Reading Kierkegaard in Las Vegas

The AAG will hold its 2009 Annual Meeting in Las Vegas. Yes, that's right: Las Vegas. Now, it is taken for granted that you will enjoy your time actually spent in the AAG meetings, with thousands of scholarly papers, research presentations, and panel discussions on themes ranging from the classically geographic to the very latest on our revolutionary new geographic technologies. And with an expected attendance of nearly 8,000 geographers from around the world, you are probably already looking forward to meeting and interacting with interesting colleagues and friends, old and new, while in Las Vegas.

However, aside from all this, I know that the question foremost on the minds of most potential attendees is not the quality of the AAG meeting experience itself, which is assured, but rather how one can avoid the contaminating and corrosive effects of Las Vegas’ well-known seamy side: the gambling, the glitz, the gaudy, and the inappropriate. Here I can only speak from personal experience.

The last time I was in Las Vegas was for a small meeting on the impacts of the “first” major energy crisis. I was just out of graduate school and recall walking along the main casino strip, despite the topic of my meeting. But after quickly losing a couple of dollars that I didn’t have to spare, I spent the rest of my spare time there reading Kierkegaard by the side of the pool. I still have vivid memories of the pleasures and irony of reading Kierkegaard in Las Vegas (you will think I’m making this up but it is true: the book was K’s *Purity of Heart*).

So when the AAG Council unanimously decided to hold our AAG Annual Meeting in Las Vegas for the first time, my vote was the only abstention. I abstained on the vote not on principle or because I particularly opposed the idea but because I knew I would be the first one to receive any complaints about the city’s “other qualities.” The argument that finally carried the day during the Council’s deliberations was Alec Murphy’s point that, as geographers, we are concerned about understanding that which is on the face of the earth, and that we cannot simply ignore the fastest growing urban area of the United States just because it is Las Vegas.

Despite its controversies, Las Vegas does present a great many advantages for visiting geographers of all stripes. Its physical, cultural, and economic geography field trip opportunities are phenomenal. It is perhaps the ultimate postmodern city. It presents stark environmental and natural resource conflicts. It provokes unique economic, cultural and social geographic questions. It is a city of immigrants and migrants yet also has one of the most highly unionized workforces in the U.S. (the AAG’s primary hotel, the Riviera, is a fully unionized hotel). Advanced GIS programs are fully integrated into most of its urban planning and environmental assessment processes at very sophisticated levels. And its tourist economy is an international phenomenon in a league of its own.

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Two new AAG books, Aspiring Academics and Teaching College Geography, are now being supported by a companion website available at www.pearson-highered.com/aag. The books enhance the preparation of faculty in geography and related social and environmental sciences. The website is designed to promote the practice of community-based faculty development in an effort to improve the climate of support for graduate students and early career faculty. In practice, this means making available information and resources about effective practices for developing academic professionals, sharing that knowledge openly in academic departments and through professional networks, and providing a means for individuals to contribute their own advice and materials in a spirit of collegiality and sharing of support. A variety of resources are available on the website to support this vision. Visitors can access a collection of activities for use in professional development workshops, graduate seminars, and faculty mentoring programs. The activities support the chapters in Aspiring Academics and Teaching College Geography and were written by geographers with input from faculty development professionals. Many of the activities are based on materials developed for the Geography Faculty Development Alliance workshops. Examples include creating time management logs, analyzing ethics cases, using a coherence matrix to design research proposals, responding to manuscript reviews, creating a teaching portfolio, preparing a tenure dossier, and using active learning strategies in large classes.

In addition, registered users can access discussion forums on topics that many new scholars report are among the most stressful at the beginning of their careers. These issues span course design, student assessment, responding effectively to reviews of research manuscripts, structuring grant proposals, and balancing work with home life. Because many of these issues are not systematically discussed in graduate programs, the hope is that the website will provide ready access to advice and resources that may otherwise be unavailable locally to graduate students and faculty.

The value of the discussion forums will be further enhanced by the ability of registered users to contribute their own resources to share with others. Many types of contributions are sought, such as:

- lab activities for physical and human geography courses
- GIS exercises
- active learning exercises
- problem-based learning activities
- field studies
- course syllabi
- copies of funded grant proposals
- activities for professional development workshops

All readers are encouraged to visit the Aspiring Academics and Teaching College Geography website and participate in the development of this new resource. Both books were produced through the AAG’s Enhancing Departments and Graduate Education (EDGE) Project. For more information about the books or the website, please contact the AAG’s Director of Educational Affairs, Michael Solem (msolem@aag.org).

Aspiring Academics and Teaching College Geography are published by Pearson Prentice Hall. To order these books visit www.aag.org/edge/edge_materials.cfm.

The immediate region surrounding Las Vegas is home to some of the most spectacular physical landscapes in the world, and dozens of AAG field trips are being planned to explore these features of the region. The Grand Canyon, Zion National Park, Death Valley, Bryce Canyon, Valley of Fire, Red Rock Canyon, Lake Mead, and dozens of other geographically fascinating places are easily accessible by organized AAG field trips, personal rental car, or inexpensive commercial excursions from Las Vegas.

The moral of this story is that what you do in Las Vegas will be your decision. As is the case for most residents of this fastest growing urban area in the U.S., the gambling and glitz can be eschewed for a world of other activities. If AAG sessions, fabulous field trips, cutting edge research, and host of other events are not sufficient distraction, keep in mind that there’s always Kierkegaard by the side of the pool.

For more information on the AAG Annual Meeting, which will be held March 22-27, 2009, please visit www.aag.org. I look forward to seeing you all in Las Vegas (at poolside).

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For a description of local landscapes, parks, and wildlife within two hours of Las Vegas see Jill Heaton’s article beginning on page 1. For more on AAG field trip and workshop proposals, see page 8.