

Visualizing The Archipelago: A Critical Analysis of Drone Photography, The Vertical Gaze, And Tourism Representation on Pulau Tuba

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Abstract

The increasing use of drone photography has changed how tourism destinations are visually represented and consumed. This study examines how researcher-produced drone photographs construct the visual representation of Pulau Tuba and the extent to which they reproduce, or challenge established island tourism conventions. Six photographs produced in 2025 as a research-based portfolio were analysed through Rose's compositional approach, focusing on viewpoint, framing, spatial organisation, colour, horizon position, and subject selection. The analysis is informed by the Tourist Gaze and the concept of the vertical gaze to examine how aerial perspectives position the viewer and shape destination representation. The findings show that elevated viewpoints, environmental emphasis, blue green colour relationships, and limited human visibility contribute to a scenic and visually coherent representation of Pulau Tuba. While agricultural landscapes, settlements, infrastructure, boats, and maritime environments provide some variation, the photographs reproduce established tropical tourism aesthetics more strongly than they challenge them. The study contributes by demonstrating how specific compositional decisions connect aerial visibility, the vertical gaze, and destination representation.

Keywords: *drone photography; vertical gaze; Tourist Gaze; destination image; visual culture; Pulau Tuba; tourism representation*

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Visualisasi Kepulauan: Analisis Kritikal Fotografi Dron, Pandangan Menegak, Dan Representasi Pelancongan Di Pulau Tuba

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Abstrak

Penggunaan fotografi dron yang semakin meluas telah mengubah cara destinasi pelancongan divisualkan dan diwakili. Kajian ini meneliti kaedah fotografi dron yang dihasilkan oleh penyelidik membentuk representasi visual Pulau Tuba serta sejauh mana imej tersebut mengulangi atau mencabar konvensyen visual pelancongan pulau yang sedia ada. Enam imej yang dihasilkan pada tahun 2025 sebagai portfolio berasaskan penyelidikan dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan komposisi Rose, dengan memberi tumpuan kepada sudut pandangan, pemingkaian, organisasi ruang, warna, kedudukan ufuk, dan pemilihan subjek. Analisis ini berasaskan konsep Tourist Gaze dan pandangan menegak untuk meneliti bagaimana perspektif udara meletakkan kedudukan penonton dan membentuk representasi destinasi. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa sudut pandangan tinggi, penekanan terhadap alam sekitar, hubungan warna biru-hijau, dan keterlihatan manusia yang terhad menghasilkan representasi Pulau Tuba yang indah dan tersusun secara visual. Walaupun landskap pertanian, penempatan, infrastruktur, bot, dan persekitaran maritim memberikan variasi, imej tersebut lebih banyak mengulangi estetika pelancongan tropika sedia ada berbanding mencabarnya. Kajian ini menyumbang dengan menunjukkan cara keputusan komposisi menghubungkan visualiti udara, pandangan menegak, dan representasi destinasi.

Kata Kunci: fotografi dron, pandangan menegak, imej destinasi, budaya visual, Pulau Tuba, representasi pelancongan, Tourist Gaze.

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1.0 Background and Context

The rapid integration of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) into tourism marketing has changed how landscapes are visualised, represented, and consumed. Strategic Revenue Insights (2026) reports that drone technologies have expanded access to aerial image production, allowing small-scale destinations to capture perspectives previously associated with helicopter cinematography. McConville (2024) and Crisp Productions (2025) demonstrate drone photography's growing popularity. Recent academic literature suggests that drone imaging is a visual activity that affects how landscapes, surroundings, and spatial relationships are seen. Drone photography changes aerial visibility through viewpoints, spatial linkages, and tourism-oriented representations, as shown by O'Hagan and Serafinelli (2023), Pong and Richardson (2024), and Hildebrand (2024). Based on these approaches, this study views drone photography as a technological instrument and a produced visual practise that shapes destination portrayal through compositional judgements. This development is particularly relevant to island destinations, where aerial photography can provide broad views of coastlines, vegetation, settlements, and surrounding waters. Within Malaysia's archipelagic context, Pulau Tuba occupies a relatively peripheral position compared with the more commercialised areas of Langkawi (M. F. Azman et al., 2025). As emerging destinations compete for visibility, aerial imagery can therefore contribute to destination identity rather than function solely as documentation. However, its increasing use also raises questions about how aerial perspectives reproduce established tourism conventions and how they represent the social and cultural dimensions of place.

This study examines original drone photographs (Figures 1-6) produced by the researcher and a collaborator in 2025 as a research-based portfolio within a practice-led investigation of Pulau Tuba. Rather than focusing on the technical capabilities of drone technology, the study examines how compositional decisions, including altitude, camera orientation, framing, spatial organisation, colour, and subject selection, shape the visual representation of the island. The photographs were produced to explore the visual representation and tourism potential of Pulau Tuba through drone photography, covering its natural landscape, settlement, agricultural areas, coastal environment, and maritime activities. The images were captured during a site visit to various locations across Pulau Tuba in 2025, covering different coastal, inland, settlement, agricultural, and maritime environments. As the photographs were produced as research-based visual materials rather than commissioned commercial advertisements, they are referred to as researcher-produced tourism-oriented images. This distinction allows the study to examine their potential role in tourism representation and marketing without claiming that they were already commercially published or used. Accordingly, the study asks how compositional decisions in researcher-produced aerial images shape the visual representation of Pulau Tuba and to what extent they reproduce or challenge established island tourism marketing conventions.

1.1 Theoretical Context: From Tourist Gaze to Vertical Gaze

Urry's concept of the Tourist Gaze defines tourism as a form of socially organised seeing shaped by cultural expectations and representational codes (Çilkin & Çizel, 2021). In



contemporary visual culture, this gaze has been spatially reconfigured. Brighenti and Pavoni (2023) and O'Hagan and Serafinelli (2023) describe drone photography as producing a “vertical gaze,” characterised by elevation, spatial control, and a comprehensive view. Pong and Richardson (2024) further describe the aerial perspective as a “God’s-eye view,” suggesting a position of visual authority.

The vertical gaze alters the spatial relationship between viewer and landscape. From above, settlements can appear as geometric forms, coastlines can become compositional lines, and environmental features can be read primarily as surfaces and patterns. Such abstraction may increase visual impact while reducing the visibility of social and cultural context. Ramírez-Guerrero et al. (2025) and Graham and Campbell (2021) note that repeated visual strategies can contribute to the homogenisation of island destinations, particularly through recurring motifs such as clear water and dense greenery. Pulau Tuba therefore provides a relevant case for examining how authorial drone photography reproduces, modifies, or challenges established tourism visual conventions.

1.2 Objectives and Significance

This study has three objectives. First, it analyses the compositional strategies in Figures 1-6, focusing on altitude, framing, camera orientation, tonal hierarchy, colour, and the visual emphasis placed on landscape and human activity. Second, it examines how these strategies construct Pulau Tuba as an ecological setting, organised settlement, tropical destination, maritime environment, or lived cultural space. Third, it evaluates the extent to which researcher-produced aerial images reproduce or challenge established island tourism conventions and the visual logic of the vertical gaze. Theoretically, the study contributes to research on mediated place-making by positioning drone photography as an authored visual practice rather than a neutral technological tool. Methodologically, it contributes to practice-led visual research by treating image production as both a research context and an object of analysis. Practically, it offers a basis for tourism stakeholders to consider how aerial imagery can communicate scenic qualities while also representing the social and cultural dimensions of a destination.

2.0 Literature Review

This literature review examines the relationship between the Tourist Gaze, vertical gaze, destination image, visual marketing, and drone photography. It begins with the development of the Tourist Gaze, followed by the emergence of aerial and vertical perspectives. It then considers how visual marketing shapes island destination representation before positioning the present study within research on researcher-produced drone photography and Pulau Tuba.

2.1 The Evolution of the Tourist Gaze

Urry’s concept of the “Tourist Gaze” explains tourism as a socially and culturally organised way of seeing, in which landscapes, attractions, and experiences become objects of visual attention (Urry & Larsen, 2012). The concept remains relevant in contemporary digital tourism,



where websites, social media, and travel platforms shape how destinations are viewed and anticipated. Lee et al. (2023) further demonstrate the continuing importance of the tourist gaze within contemporary tourism practices. The development of drone photography has expanded this visual relationship by allowing destinations to be viewed from elevated and near-vertical positions. Brighenti and Pavoni (2023) and O'Hagan and Serafinelli (2023) describe this shift through the concept of the vertical gaze, in which elevation changes the relationship between the viewer and the landscape. From above, settlements, coastlines, agricultural areas, and infrastructure can become lines, patterns, and geometric forms. Pong and Richardson (2024) similarly highlight the distinctive visual possibilities of drone photography. However, the vertical gaze should not be understood simply as a technological effect. Its meaning is shaped by compositional decisions such as altitude, orientation, framing, scale, horizon position, and subject selection.

2.2 Destination Image and Visual Marketing

Destination image refers to the perceptions and associations through which a place is understood by visitors. In tourism marketing, photographs play an important role in communicating landscape, atmosphere, attractions, accessibility, and destination identity. The increasing circulation of tourism imagery through digital platforms has strengthened the role of visual representation in shaping how destinations are perceived.

However, repeated visual strategies can also contribute to destination homogenisation. Ritter (2024) and Aboalghanam et al. (2025) identify concerns about the similarity of tourism imagery, particularly where island destinations are repeatedly represented through scenic landscapes, clear water, and dense vegetation. Ramírez-Guerrero et al. (2025) and Graham and Campbell (2021) similarly highlight recurring visual patterns in tropical and island tourism representation. While these conventions can strengthen destination attractiveness, they may also reduce the visual distinction between destinations. A critical analysis should therefore consider not only what makes a destination visually attractive, but also which aspects of the place become less visible.

2.3 Drone Photography, Verticality and Aerial Representation

Drone photography provides new possibilities for representing tourism landscapes by moving beyond conventional ground-level viewpoints. McConville (2024) and Crisp Productions (2025) note the increasing accessibility of drone technology and its growing use in visual communication. However, recent scholarships suggest that drone imagery should be understood as a visual practice rather than simply a technical development. Pong and Richardson (2024) describe drone aesthetics as a distinctive form of aerial visibility that changes how environments, bodies, and spatial relationships are perceived. Similarly, O'Hagan and Serafinelli (2023) demonstrate how top-down drone imagery can transform familiar environments into abstract patterns and geometric forms, while Hildebrand (2021) connects drone practices with commercial visions and tourism contexts. These perspectives suggest that the significance of drone photography lies not only in its ability to provide an elevated viewpoint but also in how it reorganises the visual relationship between the viewer and the landscape.



2.4 Positioning the Current Study

Tourism research has extensively investigated destination image, visual marketing, and drone-mediated representation; however, Pulau Tuba is under-represented in academic discussion, especially with researcher-produced aerial photography. There have been studies on the Tourist Gaze, destination image, drone aesthetics, and aerial tourism representation, but few on how compositional choices in researcher-produced drone photos create the visual identity of smaller island destinations. A practice-led analysis of original drone photos of Pulau Tuba connects visual culture and tourism representation to fill this gap. Rose uses compositional analysis to evaluate each photograph's visual organization, while the Tourist Gaze and vertical gaze theoretically explain how the photos place the viewer and construct the destination. Tourist Gaze gives a cultural framework for understanding how tourism sites are visually enticing, while vertical gaze explains how the drone's elevated position reorganises the viewer's interaction with the landscape. The study then uses Rose's compositional technique to determine how individual photography choices reveal various ways of perceiving. The Tourist Gaze examines the cultural organization of tourism seeing, the vertical gaze addresses the viewer's spatial position, and compositional analysis reveals the visual characteristics that produce various forms of seeing. Thus, the study investigates whether researcher-produced aerial pictures replicate island tourism conventions or offer alternative representations by including agricultural landscapes, settlements, infrastructure, and maritime settings.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative critical visual analysis informed by Rose's visual methodology, specifically the site of the image itself and its compositional modality (Rose, 2023). The analysis focuses on how visual elements are organised within each photograph before developing interpretive claims about the vertical gaze and destination representation. The study also operates within a practice-led framework. The drone photographs (Figures 1–6) were produced in 2025 by Mohamad Zaid Sulaiman and Mohammad Firdaus Azman within a tourism-oriented practice context. The researcher therefore occupies a dual position as image-maker and analyst. The dual position of image-maker and analyst is addressed through reflexive analysis rather than treated as a source of objective certainty. The analysis does not assume that the photographer's intention determines the meaning of an image. Instead, claims are grounded first in observable visual evidence, including camera orientation, spatial organisation, horizon placement, relative scale, colour, light, human visibility, and the relationship between natural and built features. Interpretive claims are then connected to the study's concepts of vertical gaze, destination representation, and tourism visual marketing.

3.1 Visual Analysis Procedure

The five analytical stages were developed as an operational procedure for Rose's compositional modality, translating her emphasis on the formal organisation of visual materials into observable categories appropriate to the aerial photographs examined in this study. The visual analysis was operationalised in five stages. First, the content and subject of each photograph were identified, including landscape features, buildings, water bodies, vegetation, infrastructure, boats, and visible human activity. Second, spatial organisation



and viewpoint were examined through altitude, camera orientation, horizon position, framing, perspective, scale relationships, leading lines, symmetry, and the distribution of visual weight. Third, colour and light were considered in relation to hue, saturation, tonal value, contrast, and their role in directing visual attention. Fourth, expressive content was considered through the atmosphere produced by the interaction of content, spatial organisation, colour, and light. Finally, the visual evidence was connected to the vertical gaze and destination-marketing concepts. Interpretations were only developed where they could be traced to identifiable compositional features.

Table 1. Visual analysis stages

No	Analytical Stage	Operationalisation
1	Content and subject identification	Record landscape, built features, water bodies, vegetation, infrastructure, boats, and visible human activity.
2	Spatial organisation and viewpoint	Examine altitude, orientation, horizon position, framing, perspective, scale, leading lines, symmetry, and visual weight.
3	Colour and light	Examine hue, saturation, tonal value, contrast, natural or modified colour appearance, and the role of light in directing attention.
4	Expressive content	Consider the visual atmosphere produced by the interaction of content, spatial organisation, colour, and light.
5	Interpretation and theoretical linkage	Relate observable visual evidence to the vertical gaze, destination image, and tourism-marketing concepts. Avoid interpreting beyond what the composition can support.

3.2 Image Selection and Corpus

Six drone photographs were selected for detailed visual analysis (Figures 1–6). The photographs were produced by the two credited photographers, Mohamad Zaid Sulaiman and Mohammad Firdaus Azman, in 2025. The selection was based on their ability to represent different aerial orientations, spatial subjects, and compositional strategies relevant to the study.

4.0 Detailed Visual Analysis of Figures 1-6

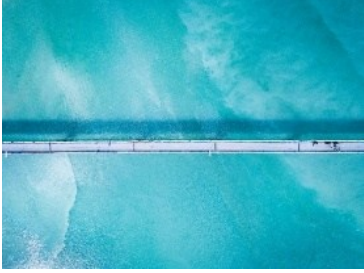
The analysis proceeds from individual image readings to cross-image comparison. Each photograph is first examined through content, colour, light, spatial organisation, viewpoint, and expressive content. These observations then provide evidence for interpreting abstraction, de-socialised representation, verticality, and destination positioning. This sequence ensures that theoretical claims are derived from identifiable visual features rather than from the comparative table alone.



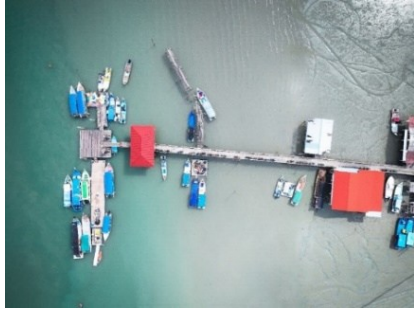
Table 2. Detailed Visual Analysis

No	Figure	Visual Reading
1	 Figure 1: Aerial View of Pulau Tuba Source: Photographed by Mohamad Zaid Sulaiman (2025)	Offers a single-frame oblique aerial image of the coastline, water, greenery, and a few houses. The lofty viewpoint makes the houses appear smaller and underlines the larger link between the settlement, flora, and sea. The shoreline clearly divides land and ocean. The reflective water and sky contrast with the darker landmass, creating a calm and scenic atmosphere. The limited visibility of people draws attention away from everyday activity and towards the landscape. Thus, Pulau Tuba is depicted as a vast and magnificent coastline environment rather than a liveable social location. Through its lofty viewing position and extensive spatial coverage, the composition depicts the vertical gaze, but the decreased visibility of social activities de-socializes the destination. Buildings prevent the image from becoming a natural landscape.
2	 Figure 2: Aerial View of Pulau Tuba Source: Photographed by Mohammad Firdaus Azman (2025)	Near-vertical agricultural terrain. The road forms a strong diagonal across the frame, while agricultural borders provide repeated lines, irregular shapes, and geographical divisions. Colour and texture from green and yellow in varied tints help identify these locations. This top-down strategy emphasises field formality above human scale. Thus, agricultural land is shown as a visual pattern rather than a productive or occupied area. The image demonstrates how the vertical gaze may abstract an agricultural scene into geometric patterns. The lack of farming activities is also part of a de-socialized representation in which the landscape's visual order overshadows its producing function.
3		Reveals an elevated perspective of turquoise sea and a narrow linear construction without a horizon. The suppression of the horizon emphasises colour, surface, texture, and the water-linear element interaction over geographical cues. The tropical atmosphere is



	 Figure 3: Aerial View of Pulau Tuba Source: Photographed by Mohammad Firdaus Azman (2025)	created by the strong blue–green colour relationship, and the limited visibility of human activities draws attention to the environment. Thus, the composition simplifies the seaside scene's colour, surface, and line. Verticality and abstraction are linked because the elevated viewpoint lessens the viewer's connection to ground-level experience and makes the environment a visual surface. While promoting Pulau Tuba as a gorgeous and environmentally friendly location, the tropical colour scheme matches island tourism aesthetics.
4	 Figure 4: Aerial View of Pulau Tuba Source: Photographed by Mohammad Firdaus Azman (2025)	A view of a Pulau Tuba and its waters from a high oblique angle, with the main island landform dominating. The contrast between greenery and blue water defines land and sea and gives spatial organization. The lofty vision shows the island's geographical relationship to its surroundings. Limited visibility of buildings and people emphasises the island's physical and environmental features over its social and cultural aspects. Therefore, Pulau Tuba is mostly portrayed as a scenic natural attraction. This composition shows the vertical gaze through its higher perspective and wider spatial field, while the clear division between land and sea improves spatial intelligibility. Figure 4 has more geographical clues than Figures 2 and 3, making it a more recognised destination representation.
5	 Figure 5: Aerial View of Pulau Tuba	A high-oblique image of a beach, vegetation, access road, and jetty. The foliage frames the architectural pieces, while the jetty separates the darker land from the turquoise water and forms a strong linear orientation toward the sea. Veg, constructed, and water contrast creates a visual hierarchy and draws attention to the coastal interface. The jetty and access path show human engagement, but the lack of people means that physical infrastructure represents human activity rather than social interaction. The graphic shows the seaside environment as an arranged entry point to nature. This promotes the vertical gaze and shows de-socialized representation because



	Source: Photographed by Mohammad Firdaus Azman (2025)	human presence is material but socially less evident. Pulau Tuba's beach, flora, turquoise ocean, and lofty viewpoint support tropical tourism standards and make it approachable and appealing.
6	 Figure 6: Aerial View of Pulau Tuba Source: Photographed by Mohammad Firdaus Azman (2025)	Near-vertical picture of jetty, boats, houses, and water in Figure 6. The jetty creates a strong horizontal axis, while the boats vary in size, orientation, and colour, providing visual rhythm on the rather homogeneous ocean surface. Red buildings and blue boats set human and maritime elements apart. The lack of people draws focus to boats, buildings, jetty, and sea rather than social interaction. Human action is communicated by its material traces, not every day behaviour. The near-vertical view eliminates the horizon and compresses the image into lines, forms, colour fields, and spatial relationships. This produces a degree of diagrammatic abstraction while improving the spatial legibility of the maritime environment. Figure 6 shows how an elevated viewpoint might organise a familiar working coastal landscape while retaining settlement and maritime activity.

4.1 Comparative Visual Analysis

The individual reading reveals several recurring visual characteristics across Figures 1-6. Although the photographs differ in subject and composition, they consistently employ elevated viewpoints, broad spatial coverage, environmental emphasis, and limited visibility of human activity. These characteristics provide the basis for examining how the vertical gaze operates across the corpus.

Table 3. Comparative Visual Analysis of Figures 1–6

No	Figure	Primary Spatial Focus	Altitude & Orientation	Human Visibility	Chromatic Strategy	Dominant Representational Effect
1	Fig. 1	Coastal panorama and settlement	High-altitude oblique	Absent	Natural tones with enhanced contrast	Eco-territorial expansiveness
2	Fig. 2	Agricultural fields	Near-vertical (top-down)	Absent	Green–yellow tonal variation	Geometric abstraction of agricultural landscape



3	Fig. 3	Water and linear structure	High oblique; horizon suppressed	Absent	Intensified blue–green contrast	Tropical visual alignment and abstraction
4	Fig. 4	Island landform and surrounding sea	Elevated oblique	Minimal/absent	Blue–green environmental contrast	Scenic spatial legibility
5	Fig. 5	Beach, vegetation and jetty	High oblique	Absent	Strong blue–green contrast	Organised coastal accessibility
6	Fig. 6	Jetty, boats and maritime interface	Near-vertical (top-down)	Absent	Muted blue–green water with red and blue accents	Spatially organised maritime activity / documentary abstraction

5.0 Findings on Compositional Decisions and the Visual Representation of Pulau Tuba

The first research question explores how researcher-produced aerial photographs' compositional choices reflect Pulau Tuba. Altitude, camera angle, framing, and spatial organization dominate Figures 1-6. Figures 1, 3, 4, and 5 are elevated oblique, while 2 and 6 are near-vertical. From these angles, land, water, vegetation, and infrastructure can be seen together. Framing and horizon position affect depiction. Figure 4 highlights agricultural fields' geometric patterns, Figure 5 highlights water, colour, and surface, and Figure 6 organises boats, the jetty, buildings, and water through lines, shapes, and spatial relationships. Several photos' blue–green colour associations suggest Pulau Tuba's tropical and environmental theme. Altitude alone does not create the vertical gaze; viewpoint, framing, spatial organization, colour, and subject selection do. The photographs show little human activity. Roads, agricultural fields, jetties, boats, and buildings show human use even when humans are absent. The images depict a de-socialized activity rather than a complete lack of humans, making the physical landscape more obvious than social experience.

The second study question examines how the photos reflect or contradict island tourism marketing conventions. The comparative analysis indicates that the photographs reproduce established island tourism conventions more strongly than they challenge them. Elevated vistas, stunning landscapes, blue–green colour associations, environmental emphasis, and limited human visibility make Pulau Tuba a lovely tropical island getaway. Figures 2 and 6 reveal agricultural and maritime habitats, while Figures 4 and 5 show infrastructure and access ways. These pieces reveal the island's working and inhabited context, challenging beach-oriented tourism perception. The photos continue tourism aesthetics by showing farmland, settlement, access, and sea activity. The findings show that drone photography is a visual practise in which viewpoint, framing, colour, and subject selection shape Pulau Tuba's tourism positioning.



6.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how researcher-produced drone photographs represent Pulau Tuba as a tourism destination and whether they reproduce or challenge established island tourism conventions. The findings show that elevated viewpoints, spatial framing, horizon position, colour, and subject selection shape the visual representation of the island. While the photographs highlight its landscapes, settlements, agriculture, infrastructure, and maritime environments, the limited visibility of people reduces the representation of everyday social and cultural experiences. The analysis demonstrates that the vertical gaze is produced through compositional decisions rather than drone technology alone.

Overall, the photographs reproduce established island tourism aesthetics more strongly than they challenge them. Tropical colour relationships, scenic landscapes, environmental emphasis, and elevated perspectives reinforce familiar tourism representations, while agricultural and maritime elements provide some variation. The study's main contribution is identifying how compositional decisions connect aerial visibility, the vertical gaze, and destination representation, while demonstrating the application of Rose's compositional interpretation within a practice-led visual analysis. The findings further suggest that drone photography can enhance destination visibility, but how the photographer selects, frames, and organises the landscape determines which aspects of local life become visible or less represented. Future research could examine audience responses, tourism stakeholder perspectives, and the production and marketing processes of aerial tourism imagery.

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