewees. While Pawel contrasted the beautiful landscape with the often-challenging

thoughts that emerged from prolonged solitude, Kirsten contrasted the pure physicality required with the mental processes:

“The focus is shifted from thoughts and your head into your body, you know, are my feet hurting? What's happening here?”

Building upon the previous thematic discussion and the proposed anchoring, this indicates that both the material world and physical exhaustion served as potential anchors to the inner world of thoughts.

Vivid and lengthy descriptions of the natural environment sprang from most of the interviews, with participants often using the strong adjective “beautiful” and expressing positive emotions while doing so. Suncem stressed the experience of being immersed in her surroundings:

“It was just amazingly beautiful. You’re walking on the cliffs, you see the ocean, and you are alone with that wild nature, with the wind, with the sun, with the ocean, with the smell.”

(Suncem, 26, Croatia)

For her, being in nature was one of the biggest reasons she wanted to do the Fisherman’s Trail:

“You're in nature every day and that's where I wanted to be, so that's where I was.” (Ibid.)

Out of all the natural elements, the ocean stood out as the most powerful motif. All participants had a strong connection to it, having mentioned it several times, with some of the most vivid stories placing the ocean at their centre. The strength of its image might be best depicted in Joanna’s description of finishing the Camino. She didn’t feel as though she had reached the end of the Camino in Santiago de Compostela:

“And for me, the finish that felt really good was, um, seeing the ocean again. I don't know, it was really strange. I really had to cry at that moment, just because I saw the ocean again.

And it was after two months of seeing nothing of the ocean, and then you see it.”

Empowerment through physicality and shifts in perception

The discussion of fear emerged in several forms. Before commencing the hike, Suncem had an initial fear of travelling and hiking alone as a woman. These fears, she said, dissipated once she began the hike. For Kirsten, however, the fear was future-oriented. Having done all of her walks with a friend or in a group, she feared walking alone and questioned her courage to do it.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked what they think holds people back from doing LDH: comfort, self-limiting beliefs, and fear emerged as overarching topics. Although this fear had general connotations, it could be interpreted as the fear of the unknown, as Joanna described:

“Because if you never did it, you don't know what it is. I've met a girl on the Camino and she was hiking with her sister. And I was hiking alone and she was to me like, oh, you're so brave that you're doing this alone. And she was a lawyer, she had her own company. And I was like, yeah, but I think I would never dare to do what you are doing.”

Perhaps one of the causes of such fears is the physically demanding nature of the activity. For Suncem, exhaustion was a more frequent reason to reach out for support than loneliness:

“If I felt lonely, I would just call my family, but I would usually call them if I was really physically struggling, so I would just talk to them so I can continue walking.”

Kirsten also placed a lot of importance on the physical aspect of the walk, proving to herself that she was capable of doing the Camino even in her 60s: *“To me, it's also physical, more empowerment really, you know, that I feel, oh, my body can do this.”*

For Pawel, the importance of physicality extended beyond the hike itself. Speaking of his current life, Pawel appreciated the physicality of his work:

“And I found a physical job that kind of reminds me of that feeling of getting exhausted every day that you have on that trail. So it satisfies my need to let go of stuff.”

Another aspect of physicality is the sheer distance walked. Every day, participants had to walk distances of 20 kilometres or more. To some degree, Kirsten's empowerment and Pawel's satisfaction may lie in the simple fact that they had walked this distance—and the several hundred kilometres of the Camino's length—by putting “one foot in front of the other”. This leads to the first discussion on perception shifts that the participants experienced. Both Kirsten and Frederik reflected on their subsequent perception of distance:

“If I say to people, oh, let's walk to the art museum. And they say, oh, that's a long walk. And I say, oh, it's from here to there. I know if I start there, I'll be there, you know, an hour and a half later or something. So, in that sense, distance has, or the concept of distance has changed to me.” (Kirsten GP, 69, Denmark)

“I was stoked to ride a bus because at one day I drove 900 kilometres through Morocco and I was so thankful. You know, like the distance is so far, and walking 20 kilometres, it can be really, really far, especially when you have like foot pain, and I was limping 200 kilometres on the Camino because of my pain.” (Frederik, 26, Germany)

With Kirsten, there is a very tangible sense of empowerment: what was once a long distance no longer seems so, and her perception now differs from those around her. With Frederik, there is a sense of developed gratefulness for the convenience of modern transport, and an awareness of the possibilities it enables.

Gratefulness is also present in Suncem's reflection on being in nature:

“And you're so small in the middle of everything, that's so big and amazing.”

Furthermore, her stance exhibits appreciation of the surroundings and an eco-centric worldview. However, it cannot be established whether this is a mindset that was already present, developed through the experience, or perhaps strengthened.

The same can be said for another commonality found in the participants' character. When asked to give one piece of advice to somebody about to begin an LDH, all participants offered empowering yet empathetic, action-oriented advice—often without much hesitation:

- “Just do it, but also take your time.” (Suncem, 28, Croatia)
- “Simplify, and don't worry about it, you know. You can manage on very little.” (Kirsten GP, 69, Denmark)
- “Trust yourself.” (Frederik, 25, Germany)
- “Don't listen to your anxiety.” (Pawel, 28, Poland)
- “Just start, and don't bring too much.” (Joanna, 34, Belgium)

Whether such character was developed through the experience of LDH or was already present is difficult to establish. However, their advice indicates experiential learning and determination.

Discussion

Based on the previous data analysis, long-distance hiking—a highly physical activity, one which undeniably imposes natural conditions upon the individual—at the same time exists as a profoundly personal journey filled with meaning. As Kirsten termed it, it is simultaneously **“a walk in the landscape”** and **“an internal walk”**.

All participants were, in some way or another, in a **transitory period**—or rather, in need of space, distance from their usual environment, and, to varying degrees, in need of time to make important life decisions, challenge themselves, spend time alone, and enjoy nature. This aligns with the literature review and the discussed **“need to get away”**. However, what also emerged from the interviews could be juxtaposed with the former and termed a **“need for stability”** that developed after the experience of hiking—or, more broadly, travelling. Based on this outcome, it is proposed that both needs exist within the larger human need for balance and experiencing the self in different environments. None of the participants expressed the desire to hike indefinitely, stating that once per year—or even once every few years—would suffice. Based on the theoretical framework of **Heidegger’s idea of *Spielraum***, and the analysis of patterns of simplicity, physicality, and the natural conditions that shape the experience, I would argue that long-distance hiking presents a concrete example of tourism as a liminal space—a hiatus from routine—within which freedom of thought and action is allowed and encouraged. In the theoretical framework, I discussed Brown’s idea of tourism as a **catalyst for existential authenticity and long-term life changes**. Although there were lessons learned and applied to participants’ everyday lives, none of them showed signs of having lived inauthentically prior to their travels or of living a significantly “more” authentic life afterwards. Measuring such change would be, at best, ambiguous. However, as previously mentioned, **a need for distance from the everyday** was definitely present, as well as a need to reconsider their path forward. I would like to highlight two excerpts that speak to **the discussion of authenticity**. Firstly, the already discussed statement from Suncem—that the experience *“wasn’t an in-between, it was the realest thing”*—reflects a strong belief that travelling is not a temporary relief from reality but rather a very real experience, inseparable from life. Similarly, Kirsten used the same word to reflect on the experience of passing through a desolate area where bushfires had burned the forest: *“It becomes real, what you might have seen on television.”* (Kirsten, 69, Denmark)

In this way, long-distance hiking became a **learning experience**—one that not only brought the individual closer to herself, but also to the harsh realities of the world.

Conclusion

All interviewees demonstrated a high level of proficiency in reflecting on and articulating specific aspects of the experience. For some, it was the **social interactions**; for others, the **inner world**; and for some, the **natural world**. Naturally, this depended on a variety of factors—e.g. what the individual deemed to be the most important aspect, what stuck with them the most, or simply what they wanted to discuss. I admit that, in the construction of the analysis, I at times prioritised constructing a coherent view of the phenomenon over a strict comparison of similarities and differences in opinions.

However, it is my conclusion that the participants' articulations complemented each other, and each elaborate reflection shed light on that aspect of another's experience. This conversation between the interviewees that emerged from the analysis is what assures me that commonalities at such a deep level exist—commonalities in what could be considered the most private and personal of thoughts and feelings. It would be too bold to draw generalisations from such a small sample onto the wider population. The group is relatively homogenous, and long-distance hiking could be a drastically different experience for a group of interviewees from another part of the world or of different circumstances. Hence, further quantitative research is called for—studies which could establish whether patterns exist on a larger scale. However, the importance of in-depth qualitative research should not be neglected either, as it is by giving voice to the individual that keeps bland categorisations and explanations at a distance.

This project aimed to give depth to the growing body of research on long-distance hiking as a form of outdoor and slow tourism. It builds upon existing literature concerned with the **therapeutic effects of being in nature, authenticity and freedom in tourism, and serious leisure activities**. By entering with the broad goal of understanding the individual experience, the outcomes of this study specifically addressed the **travelling-everyday contrast**, the conditions of LDH that enable a profound experience, and the changes that the individual undergoes.

As the psychologist Carl Rogers stated, “*what is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others.*” In line with his words—and other philosophers’ and scientists’ thoughts on the similarities between the personal and the universal—I take a stand for the importance of a phenomenological approach, and for the meaning that several individual experiences can hold.

Positionality

It is important to state that I have myself been on a long-distance hike—an experience that sparked a high level of interest and passion for the topic. It is safe to assume that I wouldn’t have an interest in writing this paper if I didn’t have a personal connection to the subject. Considering my travel habits, as well as my personal interests, the topics of authenticity, freedom, and the natural world naturally permeate this paper. This does not hinder the importance of approaching the topic open-mindedly and conducting the interviews with as little interference and as few leading questions as possible. This is a skill I have learned through mistakes made during the process of writing this paper and interviewing the participants. Regardless of those mistakes, I believe the value of this paper lies in its effort to tap into the most personal and deepest parts of individual experiences. These experiences, as subjective as they are, turned out to have many profound characteristics in common—some of which deeply moved me, and which made it an ever-greater challenge to remain an objective interviewer.

“You can be honest, that it's enough. You know, people told me also, you have to see that you don't lose yourself in hiking. At some point, it feels like you can keep walking. It's also not so difficult. It's easy, you just have to think about where I'm going to sleep, what I'm going to eat, and you just have to walk. And that's it. It's a very simple life.” (Joanna, 34, Belgium)

On the use of generative AI

Generative AI ChatGPT was used throughout the construction of this project. However, its purpose was conversational, being primarily utilised at the beginning of the project in the visualisation of the project's theme. For example, it offered its opinion on the proposed project directions and research questions.

Secondly, once a more specific theme had been established, it proved to be a valuable tool in discussing relevant theories to be connected with the research project. It must be noted that its suggestions were used to generate ideas and as inspiration for possible theoretical construction, rather than as taken-for-granted rules, and that all propositions were explored extensively.

In the subsequent process of data collection, ChatGPT provided suggestions on the optimal duration of the interviews, number of questions and sub-questions, and other more general ideas related to research structure. Once the interviews were conducted, another AI tool, "Gladia", was used to transcribe the interviews from speech to text. ChatGPT's coding function was also explored by informing it of the theoretical framework and uploading the interview transcripts. However, certain factors that AI was not capable of considering played a significant role in the successful analysis of the data. Hence, I carried out the primary coding independently, manually going through the text of each interview.

Lastly, once the data analysis was completed—along with the rest of the project—ChatGPT was used for grammatical support, including checks of spelling, punctuation, and word order, with a strict rule not to interfere with the expression and language.

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