



“As a geographer, I consider interdisciplinarity the key to understanding the intricate issues facing the tourism industry in the Barents region.”

Alix Varnajot

PhD Student,

Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

alix.varnajot@oulu.fi

I'm a French geographer working as a PhD student at the Geography Research Unit of the University of Oulu. I'm a part of the Academy of Finland's RELATE Centre of Excellence, engaged in arctic tourism, imaginaries, and bordering processes. My research has since 2016 focused on social and cultural construction of the Arctic from a tourist perspective. I also take part in PhD activities organized by the REXSAC Nordic Centre of Excellence funded by Nordforsk, where we study how industries such as mining, reindeer husbandry, and tourism are impacting environments and societies of Greenland, Svalbard, and the Barents Euro-Arctic region (BEAR).

I completed my BA in geography and urban planning at the University of Nantes, western France, in 2013. During this BA, I had the opportunity to study Nordic geography for a year (2012–2013) at the University of Bergen in Norway. My trips to northern Norway were my first acquaintance with the North, the Arctic, and the BEAR region. Then followed an MA in sustainable development engineering and Arctic studies, completed in 2015 at the University of Versailles, France, and in collaboration with the CEARC (Cultures, Environment, Arctic, Representation, Climate) Research Centre, one of the non-Arctic UArctic members. My Master's thesis focused on climate change impacts on tourism activities in the Swedish communities of Jokkmokk and Arjeplog, comparing IPCC projections with entrepreneurs' experiences of the field. It also emphasized the potential challenges and opportunities generated by changing climate for the tourism industry. In addition, I had the opportunity to write my master's thesis as an intern at the Department of Geography and Economic History at the University of Umeå in the spring of 2015. A doctoral project in the geography of Arctic tourism was thus a logical next step.

My PhD project explores the borders and the bordering processes in Arctic tourism, as well as the social construction of the borders of the Arctic from a tourism geography perspective. In this, the Arctic Circle represents the main subject of study, as it can be comprehended both as a geographical border and as an object. Indeed, the geodetic line of the Arctic Circle is the most common parameter to delimit the Arctic from the rest of the world, both in popular representations and in academic tourism literature, and is also marked on the ground by different types of landmarks that have become tourist sites. My main argument is that the Arctic Circle is a porous border in tourism studies for two reasons. First, some features commonly characterizing the Arctic as a cold and cryospheric environment or inhabited by iconic wildlife can be found far south of the Arctic Circle. Tourism entrepreneurs take advantage of this by branding themselves as Arctic and thus implant the idea of being in the Arctic in tourists' minds.

Second, the Arctic Circle is not necessarily seen and felt as a border from a tourist point of view, as tourists do not always know the Arctic Circle as a location. This may call into question its relevance as a border line of the Arctic in the scope of tourism.

Another aspect of my project is related to tourist practices around Arctic Circle landmarks. Rovaniemi provides a fruitful case to observe and assess tourists' behaviours and practices, as the Arctic Circle's landmarks are located in one of the most popular sites in the Arctic, namely the Santa Claus Village. The Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi has become one of the most visited and photographed sites in the whole Arctic, where thousands of border-crossings can be studied thanks to an ethnographic approach. The project here is to assess how tourists interact with the Arctic Circle as an object and how its landmarks have become tourist sites that can play key roles in generating common behavioural patterns among tourists, despite the amorphous characteristics of such a social group.

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries, and the Arctic is no exception. All the circumpolar countries have embraced the tourism industry. Tourism in the Arctic is very diversified with various high and low seasons and related activities. The Arctic is also highly vulnerable to human activities, and mass tourism practices have already arrived in some areas of the BEAR region, such as Rovaniemi in December or the Lofoten Islands in summer, affecting both local environments and societies. Tourism studies also entail topics such as commodification of indigenous cultures; land competition with other industries (mining, hydropower, etc.); climate change-related issues; natural areas management; statistics; social and cultural construction of places; tourism as a geopolitical tool, etc.

As a geographer, I consider interdisciplinarity the key to understanding the intricate issues facing the tourism industry in the Barents region. What could be a more interdisciplinary discipline than geography? I locate my project at the crossroads of ethnography, border studies, and tourism geography. Furthermore, because I appreciate the importance of interdisciplinarity, I have participated in several summer schools organized by the Norwegian Scientific Academy for Polar Research in 2015 and 2017, and by the Ecologic Institute in 2015, that have allowed me to develop a broader outlook on the Arctic and worldwide issues at different scales. Interdisciplinarity means always learning from others, which is a significant advantage for an early career scientist and which will hopefully be beneficial also in my future academic career.