

## Full Length Article

## Tourism and extraordinary ordinary life

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how nature-based tourism and everyday life intertwine to shape meaning and personal transformation. Drawing on constructivist grounded theory and evidence from observations in four protected areas alongside thirty-eight interviews with Chinese tourists, it identifies a four-stage process of becoming: departing, encountering, returning, and transforming. Informed by Deleuzian philosophy, tourism is reimagined as an immanent and open-ended force embedded within the rhythms of everyday life rather than a temporary escape or quest for authenticity. Findings challenge binaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary, showing how subtle affective encounters can profoundly reshape self and world. The study proposes a more inclusive and ontologically grounded understanding of tourism, while questioning modernist, class-based assumptions.

## Introduction

Humans, as conscious beings, actively construct experiences, seeking moments that capture attention and evoke emotion (Zylstra, 2018). In the absence of such meaningful experiences, individuals may encounter feelings of emptiness or a diminished sense of purpose (Barragan-Jason, Loreau, de Mazancourt, Singer, & Parmesan, 2023; Soga & Gaston, 2016), and respond by pursuing change or engaging in rituals that imbue life with significance (Graburn, 2024; Nash, 1984). Tourism frequently serves this role, providing an altered state of consciousness that intensifies perception and emotion (Apchain & MacCannell, 2024). This heightened awareness can evoke a profound sense of vitality, often reflected in expressions such as “*I have never felt so alive*” (Graburn, 2018; Wang, Blasco, Verschuuren, & Hamzah, 2024). As a result, tourism is commonly perceived as extraordinary, standing in sharp contrast to the assumed ordinariness of everyday existence (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Urry, 1990; Wang, 1999).

However, this binary view obscures the complexities of both tourism and lived experience. Tourism is not always extraordinary; it can be mundane, disappointing, or even distressing (Su, Gong, & Huang, 2025). Nor is everyday life necessarily devoid of meaning; it can be both emotionally rich and transformative (Zylstra, 2018). Many tourists do not travel to escape routine or existential angst (Bruner, 1991; Cohen, 2003; Wang et al., 2024). Rather, meaning is shaped through a continuum of experiences and symbolic rituals — birth, growth, love, grief, and renewal — that structure the life course (Pratt, Tolkach, & Kirillova, 2019; Singleton, 2017; Willson,

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McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013). Stewart (2007) similarly describes “ordinary affect” as a subtle yet powerful force that emerges from everyday encounters and leaves a lasting impression. From this perspective, the boundary between the ordinary and the extraordinary proves increasingly difficult to maintain, and tourism is best understood as an extension of life rather than as something set apart from it.

In the contemporary era, tourism has become a widespread social practice. No longer limited to elites, it is now embedded in the rhythms of everyday life (Cohen, 2019; Graburn, 2017). Despite calls to reframe tourism within this broader context, much research continues to reinforce a rigid divide between tourism and ordinary experience (Apchain & MacCannell, 2024; Bosangit, Hibbert, & McCabe, 2015; McCabe, 2002). Few studies examine how tourism contributes to meaning-making when situated within the arc of broader life trajectories (Collins-Kreiner, Yonay, & Even, 2018). This gap raises several questions. Can tourism genuinely reshape a person's life, or does transformation emerge through sustained engagement with the so-called “ordinary” world? Have scholars overestimated tourism's transformative potential? More broadly, is the search for meaning ever complete, or does it unfold as an ongoing, lifelong process?

Much of the literature leans towards pessimism. This stance reflects not only the methodological difficulties inherent in measuring transformation (Robledo & Batle, 2017), but also a binary framing of tourism and daily life, rooted in the existentialist tradition. On the one hand, Heidegger (1996) argued that routine offers comfort by shielding individuals from the chaos and uncertainty of existence; yet the same comfort can hinder authentic living, leading to alienation and a longing for deeper meaning (Pratt et al., 2019; Urry, 1990). Within this framework, tourism is often seen as a temporary rupture through which the individual seeks reconnection with a more authentic self (Cohen, 2003; MacCannell, 1989; Sharma & Rickly, 2019). This imagined resolution is often projected onto a distant “elsewhere” (Enzensberger, 1996), thereby reinforcing the division between tourism and everyday life.

On the other hand, strands of existentialist thought, grounded in crisis, disillusionment and nihilism, suggest that human freedom and the capacity for self-transcendence ultimately culminate in an existential shipwreck, or “naufrage” (Thilly, 1982). Tourism scholars adopting this philosophical stance may find themselves “thrown” into nihilism, struggling to provide empirical evidence of genuine transformation or movement towards an authentic self. Bruner (1991), for example, argues that claims of transformation are often overstated. Vidon and Rickly (2018) suggest that the more individuals pursue existential authenticity through tourism, the more elusive it becomes, sometimes deepening estrangement. Other scholars describe tourism as a repetitive and potentially futile pursuit that sustains a cycle of imagined “elsewheres” and the desire to escape (Enzensberger, 1996; McCabe, 2024; Varley & Barry, 2025). Although this repetition is occasionally framed as a catalyst for authentic living, persuasive empirical evidence and robust theoretical justification remain limited (Brown, 2013; Collins-Kreiner et al., 2018).

These limitations highlight the need to move beyond the modernist assumptions that have long shaped tourism discourse (Guia, 2025). The present study engages with posthumanist thought, particularly the philosophy of Deleuze, as a conceptual lens for rethinking self-transformation in tourism. This ontological shift may introduce certain tensions with prevailing methodologies, yet it offers valuable tools for reimagining tourism phenomena. As Cohen (2019) argues, such tensions should not deter researchers from integrating posthumanist perspectives into contemporary tourism scholarship. This research remains grounded in empirical tourism practice while drawing theoretical inspiration from posthumanist philosophy, and avoids drifting into purely abstract or metaphysical debate.

Following Huijbens (2021), who argues that Deleuze's philosophy cannot be adequately summarised in a few paragraphs, this study focuses on one particularly relevant concept: becoming. Other Deleuzian concepts such as lines of flight, assemblage and affect also emerge through the analysis. Deleuze's idea of becoming, articulated in *Difference and Repetition* (1968), *The Logic of Sense* (1969), and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), provides a fluid and dynamic framework for understanding transformation. From this perspective, being is not a final destination but a provisional expression within a continuous process of change and differentiation (Mo, Jiang, & Wang, 2008). Rather than returning to a whole or authentic self, becoming involves expansion in multiple directions within the immediacy of the present (Bankston, 2017). This stance supports a non-linear, open-ended approach to transformation (Thornton, 2025).

Whereas existentialist theories often interpret tourism as a response to alienation and a search for wholeness or authenticity, Deleuzian thought reimagines travel as a trajectory or “line of flight”. This concept refers to movements that disrupt or deterritorialise established structures and systems, thereby opening up space for new assemblages and affective intensities to emerge on the immanent plane of life. Such movements give rise to becoming-other, characterised by continual transformation that resists fixed identities (Guia & Jamal, 2023; Mo et al., 2008; Stewart, 2007). From this perspective, tourism is less a quest for an authentic self than an experimentation with desire, entanglement with heterogeneous elements, encounters with affective intensities and assemblages, and the forging of new connections. This process can blur conventional boundaries between interior and exterior, self and world. More broadly, posthumanist thinking promotes a flat, relational and non-dualistic ontology that challenges entrenched binaries such as human versus nature and ordinary versus extraordinary (Guia, 2025; Guia & Jamal, 2020; Rantala, Höckert, Anttila, Ranta, & Valtonen, 2024). Rather than viewing tourism as a temporary escape from “real life”, posthumanist approaches understand it as a space in which life is continually reshaped through embodied practices and encounters with more-than-human worlds (Huijbens, 2021; Løland & Hällgren, 2025; Nadegger, 2023).

This research focuses on nature-based tourism, encompassing mass tourism in natural sites, self-drive leisure travel, hiking, and camping, as a context for exploring personal transformation. It examines the dominant binary in tourism theory: the separation between tourism and everyday life. By reconnecting tourism with both daily life and the more-than-human world, this study reframes tourism as a vital human practice in the twenty-first century. It also responds to McCabe's (2024) call to reorient tourism theory by grounding conceptual development in the tourism phenomenon itself. Employing a constructivist grounded theory methodology, the study investigates the following research questions: *How do nature-based tourism experiences intertwine with everyday life to reconfigure individuals' perceptions and practices? What kinds of transformation arise through these encounters, and how do they reshape the evolving*

*relationship between tourism, the self, and the more-than-human world?*

Addressing these questions elucidates a non-linear, open-ended process of becoming, shaped by the entanglement of tourism practices with everyday life: a line of flight that departs from temporarily stabilised rhythms, deterritorialises the self through immersion in new assemblages, reterritorialises everyday life upon return, and continues to generate possibilities for becoming-other. So-called extraordinary tourism does not stand apart from the ordinary; rather, it arises immanently from it, expanding the affective and perceptual boundaries of experience (Guia & Jamal, 2023). Transformation is therefore not confined to existential authenticity, which often proves elusive, but unfolds through everyday encounters and affective intensities (Mo et al., 2008), similar to Stewart's (2007) notion of "ordinary affect", through which profound change can emerge (Thornton, 2025).

## Methodology

### Research context

Empirical data were collected through field observations at four natural sites in China and thirty-eight in-depth interviews with Chinese nature-based tourists. During the research design process, we selected potential fieldwork sites using key criteria: each site had to be a protected natural area that permitted a range of nature-based tourism activities, including mass tourism, self-drive leisure travel in scenic areas, and hiking and camping in nature reserves. Fieldwork took place between June and September 2024, China's peak season for natural disasters such as storms, typhoons, flooding, landslides, and mud-rock flows. To ensure safety and accessibility, we excluded sites where tourism was temporarily suspended or where risks were particularly high. Based on these criteria, we selected four fieldwork sites: Shennongjia (high altitude) in Hubei Province, Wuyi Mountain (low altitude) in Fujian Province, Siguniang Mountain (very high altitude) in Sichuan Province, and Mount Yu (low altitude) in Jiangsu Province.

The first three sites are iconic protected areas in China that contain both popular scenic spots and national nature reserves, enabling observation of mass tourism, leisure tourism, and hiking and camping. At each site, the first author observed visitors in conventional tourist areas and nature reserves. For example, from 9 to 11 June 2024, the first author joined a group trek in Shennongjia, hiking and camping in a wild area without facilities, marked trails, or phone signals. The route covered approximately 12 km per day with a cumulative ascent of about 2100 m (from 1000 m to 3106 m above sea level). Two subsequent days were spent observing tourists at the popular scenic sites of Guanmenshan and Jinhouling in Shennongjia. The same observational strategy was applied at Wuyi Mountain and Siguniang Mountain. Mount Yu, by contrast, is a national forest park and a regional tourist destination primarily visited by residents of nearby cities for weekend excursions. Given these different tourism dynamics, the first author conducted a one-day observation of tourists and hikers at this site.

### Research procedure

Grounded theory (GT) is a well-known research approach aimed at developing theories rooted in data (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2022; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It involves a set of systematic yet flexible guidelines for qualitative data collection and

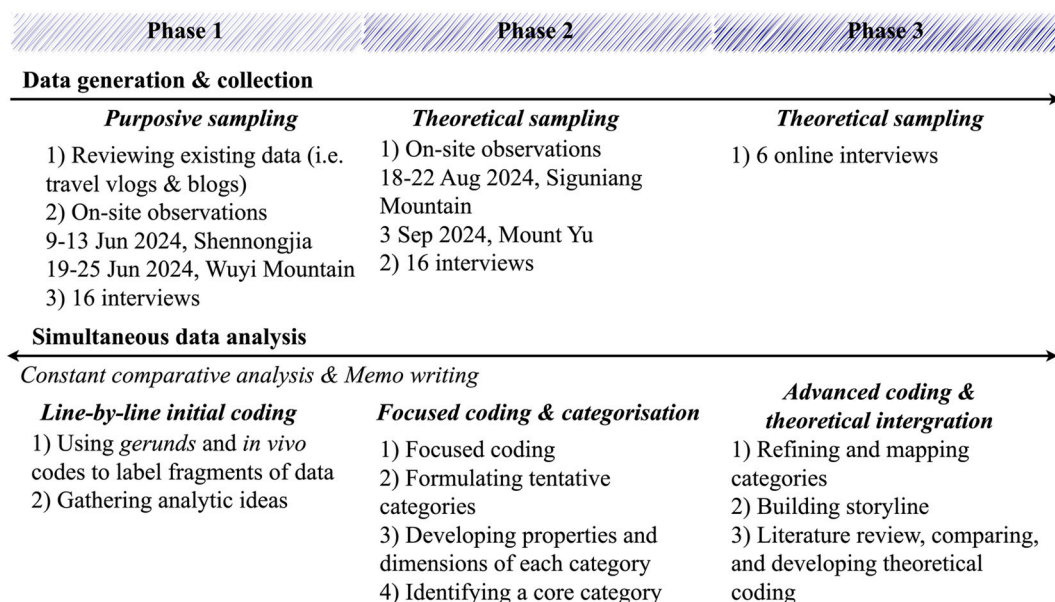


Fig. 1. Research procedure.

Source: Authors after Charmaz (2014) and Birks and Mills (2023).

analysis (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). Since Glaser and Strauss's seminal work in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), GT has diversified into several schools, including classic Glaserian GT, Straussian GT, and Constructivist GT (Rieger, 2019). In this study, we embraced Constructivist GT, as advocated by Charmaz (2014), which asserts that social reality is constructed by individuals who experience it and is reconstructed through the research process. The research procedure is summarised in Fig. 1, encompassing three phases of data collection and analysis. However, the iterative process of concurrent data collection and analysis characterises GT, so the research process is not as linear as it is often presented (Birks & Mills, 2023).

Phase 1 began on 12 May 2024. The initial stage involved collecting and reviewing travel vlogs and blogs produced by amateur bloggers about their nature experiences. The objectives were to gain a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon, refine the fieldwork topic guide, and finalise the selection of field sites. Analysis of this dataset was limited to screening and did not involve rigorous data analysis. Fieldwork subsequently took place in Shennongjia and Wuyi Mountain, where the first author conducted participant observation and recruited interviewees. Following Charmaz's (2014) guidance, the researcher took part in all activities organised by the guide, including hiking, singing, conversations, and stargazing at the campsite. This approach enabled immersive on-site observation, rather than periodic withdrawal to the tent for note-taking. Given the challenging field conditions, keywords were initially recorded in a hardcopy notebook; when permitted, short video clips were also taken to aid recall. These materials were expanded into full field notes immediately after each fieldwork session.

As rapport developed between the researcher and potential participants, informal and spontaneous conversations occurred without audio recording. Using a purposive sampling strategy, individuals who were both willing and able to share their nature experiences and perspectives during on-site interactions were invited to participate in in-depth interviews. To minimise disruption to their travel experiences, these interviews were scheduled a few days after their visits. While carefully developed semi-structured interview guides were prepared, participants were encouraged to lead the conversations to ensure their voices took precedence over theory (Charmaz, 2014). In cases where participants had more than 15 or 20 years of experience and were particularly forthcoming, unstructured interviews were conducted. By 30 June 2024, observations in Shennongjia and Wuyi Mountain, along with 16 recorded intensive interviews, had been completed. Data collection proceeded alongside line-by-line initial coding using *gerunds* and *in vivo* codes, a combination of efficient techniques to prevent forcing data into a preconceived framework. This process was carried out in *ATLAS.ti* to label data fragments (Birks & Mills, 2023). Initial coding emphasised staying close to the data, remaining open to all theoretical possibilities, and fostering analytic leads for further data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Phase 2 began once strong analytic directions emerged. The first author conducted additional fieldwork at Siguniang Mountain (18–22 August 2024) and Mount Yu (3 September 2024). Alongside observation, we employed a theoretical sampling strategy to select and interview a further 16 participants. Guided by insights from initial coding, this phase was more theoretically driven: we used a more structured, focused interview guide emphasising motivations for travel; perceptions of daily life; on-site experiences and post-trip reflections; contrasts among mass, leisure, and hiking tourism; long-term self transformation; emotional connection with nature; perceptions of “once in a lifetime” places; and the meaning of life and tourism. Focused coding, also referred to as intermediate coding (Birks & Mills, 2023), drew on the most significant or frequent initial codes to theorise both old and new data (Charmaz, 2014; Rieger, 2019). We then developed tentative categories, enriching their properties and dimensions through ongoing data collection and analysis, and identified a core category “the process of becoming” to anchor subsequent theory building.

Phase 3 entailed advanced coding and theoretical integration, moving from descriptive categories to abstract conceptualisation. Categories were further developed, enriched, and interconnected using the storyline strategy suggested by Birks and Mills (2023). From October to November 2024, we conducted six additional online interviews to address gaps in the storyline. In addition to the topics covered in the earlier topic guide, we introduced new themes, including perceptions of tourists' misconduct in nature (e.g. littering), encounters with danger, and unpleasant travel experiences. After refining the storyline, we examined the academic literature, which catalysed theoretical coding and extended the substantive theory.

To conclude, this grounded theory (GT) study employed a crystallisation approach to data generation and collection, conducted between 12 May and 5 November 2024. The dataset comprised four volumes of field notes (Fn1–Fn4) and 38 interviews, each lasting an average of 58 min (Int01–Int38; see participants' profiles in Supplementary Document 1). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, with transcripts checked and corrected against the original audio recordings prior to analysis in *ATLAS.ti*. Data analysis followed an inductive–abductive logic, allowing the GT process to move beyond description and towards abstract conceptualisation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Three coding phases were undertaken: line-by-line initial coding, focused coding, and advanced theoretical coding (Birks & Mills, 2023; see the coding list in Supplementary Document 2). A constant comparative method was employed throughout, systematically comparing new with existing data, codes with codes, and categories with categories (Rieger, 2019). Analytic memos were written concurrently to support reflexivity and conceptual development. The entire process was led by the first author and reviewed by the co-authors. In line with Charmaz (2014) and Birks and Mills (2023), the iterative nature of GT supports a self-correcting function that enables the identification and resolution of potential issues in data collection and analysis over time.

## Results

By presenting a narrative framework of the “process of becoming”, comprising four key episodes (departing, encountering, returning, and transforming), our findings show how engagements in tourism and everyday life become entangled, reconfiguring individuals' perceptions and practices. This, in turn, deepens our understanding of what transformation entails and how it unfolds through these encounters, ultimately reshaping lives. As Charmaz (2014) observes, many grounded theory studies fall short by offering only descriptive accounts. In response, we move between theoretical explanation and empirical evidence, striving to maintain a balance among analytical narrative, interpretation and descriptive support.

*Departing: Between necessity and serendipity*

*"My roommate once showed me photos of alpenglow. I couldn't believe such beauty could be real. 'The real scenery is even more breathtaking,' he assured me. That night, I lay awake, unable to stop thinking about that place. I knew then that I had to see it for myself at least once in my life." (Int17).*

Humans lived as hunter-gatherers for most of our evolutionary history, leaving us with an innate attachment to nature. This deep connection fuels a longing to return to the wilderness. Yet this desire exceeds our biological ties to the natural world.

For many people, particularly those living and working in urban environments, the daily routine breeds monotony. Numbed by the repetitive cycle of commuting between home and work, they may feel their individuality fading, their dreams slipping away, and their sense of vitality diminishing. In a society where social roles shape behaviour, individuals often present carefully curated versions of themselves that conceal their true thoughts and emotions. The relentless pursuit of success can compromise integrity and sincerity, undermining trust. Over time, innocence, authenticity, and idealism may give way to cynicism, hypocrisy, or disillusionment. In such circumstances, people may begin to feel unmoored and question the meaning of their lives and existence. As one participant noted: *"Deep within our souls, there must be desire, ideals and dreams. Yet life gradually wears them away. We are forced to submit to society, to the way of life it imposes. You are no longer yourself. How can a person remain in such a constant state of quiet oppression?" (Int18).* From such moments, the search for answers begins.

Of course, not everyone perceives life as dull or meaningless, nor the world as disingenuous or bleak. Many find joy, beauty, and meaning in everyday moments, embracing life as it is. Yet, regardless of one's outlook, the reality of life's transience is inescapable. Ageing, illness, pain, loss, and mortality cast a shadow over even the most fulfilling lives. The uncertainty of the future and the inevitability of death can sharpen awareness of life's brevity, prompting a desire to make the most of the time that remains. For some, this means seeking new landscapes, collecting meaningful experiences, and immersing themselves in the vastness of existence. As one respondent reflected: *"My life is quite peaceful. There is nothing I need to escape from. But more and more of my friends and relatives are falling ill. When faced with life itself, nothing else really matters. I feel indifferent to money and material possessions. [...] I have an urge to live fully, to seize the day, and to do something meaningful" (Int01).*

Beyond those who are awakened by the absurdity of society or the nature of existence itself, some individuals have yet to question life's deeper meaning or attempt to create their own. Their reasons for venturing into nature may appear incidental: responding to a friend's invitation, taking a graduation trip, following a hiking trend, keeping fit, or simply making use of trekking poles received as a birthday gift. Yet interviewees noted that even these casual decisions carry significance. Whether deliberate or not, the impulse to explore, to experience something new, or simply to keep moving, an act that eventually culminates in departure, can mark an opening towards a wider world and new possibilities. The act of setting off, regardless of what follows, often signals a potential shift. *"It is like planting a seed in the soul, silent at first, but one day it will take root and begin to bloom" (Int31).*

Thus, regardless of their background or way of life, the very act of departing in search of nature emerges as a quiet yet powerful force, even when the journey appears spontaneous. Some may set out after merely glimpsing a photograph of a breathtaking landscape or hearing a compelling travel story; as if struck by an unseen force, they feel nature's call stir something deep within. Their hearts race, and an overwhelming urge surges through them: *I must go and see that place in person.* The longing for beautiful scenery is the most common reason respondents cited for travelling. Yet this impulse is more than a fleeting wish. It reflects an immanent drive to move outward and to expand the lived boundaries of everyday existence. This drive is strong enough to set in motion a series of actions: seeking out dramatic landscapes, walking in the wild, heightening the senses, living more simply or more strenuously, standing on mountain peaks, pushing one's physical and emotional limits, and capturing these moments through photography. Such meaningful practices unsettle the familiar and open space for new forms of perception and connection with the world.

*Encountering: Awakening through seeing the "flower"*

*"For the first time in a long while, I feel truly alive. Life has not entirely left me behind. [...] The city is where we live, but nature is where our spirit finds its home." (Int04).*

The Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi once said, *"The world possesses great beauty but does not speak."* Many respondents echoed this in describing their immersion in nature. Confronted with an incomparable beauty far exceeding anything they had seen in photographs, descriptions once read in books suddenly became real. The breathtaking scenery expands the mind. Birdsong and the hum of insects become music to the ears. The crisp air fills the lungs, and the scent of vegetation carries a refreshing fragrance. The coolness against the skin contrasts with the oppressive heat of the city. These sensations are vivid and immediate, as real as the physical effort of walking and the profound emotions of awe, joy, gratitude and inner peace that accompany the journey.

Stepping beyond an anthropocentric perspective, travellers begin to appreciate life's wonders from a new vantage point. The landscapes before them have been shaped by geological forces over billions of years; flora and fauna quietly live out their existence in the depths of the mountains. A city-dweller, long accustomed to urban life, may unexpectedly meet the gaze of a foraging spotted deer. In that moment, the human, so often assured of their own superiority, suddenly realises how little separates them from other living beings. Both are carbon-based life forms, small yet significant within the vastness of nature. From this recognition, "a felt kinship" emerges, connecting self and world: mountains and rivers, animals and plants, and the unseen forces that shape existence. One interviewee (Int10) quoted Wang Yangming to express this feeling: *"When you do not look at this flower, it and your heart remain in mutual tranquillity. When you look at it, the flower's colours come alive at that moment."*

In truly seeing nature, one awakens not only to its presence but to one's own existence. Walking through the landscape, breathing deeply, sweating, pushing their physical limits, and enduring harsh conditions heightens their sense of being alive. Attention turns inwards to their senses, movements and emotions. Desires become simple: a brief rest to regain strength, a sip of water, a small meal. Reaching a summit, taking in the view or arriving at a campsite brings a deep sense of satisfaction. Happiness feels effortless. Something as simple as sitting on a rock and drinking steaming rice soup after a long trek becomes the greatest joy. In daily life, people may have comfort, security and abundance, yet remain unsatisfied. In nature, with so little, contentment comes easily.

In this way, people reclaim their place in nature, while the social expectations and roles that once constrained them fade into the background. For a time, status and wealth lose their significance. This is particularly evident among trekkers, who tend not to discuss work, income or social standing, and treat others as equals regardless of background. As the weight of society lifts, people recover what city life had dulled: innocence, authenticity, trust, kindness and compassion. Interactions become simpler and more genuine. Unlike in urban settings, where individuals often mask their true selves, they are more open to conversation, more willing to offer support and more receptive to help. In turn, they rediscover the warmth and goodness of human nature, both within themselves and in others.

Despite these wonderful experiences, nature is not a utopia where everyone leads a carefree existence. Across the spectrum of nature tourism, from mass tourism to mountaineering, uncertainty remains ever-present: extreme weather, getting lost, shortages of food and water, heatstroke, hypothermia, high-altitude sickness; and encounters with dangerous wildlife such as bears or venomous snakes. Navigating mountain passes and crossing streams can be treacherous; even a minor misstep may result in serious injury or worse. Fractures and sprains are not uncommon, and lives are sometimes lost. Such experiences can have a profound spiritual impact, compelling people, especially those previously unaware of these risks, to acknowledge human fragility and insignificance within nature's vastness. In the end, everyone must confront uncertainty, a reminder of the absurdity of life and death from which escape is only partial at best.

Furthermore, no matter how far people attempt to escape through travel, as long as they are with others, they inevitably conform to certain social norms and hierarchies. Even when acting on impulse, they generally adhere to the group's code of conduct, behaving respectfully and ensuring they do not disturb others. This is almost inescapable, even in niche forms of tourism such as wilderness trekking, where trekkers hike in groups for safety. Nor does the darker side of human nature simply disappear. At times, one may experience the beauty and warmth of humanity, at others, its complexity and indifference. Some refuse to help those in need, while others offering assistance are not always met with gratitude, and may even find themselves in difficult situations. Such occurrences are not uncommon and reinforce what many respondents observed: nature can awaken a survival instinct that people often leave behind in civilisation: *"Once this instinct takes over, social norms and morals may be forgotten, and human character is truly tested"* (Int23).

The utopian illusion of nature fades. Wherever one goes, the world remains what it is. In the end, one can only accept it—for this is how we exist in the world.

#### *Returning: The continuous search for "meaningful" experiences*

*"The day after I arrived home, I went straight back to work. I have never felt so energised. I am more motivated than ever. In the past, I might have procrastinated, but over these last few days, I have contacted every customer who needed a response on the same day. I just kept thinking—I want to work hard so I can travel again."* (Int02).

Returning home is an inevitable part of most journeys. In the first few days, many experience a sense of ambiguity, as if part of them still lingers on the mountain. Nostalgia fills their hearts. The natural environment, the simplicity of life, the people they met and their state of mind during the journey remain vivid in their memory. Even difficult moments soften over time, taking on a special significance. After a restorative trip in nature, the body, mind, and emotions feel reset, ready to embrace everyday life with renewed energy. Sleep deepens, mornings feel more refreshing, focus improves and the world appears more vibrant. For those who endured arduous conditions while travelling, it becomes easier to find joy in life's small pleasures. A comfortable bed, a clean bathroom and a good meal, once taken for granted, now feel like small luxuries. There is a growing realisation that little is needed to be truly content and that happiness is always within reach. The illusions of modern society, such as the relentless pursuit of money and success, begin to dissolve. In these moments, what truly matters is living in the present and rediscovering the beauty of the life once overlooked.

However, this state of heightened awareness does not last forever. As time passes and routine returns, the clarity and intensity of these experiences begin to fade. Beauty that once felt so vivid slips from memory, and doubts about meaning and existence re-emerge. Then, one day, a photograph, a travel story, or a call from a friend reignites the longing to set out again. This time, however, there may be a clearer purpose: to breathe, to live, to experience, to feel, and to rediscover another transcendental moment. Some may seek something entirely new, whether a theme park, a city, or a culture, while others will return to nature without hesitation.

Yet this yearning for nature, and the meaning found within it, is neither eternal nor linear. Over time, people seek change. Some shift from mass tourism, with its quick sightseeing, to self-drive leisure tourism, which offers greater freedom and flexibility. Others are drawn to hiking and camping for immersive experiences in remote landscapes, or to extreme pursuits such as snow mountain climbing, which bring about peak experiences. Eventually, some, particularly those who have spent extended periods in wilderness, lose interest in sightseeing and nature-based tourism altogether, turning instead to other forms of travel, such as cultural or gastronomic tourism. Meanwhile, others, despite extensive experience, retain an enduring passion for nature and return time and again, especially when life becomes overwhelming.

This shift highlights a deeper truth: just as urban life can dull the senses, so too can nature and even travel itself. No matter how exhilarating an experience may be, once it becomes routine, it risks losing its magic. As people grow accustomed to their surroundings, the heightened awareness they once felt begins to fade, creating a need for change in order to rediscover meaning and presence. The

cycle between everyday life and travel is continuous. The experiences of ordinary existence fuel the urge to return to nature, while travel itself reshapes one's perception of life. In this way, the meanings of tourism and life are deeply intertwined. As respondents noted, travel enriches life just as life deepens the experience of travel.

#### *Transforming: Heaven, earth and all things as one*

*"Nature is an essential part of my life. As long as I live, I will never stop doing outdoor activities. If age ever limits me, I will simply find gentler paths to walk. No matter what, I must return to nature; it is woven into my very being."* (Int06).

The cycle of leaving home, immersing in nature, and returning is more than a mechanical routine to sharpen senses dulled by familiarity. It sparks transformation and reshapes lives. No longer a distant escape from city life, nature becomes woven into some individuals' daily routines and spiritual longings. Like breathing, it is integrated into their existence, strolling through parks, hiking nearby trails at weekends, or prioritising long-distance nature tourism. Whether sightseeing at traditional destinations or trekking through remote wilderness, these pursuits are no longer impulsive adventures but deliberate choices. Drawn with an almost addictive pull, they seek out the world's most breathtaking national parks, iconic hiking routes or the snow-capped peaks they dream of summiting in a lifetime. To sustain this passion, many adopt healthier habits to maintain fitness. Even those with conditions such as synovitis remain hopeful of recovery, eager to return to nature on foot. When long-distance walking becomes impossible, some turn to overlanding, finding new ways to satisfy their need for the outdoors. For them, nature is not merely a place to visit. It is a purpose, a way of life.

Over time, emotions such as excitement, amazement, and a sense of newness may soften, giving way to a deeper recognition. They learn to savour the subtleties, for even familiar landscapes do not lose their wonder. They come to appreciate nature in all its forms. Reaching a summit or completing a journey is never about conquering nature. Experienced travellers understand that success depends as much on fortune as on endurance. Favourable conditions are a gift from nature, not a victory over it. And when luck is not on their side, they know when to turn back. *"Giving up requires courage. Many people do not want to admit failure. But in the face of nature, you must learn to accept it. Otherwise, you may pay with your life"* (Int19). At this stage, travelling, hiking or summiting is no longer about chasing novel landscapes, dramatic experiences or self-validation. Rather, they humbly embrace the simple act of being in nature, engaging in a quiet, personal dialogue with the world around them.

An attachment to nature takes root. For some, it fosters a profound sense of belonging. Each time they return, glance at a photograph or even think of a place, they experience an incomparable sense of happiness, fulfilment and pride. They call it their mountain, their lake, their valley. For others, however, a mere sense of place cannot fully capture this connection. It evolves into something sacred, expressed through a seal specially carved for a mountain, a shrine built in its honour or decades of devotion to a single site. Though they follow no particular religion, their bond with nature is no less sacred than the reverence given to holy mountains and lakes in religious traditions. This connection, born from deep emotional ties with Mother Nature, is something words alone cannot fully convey.

At this point, some tourists find their place in the world. As they move beyond the self, they begin to perceive existence in a more transcendental way. Mountains and rivers, flowers and trees, animals and insects and human beings are all part of a vast interconnected whole, each possessing a spirit and an inherent sacredness. Boundaries between species, race and gender dissolve, revealing a deeper unity. Such awareness is more than a fleeting moment of enlightenment when seeing the flower. It transforms into an ethic rooted in kindness, mercy and compassion, shaping both actions and outlook. They reduce plastic use, avoid food waste, collect litter while travelling and treat animals and vegetation with care. They also extend equal respect and kindness to all people, regardless of social status, ethnicity or language. They see others not as separate but as part of the same shared existence. One interviewee explained: *"Having accumulated many experiences in nature, I have come to believe that all things possess a spirit: the mountains, lakes, waters, plants, trees, rivers and seas alike. People often criticise the killing of animals, but in my view, do plants not have life as well? Yet there is no avoiding it; we cannot survive without consuming them. I can only strive to take as little as possible and avoid waste. Gradually, through this process, I feel that I treat all things kindly. Whether all things treat me kindly in return is a matter of my own fortune"* (Int10).

Unfortunately, this more-than-human consciousness and ethic have not been effectively or widely integrated into nature tourism. Across our four field trips and thirty-eight interviews, we observed man-made waste (plastic bottles, bags and drink cans) almost everywhere accessible to humans. Even on remote trails, where only so-called real nature lovers venture, where the principle of "leave no trace" is widely promoted, traces of human presence persist. However careful travellers try to be, their impact on the environment is unavoidable, especially in extreme and fragile wilderness areas such as snow-capped mountains. This raises a fundamental ethical dilemma for nature tourism: is it justifiable to satisfy one's longing for nature by intruding on other beings' habitats and leaving behind waste, including human excrement?

Feeling the call of nature and returning to it, entering wildlife habitats, making noise, disturbing ecosystems and summiting mountains considered sacred by Indigenous communities, people travel simply to experience, to feel alive, and to seek meaning in life. Are these acts of reverence or selfishness? Is nature tourism yet another form of anthropocentrism disguised as appreciation for the natural world? There is no definitive answer, but perhaps the words of our interviewees point towards a future for tourism. All species, great and small, and all lives and deaths hold meaning. For the living, the very act of being alive is already meaningful. *"Life is too short. Live, live longer, live well, and experience everything it has to offer. That is enough"* (Int27). Whether walking in a park or summiting a snow-covered mountain, in essence there is little difference from reading, resting in a garden or sipping tea on a sunny afternoon. In the end, whether through movement or stillness, we search for meaning not only in nature, but in the experience of being alive.

## Discussion

This discussion situates the four episodes of departing, encountering, returning, and transforming within a broader process of becoming, offering a new framework for understanding tourism in the contemporary era. Through these episodes, we move from modernist narratives towards a Deleuzian philosophy of becoming that illuminates the transformative capacities of tourism. In this way, the extraordinary is folded back into the fabric of ordinary life, extending debates that dissolve the binary between ordinary life and extraordinary tourism.

In *departing*, we find that some tourists are genuine seekers of meaning, prompted by philosophical reflection or by existential concerns such as alienation, the search for purpose, or an awareness of mortality (Bosangit et al., 2015; Brown, 2013; Munar, Meged, Bødker, & Wiedemann, 2021; Pratt et al., 2019; Sharma & Rickly, 2019; Willson et al., 2013). Yet this discourse continues to marginalise tourists within the recreational model. Pleasure-seeking tourists, who comprise a large proportion of the industry, are often dismissed as superficial or lacking depth (Cohen, 1979; Graburn, 2017). Our findings indicate that not all tourists who later undertake serious meaningful journeys set out in pursuit of escape or profound transformation (Bruner, 1991; Wang, Blasco, Hamzah, & Verschuren, 2023). At times, a “meaningful” journey is set in motion by incidental triggers. A birthday gift of trekking poles, for instance, may prompt movement without prior intention.

Motivations, therefore, emerge as lines of potential, arising from the convergence of particular elements rather than from fixed objectives (Stewart, 2007). Such serendipity, which may appear trivial or even absurd, often compels people to depart. It reflects the instability of immanence and an underlying sense of nomadicity that unsettles the temporarily stabilised structures of everyday life (Guia & Jamal, 2023). Within this dynamic, tourism is not merely a break from the ordinary, but a line of flight produced by immanent forces that disrupt habitual rhythms. These forces are not necessarily tied to serious quests for escape or existential authenticity; any disturbance can destabilise the fragile balance of everyday life. Seen in this light, the act of departing carries intrinsic value, initiating a process of deterritorialisation that unfolds more fully in the episode of *encountering*.

*Encountering* is often framed through dualist perspectives that describe tourism as heightened moments of sensory stimulation, reflection, and emotional engagement (Graburn, 2018; McCabe, 2024; Pratt et al., 2019; Sharma & Rickly, 2019). Nature tourism in particular is frequently imagined as a path towards vitality and authentic existence (Chen, Scott, & Benckendorff, 2017; Farkic, Isailovic, & Taylor, 2021; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Wang et al., 2024). Yet our findings indicate that this framing captures only one possible trajectory. Encounters with nature do not invariably tend towards utopia or grant access to authentic living. The illusion of nature as utopia often fades upon arrival. Natural environments carry risks and uncertainties, and social dynamics among tourists may reproduce hierarchies or undermine idealised expectations. For experienced travellers, the very act of travel can become ordinary (Apchain & MacCannell, 2024; Su et al., 2025).

Instead, *encountering* captures the interplay between humans, landscapes, vegetation, animals, weather and other environmental elements (Guia & Jamal, 2023; Huijbens, 2021). Sensory experiences such as birdsong, the hum of insects, shifting light, bodily exertion, and the presence of other tourists, alongside fleeting moments such as glimpsing a deer, draw individuals into temporary assemblages. These encounters alter perception and embodiment (Løland & Hällgren, 2025; Nadegger, 2023). They are immanent, unpredictable and often difficult to articulate in symbolic language (Stewart, 2007). Encountering is, therefore, less about reaching authenticity than about being drawn into entanglements that dissolve prior boundaries. It opens life to new intensities, orientations and possibilities.

*Returning* highlights the reciprocal relationship between tourism and everyday life. *Re-entering* daily routines often sharpens perception and heightens awareness of ordinary details (Chen et al., 2017). This suggests that it is not routine itself that dulls perception, but the familiarity of place. Tourism and everyday life exist in mutual relation, continually shaping one another (McCabe, 2002). To be away presupposes being grounded in the everyday (Cohen, 1979). The significance of tourism arises not from imagined utopias but through their eventual disillusionment, which enables what Wang et al. (2024) describe as a poetic return. This return is marked by intensified, if fleeting, awareness of the present. It resembles an epiphany more than a restoration (Sharma & Rickly, 2019). It represents a process of reterritorialisation, in which values and perspectives are temporarily stabilised within daily life. Travellers may rediscover joy in simple experiences such as the comfort of a bed, the warmth of a shower, or the pleasure of a modest meal. These insights often call into question the dominant pursuit of material success. Yet this heightened awareness usually fades, and routine reasserts itself. The cycle of departure begins anew.

*Transforming* extends the analysis beyond return and reveals more enduring change. Although repetition occurs, it does not return to the same because each experience leaves a trace in the form of habits or embodied memories (Stewart, 2007). Many nature tourists weave outdoor practices into daily life and develop personal philosophies grounded in more-than-human values such as kindness, mercy and compassion. This recalls Cohen's (1979) existential tourists who adopt an elective centre, Kujawa's (2017) protagonists who reorient their lives, and lifestyle migrants who restructure their ways of living after travel (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). Yet tensions remain. If tourists are transformed, why then does the desire for continued searching, often in fragile environments, persist? This reflects the instability of habitual rhythms and the sense of nomadicity mentioned above (Guia & Jamal, 2023), which fuels the desire to engage with heterogeneous elements and continually blur temporary boundaries (Mo et al., 2008; Rantala et al., 2024). In line with Deleuze's philosophy, transformation is not about reaching a stable identity such as authenticity or ethical living. It is a continual process of becoming-other, an unfolding without predetermined destination (Bankston, 2017; Thornton, 2025).

Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that tourism is best understood as an immanent force within life, unfolding through rhythms of becoming rather than linear progression. Departing unsettles habitual patterns (Guia & Jamal, 2023); encountering draws individuals into affective entanglements with more-than-human agents that dissolve prior boundaries between self and world (Huijbens, 2021; Løland & Hällgren, 2025); returning signals a temporary reterritorialisation, where values and perspectives are

reshaped within the everyday, even if home itself remains provisional (Chen et al., 2017; Cohen, 1979; Sharma & Rickly, 2019); and transforming ensures that repetition never circles back to sameness, but instead leaves traces that subtly and enduringly alter life (Stewart, 2007; Thornton, 2025). This perspective moves beyond long-standing views of tourism as an extraordinary ritual that temporarily suspends ordinary life (Enzensberger, 1996; Varley & Barry, 2025). Instead, it shows how life is continually unsettled, deterritorialised and reterritorialised, always oriented towards becoming-other through the rhythms of departure, encounter, return and transformation, within which the ordinary and extraordinary fold into one another.

When the extraordinary is absorbed into everyday life, tourism is not merely a quest for authenticity nor simply a form of consumption or escape, but an ordinary rhythm through which life is continually reshaped. Transformation therefore no longer depends on conquering mountains or testing limits at the expense of fragile environments. It can instead emerge in simple, everyday acts such as walking, breathing or sharing a drink (Apchain & MacCannell, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). The privilege of being a hiker, a mountain climber, or a backpacker thus dissolves. Recognising the tourist as a legitimate figure in this process challenges long-standing dismissals of their significance (Graburn, 2018; McCabe, 2002). This shift is not only theoretical but urgent, as it demands new forms of tourism that respect fragile environments, embrace inclusivity, and acknowledge the transformative power of even the most modest experiences.

## Conclusion

This research signals a shift in tourism scholarship away from modernist critiques and towards a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of travel. Tourism offers a window into the social world of everyday life and the experiences of ordinary people (Graburn, 2017; McCabe, 2002). Yet much scholarship has focused heavily on the “extraordinary” time and space of tourism, while everyday life, the ground from which the force of tourism emerges and with which it remains entangled, has often been dismissed as mundane or analytically secondary (Apchain & MacCannell, 2024). By examining how nature tourism experiences and everyday life intertwine through the process of becoming, articulated as departing, encountering, returning, and transforming, we reimagine tourism as an immanent force of life and reveal the everyday as extraordinary.

First, our findings suggest that ordinary life harbours powerful yet unstable forces concealed within temporarily stabilised rhythms (Guia & Jamal, 2023). From an existentialist perspective, these rhythms may give rise to feelings of monotony or alienation (Brown, 2013; Munar et al., 2021; Vidon & Rickly, 2018). Informed by Deleuzian philosophy, any stimulus has the potential to unsettle this fragile balance and release underlying tensions. Tourism thus becomes one of the ways individuals seek new assemblages that blur boundaries and provide provisional stability (Mo et al., 2008). Tourism, in this context, is not a rupture from life but a continuation of it, a rhythm that may diverge from or remain close to the habitual (MacCannell, 1989; McCabe, 2002). This interpretation challenges dominant portrayals of tourism as escapism, as a futile resistance to capitalism, or as a quest for authenticity (Collins-Kreiner et al., 2018; Enzensberger, 1996).

Second, our analysis addresses long-standing dilemmas in tourism, including the Tantalusian desire described by Varley and Barry (2025) and the estrangement that often follows the pursuit of authenticity (Vidon & Rickly, 2018). The resolution lies in recognising that utopia itself must be disenchanted. When the divide between the ordinary and the extraordinary is dismantled, the fantasy of the faraway loosens its hold (Apchain & MacCannell, 2024; Cohen, 2019; Rantala et al., 2024). In its place emerges a new possibility in which individuals learn to inhabit the everyday more fully. Walking, breathing, sharing a meal, or embarking on a backpacking trip is not fundamentally different in kind. This perspective counters what Enzensberger (1996) called the miserable destiny of tourism as a tool of capitalism. It also recalls the rise of proximity tourism as a sustainable form of travel and reflects a broader turn towards an Anthropocene perspective, a timely development within tourism research (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Rantala et al., 2024).

Third, drawing on Deleuze's notion of becoming-other, this research contributes to ongoing debates on transformation in tourism that Bruner (1991) questioned. Moving beyond existential narratives, we argue that transformation does not necessarily culminate in a fixed endpoint such as “authentic living” (Brown, 2013; Cohen, 1979; Vidon & Rickly, 2018). Rather, it is embedded in each episode of the process of becoming, wherein every affective encounter holds the potential to generate change (Stewart, 2007). The ongoing entanglement of habitual rhythms and tourism encounters creates opportunities to engage with heterogeneous elements, producing a subtle and continual reconfiguration of the self and its relation to the world (Bankston, 2017; Løland & Hällgren, 2025; Mo et al., 2008; Nadegger, 2023; Thornton, 2025). Transformation, therefore, is not a rare privilege reserved for the few, but a possibility that unfolds through the ordinary moments of everyday life. This perspective also invites the dismantling of degraded discourses around “being a tourist” and expands recognition to groups excluded from dominant narratives, including international Asian travellers and those engaging in sun, sea and sand holidays (Graburn, 2017; McCabe, 2005).

In general, this paper contributes to tourism scholarship by reframing the ordinary as extraordinary and by presenting tourism as continuous with the lifeworld rather than separate from it. In doing so, it advances theoretical debates on authenticity, transformation and the more-than-human, while also opening pathways for more inclusive and critical understandings of tourism. By shifting attention from rupture to rhythm, from the faraway to the everyday, and from privileged forms of travel to ordinary practices of becoming, this research underscores the vitality of tourism as an immanent force of life in the contemporary world. Although primarily conceptual, the paper also offers practical guidance for tourism development and management. It calls for renewed attention to everyday life as the ground from which tourism arises, emphasises the value of proximity destinations as sustainable alternatives, and urges a redefinition of both tourism and tourists, not as outsiders seeking authenticity but as participants in the ongoing rhythms of ordinary becoming. Their experiences reveal that the extraordinary is not a distant horizon to be pursued, but is already woven into the texture of everyday life.

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Shaohua Wang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Bas Verschuuren:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Amran Hamzah:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Conceptualization. **Dani Blasco:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Data availability

We have included our data in the supplementary materials submitted with the manuscript.

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