

Sol Calero

Agencia Viajes Paraíso

Text by Sira Pizà Airas

Ever since the first pilgrimages and crusades, the *Grand Tours* of the 17th century and scientific explorations of the 19th, the act of traveling has taken many forms and served different purposes. One of its most recent guises is leisure travel. Traditionally, this practice is inextricable from privilege. It wasn't until after the industrial revolution that it transformed into what we know today as mass tourism. Stemming from *tornos* and *tornus*—in Greek and Latin respectively—the word refers to a circular movement of departure and return, implying a temporary state of excursion. The main condition for the tourist stems from his privileged ability to return at will, which declares him a voluntary traveler among a new leisure class. He understands the world as attainable, in reach, and his access to mobility equals a certain amount of freedom through socioeconomic status. This figure, as some authors have argued, exists only on the basis of a growing polarization between the tourist and the migrant. A product of postmodern evolution, access to global mobility has increasingly become the most elevated factor of stratification.

The tourist embodies “experience” as the ultimate commodity in a contemporary immaterial economy. He personifies the collecting of experiences and sensations as yet another form of consumerism. This preeminent expression of leisure is magnified by the possibility of reporting the experience in real time through the immediate sharing of images on social media platforms, much like a contemporary public travel diary with its own value-bestowing audience.

The practice of traveling during one's free time involves, on one hand, the very concept of free time as an institution. It is at once the opposition and the reflection of work, as a mutually signifying structure, which classically reveals the exemption of work as an expression of luxury. On the other hand, it presents itself as a space of self-production. Choice produces personality and status within leisure; it engenders individualism, value, and difference. The contemporary tourist experiences travel as a reward for a life of work. They plan trips as an escape from domesticity, seeking intangible pleasures and to get away from “First World” diseases such as stress, depression, and a range of emotional disorders that distance promises to dilute, as if repairing a broken subject.

In this way, the act of tourism seeks difference and distance. It is historically Western and Eurocentric by definition, since it accrues meaning in proportion to remoteness—where landscape, culture, aesthetics, language, and gastronomy appear radically different from the familiarity of provenance. Thus, it is inherently based on otherness and the construction of a manufactured, exotic identity. It is a superficial experience of authenticity; a re-creation of an original state of being where work doesn't exist and principles of enjoyment, relaxation, self indulgence, and care are the imperative.

This experience must be reenacted in a virtualization of the enjoyable, easy-to-strip-down aspects of a place: the experience of the contradictions, injustice, specificities and nuances of actual everyday life in that same place would erase the difference between tourism and domestic life, and defeat its purpose. As much as this simplifying process is based on stereotypes, it also produces brands, which allow for an industry to exist. Places and their peoples, foods, traditions, natural resources and cultures are transformed into standards in order to be packaged, exported and consumed.

Traveling appears as the perfect materialization of the mechanisms of desire: the trip is presented as a promise, an adventure, a dream—where the chase and the projection are more substantial than their fulfillment. This is where the travel agency, with its calculated imagery, its posters and brochures, its necessary planning and timing, scheduling and preparation, is the most self-evident participant in designating and defining the exotic.

Agencia Viajes Paraíso (Paradise Journeys Travel Agency) approaches the underlying relationships present in the construction and self-constitution of countries as tourist destinations by adopting the innocuous appearance of a welcoming office space. The immersive installation takes the audience through the different stages and implications of leisure travel. Upon entering, visitors find themselves in a waiting room. A TV screen presents a series of videos by guest artists curated by Sira Pizà Airas. These contributions reflect on the construction of stereotypes, as they both mirror and perpetuate biased notions of race, gender, and identity in relation to travel:

In *Siboney* (2014), Joiri Minaya composes and destroys a mural with a tropical pattern as a dialogue between the painting of a dancing mulatta by Vela Zanetti and the song *Siboney* by Connie Francis.

Cristóbal Gracia presents *Aquatania Part I* (2016), in which he reenacts scenes from *Tarzan and The Mermaids* in contemporary Acapulco, a place of polarized socio-economic realities that suffered from an exploitative tourism industry which in turn has been displaced by gang violence.

Lastly, Josep Maynou's *Far South* (2016) portrays the domestic crusade of a disinterested pilgrim—a distracted rider too tall for his donkey, crossing the hills of the Moroccan desert.

The agency office is set in a second room. This space not only reproduces objectified clichés—tiny airplanes and hammocks, clocks displaying different time zones among fake plants—but also hosts employees of an actual local travel agency who are on-site offering their usual services during the exhibition.

In the successive spaces, the visitor is surrounded by references to the fantasizing stage of planning a trip. The centerpiece is an oversized, sculptural travel magazine whose splayed painted pages feature complex cut-outs of flora and architecture. This layering of lush projection utilizes Calero's technique of jigsawing together sheets of MDF (fiberboard), which she first developed for *Interiores* and later used as an element of her pavilions.

The vacation fantasy is finally realized in the last room of the exhibition, where one can dive into the promised environment of disconnect and relaxation—a space resembling a tropical lounge, made to meet the expectations of bridled exoticism.