

Youth Tourism Industry: No Great Expectations?

Youth travelers are a group of distinct people. Different cultures have defined them, if at all, in many different ways in terms of age, socioeconomic status and personal rights. For most, youth is a life cycle stage that precedes full incorporation into the adult world.

Modern industrial societies tend to locate it between the beginning of puberty and completion of high school and/or college, that is, the time span between 13 and 23–25 years of age, that precedes full legal capacity and entry into the workforce. Usually a distinction is made between early youth or pre-juvenile status (13–17 years) and true youth (18–23 years).

What is relevant for the study of tourism is whether there is anything specific about the touristic behavior of this group in modern industrial countries. There is not much theoretical work or research in this field to answer this question. Educated guesses and opinions usually surround some hard facts. These extend to three main domains: socioeconomic significance, differences with mainstream tourism in terms of cultural exchanges with the guests, and an alternative or complementary road to tourism development.



What is known about international youth tourism flows comes mainly from the World Tourism Organization sources. Based on them, an argument can be developed along the following lines: that youth tourism encompasses a distinct group of travelers between 15–24 years of age; that international arrivals in this group have outpaced the arrivals in general by a factor of 50 per cent from 1980 to 1990; that regionally, it is decreasing in Europe (although this continent still makes over two-thirds of all youth arrivals) and increasing fast in North America and in East Asia–Pacific; and that there seems to be a fair potential for growth in this group, as originating countries are affluent societies that will be growing steadily in the future.

In order to get a better picture, it should be pointed out that these data are incomplete in as much as they do not include domestic tourism, which is very important in countries such as the United States.

There are also some educated guesses about the economic relevance of youth tourism. First, even though there are not many records of expenditure by young tourists, it is suggested that youngsters have limited travel budgets, as witnessed by the success of tour guides to 'travel on a shoestring'. Second, this effect is offset by longer periods of stay in their destinations. Third, youth tourism has its own distribution

channels (specialized travel agencies, bucket shops and institutional retailers, such as universities, churches and so on) and accommodation networks (youth hostels, youth campsites, family homes and so on). Fourth, it is more open to unplanned and active behavior than mainstream tourism.



It is also said that young tourists are more likely to engage in close encounters with their hosts. In this way, youth tourism would be a key factor in cross-cultural exchanges. Youngsters are more likely to respect the values of their hosts (language, customs, rituals) and oft-times they travel specifically to participate in their activities (festivals, harvests, archaeological sites).

There is also some literature on the educational value of these experiences, and this suggests that international students broaden their minds, attitudes and values as a consequence of being exposed to other cultures. From the Grand Tour to pilgrimages in Kathmandu, travel has influenced many youngsters.

On the other hand, not everything is positive in these exchanges and enthusiasm should be toned down. Exchanges are often skin deep, and prone to reinforce stereotypes of hosts and guests. Casual attitudes about clothing, sex or drugs on the part of the hosts may lead to annoying situations, and the guests' ignorance of their hosts' cultural realities may develop into misunderstandings. Eventually, a good previous acquaintance with the host culture, even if it only comes from guides and textbooks, may smooth these rough edges.

Finally, these specific features of youth tourism have nourished some expectations that it might be an alternative way to the touristic development of some societies that do not want to be engulfed in the type of growth that mainstream tourism expects. Both in economic terms and in cultural respect, it is said that youth tourism is better.

Even though youngsters may not have much to spend, their budgets are impressive in some parts of the planet; they will accept traditional types of accommodation, so that there will be no need for big investments in infrastructure or resorts; and they are glad to consort with the locals and partake in their activities.



However, multiplication effects of their tourism dollars are limited; they will not offer the same opportunities for local employment, and they are definitely unable to stop the flow of migrants to the cities. Even though only the host society should have full authority in deciding which type of tourism development strategy it wants to pursue, exaggerated expectations as to the potential of youth tourism might lead to disappointing experiences.



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