

VSA

Visitor Studies Association

President's Column

Ridgeley Williams

An old Russian priest walked slowly home after a hard day's shopping. Fatigued, he leaned against a wall and closed his eyes for a few minutes. When he opened his eyes, he found a queue of about a hundred people lined up behind him. After a few more minutes the man next to the old priest asked what they were queuing for. The priest explained that he was only resting. "Why didn't you say so", demanded the man. "It's not everyday you find yourself standing at the head of a queue," replied the priest.

Cultural traditions influence opinions and behavior of crowds and queuing. Growing up in post-war Britain predisposed me favorably to queues. Queues were orderly. No one pushed ahead of 6-year olds waiting for the bus. Even football crowds were jovial and friendly (although perhaps this is a case of false memory syndrome). This condition resulted not from some despotic authority or subjugated despondency but from a recognition of the queue as an effective means to an end.

An adult life spent in North America had not altered that opinion, perhaps because queues have become such an alien experience. I have never had to battle the Tokyo subway or queue for any sustenance more important than an extra glass

of wine at a reception. My recollections of King Tut, World Fair and other blockbuster exhibits are entirely positive with the crowd experiences enhancing the memories. A single difficult occurrence, which has become transcribed as a vision of purgatory, was landing at a European airport on Christmas Eve to find the ground staff on strike and a hostile ugly crowd desperately trying to locate baggage and tickets before the holiday. But even this didn't change my fundamental opinion on the usefulness of queues and goodness of crowds.

Two recent experiences have changed that benign view.

Although intrigued by the success of theme parks, disinterest in celluloid heroes, particularly of the rodent order, made a visit to Orlando not a priority. This despite a daughter who, since she could first speak, protested vacations in Europe in favor of Disneyland. A business meeting in Orlando was too good an opportunity to miss and the family joined me for a few days over the New Year weekend. First impressions were good: transportation to and between sites was efficient, orientation guides worked, tickets were easily obtained and staff were friendly and expert. But once through the gates, there were the crowds.

There was a minimum 45 minutes stand-in-line for studio performances, with no benefit to being first in line as the seating was filled in blocks not from front to back of the stadium. There was also a 45 minute queue for most of the 5 minute rides. These queues were not stationary but snaked around themselves and moved at a funereal pace that prevented abject boredom but made introductions to queue fellows more difficult. Thus, one queue for a ride, plus the ride itself, plus the walk to the next queue took more than hour. Vibrating rides through time, blood vessels, shark-infested waters proved not worth the queuing commitment

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VISITOR BEHAVIOR

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