

## National Boundaries and Place-making in Tourism: Staging the Finnish-Russian Border

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**Abstract:** In the context of tourism, national boundaries are usually discussed as controlled, dividing lines between two states and scenes for international tourism. In addition, boundaries can be significant tourist attractions. This paper focuses on the representations of the Finnish (EU)-Russian border found in the Finnish tourism landscape. Special attention is paid to the staged tourism settings where the national boundary has become an object for the tourist gaze and a place for tourism enactments. By observing and reading the tourism landscape, I will discuss various manifestations and meanings that this boundary has in tourism, and how these elements are produced. My observations suggest that the Finnish-Russian border is represented in the tourism landscape as visualized, narrated or experienced. As a part of the tourism product, representation of the national boundary has become both a commodity and entertainment, but its visual and experienced authenticity is deep enough to challenge the actual border.

### Introduction

Many of us have probably felt some excitement when crossing a national boundary for the first time. Borders are often considered as dividing lines or places of mystique, although the border landscape is similar on the both sides of a boundary. Borders delimit something to the other side and therefore they are connected with elements of excitement, difference, and even danger (Medvedev 1999). Political changes and globalization have changed the role of national boundaries, but their specific character is still obvious. Even if crossing political boundaries is now everyday activity, many boundaries carry strong symbolism and have become fascinating places to visit.

Boundaries can be conceptualized as socio-spatial constructions, which are

historically produced, discontinuous, and represented through different practices and discourses (Paasi 1996). Like places and regions, they can emerge, transform, and even disappear in the landscape or on the map. Boundaries are usually moved for political and administrative reasons, but they can also change places because of the tourism industry. There is continuous demand for new products and experiences in tourism, and therefore even territorial borderlines can transform into resources for the tourism industry. The specific character of national boundaries has been utilized to attract tourists, for example by copying a boundary, “shifting” it to another location, and making it a place for tourism enactments.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the manifestations and meanings that a national boundary can get in the tourism landscape.

I use the Finnish-Russian border as a case, because it is a good example of a national boundary where permeability and tourist significance have changed many times as a consequence of the political situation and border changes. Nowadays it is also a part of the external border of the European Union. In addition, it is possible to find the Finnish-Russian border far from its actual location as the boundary is copied and staged for tourism purposes. In this paper, the actual boundary is compared to representations of the border in staged tourism settings. The purpose is to find out how representations are produced and places made in the context of tourism.

The discussion is mostly based upon observations and reading of the tourism landscape on the Finnish side of the border. I approach the tourism landscape as a tourism text, which is produced by and used in the tourism industry as well as other social, economic, and political institutions. According to a broad understanding of texts adopted in cultural studies and also in geography, landscapes are cultural texts which can be read and interpreted like written texts (Barnes & Duncan 1992). Because of multiple readings and interpretations, cultural elements usually get various manifestations and meanings in the tourism landscape. This is also evident in the case of the Finnish-Russian border.

## Relationship between borders and tourism

Political boundaries are a significant part of tourism. International tourism is based on crossing national boundaries, and many

border areas have developed into important tourism destinations. Especially on the peripheral borderlands, tourism is often considered one of the most important developmental factors for the regional economies (Butler 1996; Saarinen 2003).

According to Timothy (1995, 2001), there are four different approaches to examining the relationship between borders and tourism. National boundaries are often considered *barriers to tourism*, something that makes it more difficult for tourists to travel to another country. Permeability of borders may change from a totally closed border to an open one, but nowadays many borders are more economic or social, than military barriers. During the last two decades the roles of borders have transformed to cooperation areas and contact zones (Häkli & Kaplan 2002). With enlargement of the European Union, freedom of movement has increased and travelling has become easier inside Europe. Boundaries have transformed into *lines of transit*, constituting a part of the travel route from home to a destination area. Consequently, this approach does not consider borders to be the main reason for travelling, but their significance is more indirect.

Furthermore, tourism has physical, economic and socio-cultural impacts and thus tourism *modifies border landscape* (Timothy 2001). A borderline is usually marked on the ground, and there are different border-related constructions and tourism services that become visible in the border landscape. Besides the physical landscape, tourism leaves marks on the socio-cultural landscape of the borderland (Raivo 1996; Paasi & Raivo 1999). In addition, the permeability of the border has an influence on tourism development on the borderlands. A boundary may

hinder natural development of a tourist region, and it also affects what kind of tourism landscape can be constructed near the boundary. Hence, a boundary can also modify the tourism landscape.

Borders can become *tourist attractions and destinations* as well. Some borders interest tourists because of their strong symbolism or historical significance. For example, the ideological boundary between Eastern and Western Europe has fascinated tourists both during the Iron Curtain and after its collapse (Paasi 1996; Medvedev 1999). Besides modern-day borderlines, relict boundaries, border monuments, and boundary marks are important tourist attractions. Timothy (2001, 2006) approaches political boundaries as attractions from two different perspectives. First, the borderline itself and different demarcation constructions can be enough to make the border attractive. Visiting the boundary may be for some tourists the most significant motivational factor of the whole travel (Timothy 1998). In addition, some regions adjacent to international border crossing points attract a great number of tourists because of additional services, which have been created mainly for tourist usage. In this second perspective the border can be conceptualized as a tourist destination (Timothy 2006).

In this paper, all of these approaches are intertwined. The Finnish-Russian border is mainly discussed as a tourist attraction and a modifier of the tourism landscape, but the actual borderline is also manifested in the tourism landscape as a line of transit. Furthermore, during the period of the Soviet Union the border hindered tourism mobility and affected tourism development on the borderlands.

## Production of an attraction and the question for authenticity

To become a tourist attraction, a sight has to be defined and made visible in social and cultural practices, above all in the tourism landscape. Visualizing the attraction is a process whereby meanings are created for places by naming and marking them (Duncan 1993; Raivo 1996). MacCannell (1999: 43-45) discusses this process as the *sight sacralization*, which takes place through different stages: naming, framing and elevation, enshrinement, mechanical reproduction and finally, social reproduction. In the first phase, a sight is differentiated from similar objects by attaching the meanings of attractiveness or uniqueness to it. Then a sight is marked and exhibited for visitation and tourist consumption. Attractions also need physical markers, or *signifiers*, like road signs, guides and monuments, to become concrete in the landscape.

The meaning of an attraction is deepened through enshrinement and mechanical and social reproduction (MacCannell 1999: 45). In the process of enshrinement a single object is exhibited and elevated to the symbol of an attraction. Then it is represented and reproduced in different tourism practices. Probably the most common way to reproduce and memorialise an attraction is photographing. Tourists tend to document sights as evidence of visiting some particular attraction or participating in unusual activities. According to Urry (2002), photographing is an expression of the *tourist gaze* which is often targeted at peculiar and remarkable objects. Destinations constructed around specific locations like national boundaries

are often this kind of attraction. Besides photographing, attractions are reproduced through diplomas, t-shirts and other commodities, which are sold for souvenirs. Tourism marketing, narratives of guides, and even tourists' own experiences are also ways to reproduce an attraction. When tourists participate in tourist activities they simultaneously reproduce an attraction, thus production and consumption are intertwined in tourism. Furthermore, attractions can be reproduced outside of the tourism industry. For example, companies, municipalities and regions are often named after famous attractions for image purposes. MacCannell (1999) discuss this as the social reproduction of an attraction.

In the touristic place-making, original sights may become replaced with more spectacular constructions. Sometimes attractions are copied and even shifted into more favourable locations. This raises some questions regarding the authenticity of an attraction. In the study of tourism, there has been a lot of discussion about the concept of authenticity and its various connotations. Originally, authenticity was discussed as authenticity of origins and a search by tourists for authentic experiences (MacCannell 1973, 1999). Recently, attention has turned to constructed and subjective authenticity. From a constructivist perspective, authenticity is socially constructed, and everyone has their own criteria to define it (Wang 1999; Cohen 2007). This means that an attraction can be experienced as authentic even if it is not authentic from the perspective of objective authenticity.

MacCannell's much used concept of *staged authenticity* is also useful in this study. It refers to a situation where some cultural

elements have been exhibited for tourists, that is, set in a front region, whereas some other elements are kept in a back region away from the tourist gaze (MacCannell 1973). Staged authenticity was initially used to describe the relationship between hosts and guests, but I think the concept is more generally applicable in different tourist settings. In the context of the Finnish-Russian border, the national boundary is discussed as a part of the tourism landscape in two perspectives. First, I approach the border as *an actual boundary*. Second, I consider the Finnish-Russian border as *a representation of the actual boundary* which has been separated out of its original location and reconstructed for a staged tourism setting.

## The Finnish-Russian border in the tourism landscape

The Finnish-Russian border is a 1 340 km long national boundary, which has a great historical and geopolitical significance. For centuries it has been the border between East and West, which was probably best seen after the Second World War when it became a part of the Iron Curtain polarizing Europe. The borderline has changed in nine peace treaties, and permeability of the border has varied much. However, the Finnish-Russian border is not just a borderline between territories of two nations but a significant part of the tourism landscape on the borderlands.

Representations of the Finnish-Russian border in the present-day tourism landscape can be approached from three different viewpoints (Figure 1). First, I am discussing

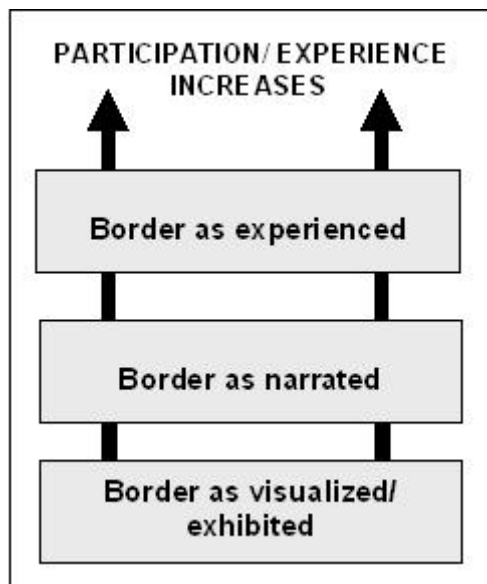


Figure 1. A national boundary in the tourism landscape.

both the actual boundary and representations of the boundary in staged tourism settings as *visualized and exhibited*. In the second viewpoint the border appears as *narrated*. In addition, the border is represented in the tourism landscape as *experienced*, which I consider to constitute the third perspective to the border.

### The border as visualized and exhibited

First, an actual boundary is probably best visible at border crossing points. Barriers, fences, customs buildings and border guards performing border checks, are manifestations

of the demarcation constructs of a border, whereas tax-free shops, exchange offices and other services refer to a border as a tourist place. At the moment, there are nine international border crossing points and 16 temporary border crossing points between Finland and Russia. The latest international border crossing point was opened in Kuusamo in 2006. On the Finnish-Russian border, demarcation constructions are also found along the border zone which is up to three kilometres wide. The mysterious character of the border is enhanced by a border zone permit which is needed to have access to the border zone.

Besides demarcation constructions, the Finnish-Russian border is often represented through sights and destinations connected to the Second World War. For example, *Raatteen tie*, the road where heavy battles occurred in Suomussalmi during the Winter War in 1940, is a place where war memorials and border attractions are combined. There is a restored defence line, a war exhibition, a sentry museum near the border zone, and many monuments through which the war and the border have been made visible along the road. Another example of connecting the war history and border landscape is *Taistelijan Talo*, the Fighter's House, which is located in Ilomantsi. In the backyard of the house there is a border crossing point and a border zone marked on the ground (Figure 2). However, it is not an actual boundary but a copied and staged landscape which constitutes a part of the war exhibition. It looks quite authentic, but in reality, the blue-white and red-green boundary marks are not used to mark a border zone but a borderline, which cannot be located just in the backyard of the tourist attraction.

The same kind of copied landscapes are created in the case of war constructions like



Figure 2. The staged border crossing point in the backyard of Taistelijan Talo (Photo: Tanja Löytynoja 26.7.2006).

trenches and dugouts along the Finnish-Russian borderland. Some of them are remade for exhibition purposes, but many dugouts have been constructed by tourism companies, thus they are seen as exotic stages for programme services. Tourism companies have also used the Finnish-Russian boundary marks to decorate their company and to create a setting for activities. For example, *Riihivalkea*, the company operating in the old border guard station in Kitee, has transformed boundary marks in front of the entrance. In addition, there are a couple of tourism companies which have constructed their own border crossing point to serve tourism purposes.

However, all border monuments are not referring to the war. A good example

of using the border as an attraction is again from Ilomantsi, where in 1996 the monument of *the Easternmost Point of the European Union* was founded just because of the specific geographical location. The monument was founded by the local Rotary Club for “the symbol of friendship, cooperation and peace” in Lake Virmajärvi. Since then, local tourism organizations and the Border Guard have developed the place by constructing small-scale tourism infrastructure, like a parking place, a hut with camp-fire and information signs, and creating some programme services. For example, guided tours include guidance, drinking to a welcoming toast at the monument, photographing the monument and dinner around the camp-fire. As

an expression of the visit, participants also receive a diploma. What makes this attraction fascinating is its location on the border zone. Tourists must have a border zone permit to get there, and because of the very peripheral location the easternmost point is mainly visited by some tourist groups and place collectors.

Border theme is often connected to other themes like local culture and heritage. Very much used in the context of the Finnish-Russian border is the eastern cultural heritage, which can be considered to include, for example, Orthodox religion and culture, Karelian folk culture and the heritage of Kalevala, the national epic of Finland. This point is illustrated well in the case of *The Bard and Border Way*, the first official travel road in Finland, established in the 1960s. This road, which is nowadays also known as *The Via Karelia Route*, runs through Eastern Finland starting from Vaalimaa, following the Finnish-Russian border and reaching until Kellosekä in Salla. It is a tourism route that is over 1 000 km long and the road has been marked with brown signs and the logo RR. Along the road it is possible to visit border-related attractions, mainly various war memorials and other attractions referring to the war history or Karelian culture.

### **The border as narrated**

Second, the Finnish-Russian border is manifested in the tourism landscape through narratives. There are many true stories connected to the actual boundary. Stories which deal with the history of a border or the process of demarcation are usually written, but they are also narrated by border guards when visiting on the

boundary. For example, the Easternmost Point of the EU is sometimes presented to tourists by border guards, thus it is not only a geographical extreme point, but a historical attraction as well. At this point the borderlines of various ages are meeting; the northern part of the boundary is from the year 1617, whereas the southern part was demarcated in 1940. It is also possible to see one of the relict boundaries of the Winter War near the monument.

Border-related stories are also made for tourism purposes. Narratives are utilized in tourism marketing, for example in brochures, to raise interest in an attraction. Stories used in tourism promotion or told by guides can be based on reality, but they are often added on fictitious elements. Narratives of everyday life in the vicinity of the boundary can be embellished with stories about historical events, trespassing and other occasions which “are told to have taken place right here”.

Besides the history of the Finnish-Russian borderline, some other stories are connected to the Easternmost Point of the EU. In this location, tourists are usually told about the foundation of the monument. In addition, there is an interesting story concerning the relocation of the attraction. In 1996 when the monument was founded, it was not built exactly on the easternmost point. The actual extreme point is located on the nearby island but because of difficulty in reaching it, the point was “shifted” to the mainland. Anyway, the real Finnish-Russian boundary mark can be seen at a distance from the place of the monument. Furthermore, this small movement is not the only transformation that the point has encountered. Since the enlargement of the EU in 2004, the Easternmost Point of the European Union is not actually located in

Ilomantsi or even in the territory of Finland. At the moment the actual easternmost point can be found from Cyprus. However, the representatives of the two countries have made a deal that Finland can keep the easternmost point, whereas Cyprus can promote itself as the South-Eastern Point of the EU (STT 2004). Despite that, Ilomantsi is mainly marketed as the Easternmost Point of the EU. However, in some brochures the name of the attraction has been corrected to the Easternmost Point of *the continental EU*. It seems that authenticity of the location does not matter so much – through tourism marketing it is possible to produce the desired image and stand out from the other places.

### The border as experienced

Third, the border becomes a part of the tourism landscape through the experiences of tourists. The Finnish-Russian border can be experienced when crossing it, doing tax-free shopping, or participating in different border-related activities. As already noted, for some tourists crossing a national boundary can even be the culmination of a trip. Even if the border is not the main reason for travelling, participation makes it possible to experience the border more deeply than just by seeing, reading or listening to stories from it.

The Finnish-Russian border can also be crossed in the context of programme services. Some tourism companies have the border – either the actual location or a staged one – included in their programmes. It is possible to visit a border crossing point, participate in a cross-border snowmobile tour or a cultural tour and take part in evening gatherings which include the

border crossing. In the latter case, the border is staged, but tourists are made to believe that they have crossed the actual boundary. In this paper, I discuss two companies that organise these kinds of staged border crossings. The discussion is based upon observations and interviews of tourism entrepreneurs.

Both of the companies have the same idea of including the border crossing in their Russian-themed evening gatherings. They use the border crossing and border formalities as an extra programme, as surprise element, when transferring participants into a wilderness resort for dinner, music and other get-together programme. Because of this surprise element, I designate these companies A and B, as they do not want to be revealed. Company A is operating in one of the border municipalities, but the staged border crossing is not located in the vicinity of the actual boundary. On the other hand, company B is also located in Eastern Finland but in a municipality which does not have a common border with Russia.

Border formalities start in both of these cases when the bus is approaching the wilderness resort on a small side-road. A couple of “Russian border guards” are suddenly asking to pull over the bus, coming in to the bus and asking for passports. “Russian border guards” wear uniforms, speak Russian, carry guns and act like actual border guards, so tourists usually believe it is a real border check in a temporary border crossing point. After a while tourists are asked to leave the bus. They are offered Russian vodka and “border guards” are asking them to visit their post. A barrier is opened and tourists follow “border guards” on foot to the nearby dugout locating in the “Russian side” of the border. The



programme continues with dinner in the dugout.

Except for a group leader, tourists do not know beforehand what is going to happen. After the programme a group leader usually tells people that the events have been staged. According to entrepreneurs of these companies, most of the tourists actually believe that they have crossed the Finnish-Russian boundary. The entrepreneur of company A describes the situation as follows: “--- *There is ‘Vladimir’ wearing a uniform on the border. There are barriers and everything else, and a Russian sign on the boundary. It is made up, this crossing point. And it is a piece of theatre, all of it is theatre. It is such great drama that when you go there, it is a play in which you participate, and you imagine that it is a real thing. ---*” (translated by the author). Even if border constructions do not exactly look like the actual boundary, tourists get the feeling of authenticity because of setting, enactment, and their own participation.

According to Cohen (2007), unplanned or unexpected sights and events are the most authentic and memorable experiences of the trip. Thus it is understandable that the companies want to keep their border crossings as surprises for tourists. Company A has included the fake border crossing in their programmes for almost 20 years now, beginning in 1988. At first the surprising border crossing was a part of snowmobile tours, but the company constructed a permanent setting with a barrier, a fence, a Russian sign, and soon, boundary markers in the forest. Despite opening up the Finnish-Russian border and increased tourism mobility, crossing the border is still a fascinating experience for many tourists. This has also been noticed by company B, which has organised fake border crossings since 1999. Both of the entrepreneurs

emphasise that not just foreign tourists believe they have crossed the border, but most of the Finnish tourists as well.

## Conclusions

The Finnish-Russian border is manifested in the present-day tourism landscape both as an actual boundary and staged tourism setting. Even if a function of the border has changed, the Finnish-Russian border is still experienced as an exciting attraction. Tourism companies have noticed the interest of tourists in the border, and consequently, the border landscape is copied and reproduced for tourism purposes.

In this paper, I have discussed the Finnish-Russian border and its representations through three different perspectives. The border appears in the tourism landscape as visualized/ exhibited, narrated, or experienced. These categories are partly overlapping, thus visual landscape and border-related narratives can be a part of the experience. The classification is followed by the idea that participation by tourists, and their experience, increases when the border is approached through narratives or personal experiences. For some tourists, a sight itself and its visual representations may be the most important factor in an attraction, but usually some other elements are needed to make an attraction fascinating. In the cases of staged border crossings, border formalities are connected to a wider context, the Russian theme. It is also possible to experience the attraction by using various senses. Visual representations (staged border constructions, costumes) are completed with sounds (Russian), taste

(vodka), and action (asking for passports, crossing the border, the whole enactment). In this tourism product, the Finnish-Russian border has transformed from a territorial borderline into a *place of experiences* (Cresswell 2004).

In the staged tourism settings the boundary is not only reproduced but also dramatized. Copied landscapes can sometimes be more impressive than the authentic ones, and in the long run the representation may even become more significant than the original, eventually replacing it, as stated by Baudrillard (1983). As the example of the Finnish-Russian border has shown, it is not necessary to travel across an actual boundary, as a border can be experienced in staged tourism settings too. The fact that the Finnish-Russian border is not actually located in the backyard of the tourism company or in the scene of border formalities does not seem to be so important to tourists. It is enough that the representations of the border or the enactment of border crossing is experienced as authentic.

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