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Understanding the 'new tourist' of Asia: Developing a global and local perspective

Norman Hassan

Importance of Tourism

During the last four decades, tourism has become one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries. The tourism industry, in all senses, has created and supported 204 million jobs world-wide, contributing to about 19% of the world's workforce. Between 1950 and 2006, there was an annual growth rate of 6.5%. In 2007, international tourist arrivals grew by an estimated 6% to reach a new record figure of nearly 900 million. This represented nearly 52 million more arrivals than in 2006. World tourism enjoyed its fourth consecutive year of growth in 2007. The 6.5% growth rate was above the long-term forecast of 4.1% and, surprisingly, even exceeded the 5.5% increases recorded in 2005 and 2006 (World Tourism Ranking, 2008).

For the full year 2007, Southeast Asia recorded a 11.8% change over the same period the previous year, while Northeast Asia recorded a 10.2% increase in international tourist arrival (World Tourism Exceeds Expectation in 2007, 2008). The United Nation's World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) has forecasted there will be 1.6 billion international tourist arrivals worldwide by 2020, a stark contrast to the record 900 arrivals of 2007 (World Tourism Exceeds Expectation in 2007, 2008).

Tourism, therefore, is of a great economic importance and new 'tourism areas' are constantly being developed, implying that consumers have even a greater selection of destinations available from which to choose when going on vacation. Moreover, the number of people travelling is on the increase. Among the reasons for this increase are

(1) more flexible working hours, (2) more leisure time, (3) an increasing level of stress and the accompanying need to relive it, (4) rising levels of disposable income, and (5) more efficient and affordable transportation networks.

Tourism businesses around the world now face intensive competition in attracting tourists due to the growing importance of tourism and the many firms that actively participate in the industry. Hence, tourism marketers are faced with the challenge of developing new and different marketing strategies that will differentiate one tourism product from its competitors. Understanding the ‘*new tourists*’ to Asia is becoming more critical than ever. Tourism marketers not only have to maintain the number of visitors, but also have to make the growth sustainable amidst the current economic uncertainty and a widening income gap.

Nearly all the activities in Asia are affordable, even to the low-budget travelers, because most of Asia is still enticingly inexpensive overall in comparison to North America and Europe. Western money is often likely to go much further in large parts of Asia than it will in key tourism locations in Africa or South America. This has put Asia firmly in the heart of the backpackers’ trail, and many cities and islands already boast a lively travelers’ scene that attracts young adventurers from all over the world (Reader & Ridout, 2006).

Future Visitors to Asia

Future visitors to Asia are likely to have different demands for travel products. They are *doers* instead of *watchers* and are attracted to interactive activities. Factors that will likely affect the demand would be their own perception of the destination,

international calamities and tensions, and major events that impact tourism related activities. Understanding the future visitor will be like having a contingency variation, estimating their desires, as many barriers arise to the new frontiers of tourism. To prepare for this future, it is important to know the profile of the new travelers to the Asia region.

Travelers of the future will likely consists of *explorers* and *drifters* who want to arrange travel independently and wish to experience the lifestyle of a host community. There might also be some who want to stay exclusively with the host community, and prefer not have any contact with other tourists. Fading are the *organised mass tourists* who want highly organised package holiday and minimum contact with a host community (Page, 2003).

New action tours

In order for businesses to be successful in the tourism industry, described as "*the art to satisfy the most diverse aspirations which invite man to move out of his daily universe,*" they need to understand what the requirements of specialised services in the future (Tourism, 2008). The rise of *allocentric* travelers to Asia will mean that more tourists want to experience the native lifestyle, such as 'homestays.' Allocentric travelers are independent travelers, with above average incomes, and seek more adventurous experiences. These travelers want more experiential tours, planned activities that deeply engage the traveler in the setting rather merely being an observer of it (New action tours, 2008.) For example, tourists to Malaysia who opt for 'homestays' will be able to experience the full spectrum of village life and activities that may include:

- Home-cooking lessons - learn what makes Malaysia food so special!

- Harvest local fruits that are in season.
 - Spend time with the children after they return from school.
 - Indulge in traditional games, such as kite flying and top-spinning.
 - Enjoy cultural dances, musical performances and even a mock-wedding
- (Homestays, 2008).

Visitors to Tokyo now can learn to be a 'samurai' or 'ninja' as part of a new range of unusual excursions that were introduced in early 2008. The *Experience Tokyo* tours are designed to give travelers a better insight of Japanese culture. Each excursion is limited to a maximum of 10 people. This will be suitable for people who want an individualised, personal touch in an environment where there may be many other holiday makers nearby. These participants hope to get a sense of Japanese realism. It is predicted that there will be an increasing demand for new action tours similar to *Experience Tokyo*. Other current experiential tours include (1) *A Day in the Life of Sumo Wrestlers*, (2) *At Home with Mrs Shinobu*, which is a visit to a typical Japanese home, and (3) the *Kimono workshop* where participants learn about and experience the art of kimono dyeing (New action tours, 2008).

Rise in Short Breaks or Getaway Weekends

The increase in the number of short-breaks will mean customers want time away without a *jam-packed* itinerary. Forget about any destination that will take more than three or four hours to reach or are part of a tour package. What these customers want is just to quickly check in and luxuriate in a resort such as those with a *Mandara Spa* that can be found in Bintan, Bali and Phuket. Thailand, for instance, is arguably Southeast

Asia's most exciting destination for regional tourists. From beaches to die for, to exotic temples that amaze, or to elephant trekking in the hills, Thailand essentially has it all. And of course, the legendary Thai hospitality ensures that the new tourists will love it there (Watts 2007). Centrally located in Southeast Asia, Thailand is well positioned to service this getaway traveler.

Overall, perhaps the greatest draw in Southeast Asia is the sheer vitality of everyday life, much of it played out on the streets. Tourists can watch Thai boxing in Bangkok and trance dance in Bali, learn yoga in Varanasi, drink rice whisky in Vientiane, eat dim sum in Shanghai and satay in Penang, buy silver in Hanoi and bargain for mangosteens in Manila (Reader & Ridout, 2006).

Knowing the profile of the *new tourist* of Asia will help tourism businesses understand what they need to put in place in order to meet the needs and demands of these *new tourists*. Because of their sheer mass of numbers and fairly close proximity, tourists from China, India and Russia will be influential in shaping the '*new tourist*' to Asia. These travelers are more likely to be discerning of their choice of tourism purchases and niche products, and generally more e-savvy. A proportion of them lead 'time-poor, cash-rich' lifestyles, and are willing to purchase a portfolio of products that appeal to their needs.

Online Presence and Cyberspace

The new, 21st century tourist to Asia is expected to be well travelled and more discerning than the typical traveler of the 1990s. They might be repeat visitors but do not desire to see long-standing familiar products. They want to be thrilled, stimulated and

excited with new, fresh and creative activities, even if it means a new twist to an old product, be it soft or hard adventures. Tourism businesses may need to examine the developing presence and successful behaviors of online travel agents such as *zuji.com*, *asiatravel.com*, *airfares.com.sg* and *agoda.com*. The newer and younger travelers will continue to exercise choice and look for best deals, while the cash-rich retirees will become generally more e-savvy when making their travel decisions.

Ecotourism & Sustainability

Ecotourism is the current 'buzz' word for many travelers. It means touring with the utmost appreciation for the environment and with the highest concern for its preservation. Ecotourism is booming around the world. The World Tourism Organisation stated that ecotourists now represent 20 percent (one in five) of international tourists, generating over US\$20 billion a year (Global Ecotourism, 2008). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (The International Ecotourism Society, 2008). In Asia, it will likely mean exploring southern Thailand's wildlife and natural wonders by gliding through the jungles and coastlines in a canoe, or joining an unforgettable rock climbing, mountain biking or mountain climbing excursion. Visitors to northern Laos, for example, can stay at the Boat Landing Guest House, an eco-lodge certified by Green Globe. Guest at the riverside bungalows can rest well, assured that the lodge is working to reduce its solid waste through recycling and composting. Tourists can spend their time trekking, rafting and biking in the nearby protected forests of Laos (Global News, 2008).

In 2007, as travel to Southeast Asia continued to rise, an estimated of 60.4 million tourists visited the region. As many visitors were discovering the nascent ecotourism, they were foregoing traditional packages and chain hotels. Inspired by Southeast Asia's natural beauty and rich culture, many travelers were showing a keen interest in the area's alternative "eco" vacations, like Thailand's National Parks where tropical birds, elephants and Asiatic tigers thrive in protected environments (Top spots for Southeast Asian ecotourism, 2008).

Though the market in Southeast Asia is still growing, there are several other countries in the region, besides Thailand and Laos, that are offering ecotourism options. These countries include Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Southeast Asia is rich with natural attraction. Taman Negara, located in Pahang, Malaysia, is one of the finest and oldest accessible rainforests in the world. Centrally located in a remote region of Peninsular Malaysia, it offers adventurous travelers an unparalleled opportunity to explore the rich natural wonders of unspoiled rainforest. Taman Negara has a range of action and adventure adventures to suit everybody, from serious sports enthusiasts to the passive, armchair adventurer. Most activities revolve around trekking through the rainforest but there are limestone caves to be explored, rapids to be ridden in inflatable rafts, canopy walks to be explored, fish waiting to be caught, and mountains to be scaled. The boat ride into the park is an adventure in itself. Visitors can immerse themselves in the many sights, sounds and smells of the park while safely enjoying the transportation (Bowden, 2000).

Society can be regarded as another tourism resource, and likewise tourism can benefit from the society as a whole, economically, but it can also be a double-edged

sword. Any future tourism development will be challenged with ecology and sustainability. The new tourists of Asia are concerned that sufficient attention will be given to ensure that these natural wonders will survive for many years to come. The challenges related to ecotourism and sustainability of tourist development in Asia are many. The staff at Malaysia's Taman Negara National Park, for instance, helps sustain that natural wonderland by ensuring that every traveler is given the 'minimal impact code' before he or she can proceed with the journey. A line in the minimal impact code states, "Take nothing but photographs and fond memories, leave nothing but footprints and smiling faces" (Bowden, 2000).

Conclusion

We thinkers and leaders should not be content to occupy our ivory towers, but as tourism business practitioner, we should be aware of our responsibilities to ground our thinking. Whether our role is planning or consuming tourism products, we must challenge existing concepts and help to develop them for the benefit of all. However, we must also ground our judgement of what is possible, for the benefit of all, in rigorous and coherent research (Iceland Walking Holidays, 2008).

In summary, it is essential that tourism businesses in Asia constantly review and update the profile of their customers to remain relevant in the industry and offer them what they want with suitable products and services. Attention must be paid to how needs and wants have changed across the world that mould the perception and eventually shape up the new tourists to Asia. Attention must also be paid to the nature of our tourism

products and our understanding of how they are perceived and used by our customers, the travelers of the world.

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