

Today's Travel Industry: Rich in Opportunities and Niches

It is often said that the process of travelling is more important than the destination itself. With the rapid growth of international tourism, popular travel hotspots are becoming 'common' as victims of mass tourism and tourism promotions.

With the death of the destination, refreshing departures from the traditional package holidays are gaining popularity. Tourists are rewriting travel rules and experiences by visiting the world in creative, exciting and unusual ways. Holiday travels for pleasure and escape from reality have given way to alternative lifestyle choices for 'discovering' and escaping from comfort-induced boredom.



With **reality tours** offering 'real', harsher and more esoteric experiences, hardship tourism is in. Today tourists want to raise consciousness of actual conditions through first-hand experience on how prisons are run, how toxic wastes are disposed, effects of overuse of pesticides on fields just as they wish to talk to teens serving murder sentences and garment workers sewing round-the-clock. Reality tours are on offer in USA, Israel, Iran, Vietnam, Cuba and India.

Disaster tourism involving travelling to disaster sites are common in tsunami-ravaged beaches (Phuket and the Andamans), terrorist-targets (New York's Ground Zero and Bali), battle-sites (Kargil, India), Nazi concentration camps (Poland), etc. Although, politically incorrect or even Lucretian, such tours actually create public awareness and generate viable solutions with special interest groups as journalists and experts.

Experimental tourism is also gaining popularity. Blind Man's Buff as the name suggests is one partner blindfolding himself and experiencing the journey/destination through the eyes of another. In **ero-tourism**, couples arrive apart in a foreign place to find one another without having recourse to any means of communication or deciding on a meeting place.

Counter-tourism, a critique of classical tourism which involves doing the opposite of what is conceived normal like taking pictures with your back to key tourist sites for results which could be exciting and revelatory, is in fashion. **Slow-return travel** involving visiting a destination using the fastest mode of travel and returning using the slowest way is in.

New forms of tourism are also gaining popularity worldwide with tourist destinations moving from one-dimensional attitudes by offering varied special interest niches and new tourism products. The traditional 'sun and sea' holidays have given way and the natural beauty, history and cultural traditions of tourist destinations are being translated into opportunities for a rapidly growing alternative/niche tourism segment (of educated, affluent clients) for preserving traditional ways of life, contributing significantly to sustained economic development and ensuring local participation.

In Europe, more than 35 million tourists are involved in alternative tourism with about 20 per cent rise annually. Some popular forms of its manifestation in recent times include:

Agro-tourism: visiting farms or any agricultural/horticultural operation for enjoyment and education and assisting with farming tasks like picking farm produce, working in cattle ranches and vineyards, riding horses, tasting honey or even living in villages **Bookstore Tourism:** supporting independent bookstores struggling to compete with larger chains by promoting them as travel destinations. This is by encouraging reading groups, promoting literacy campaigns, organizing literary outings to places with independent bookstores, etc. **Cinematic tourism (film tourism):** visiting locations of popular films as Harry Potter (Scotland), or Lord of the Rings (New Zealand) **Drug tourism:** travelling for procuring narcotics from countries where it is legal (Amsterdam, Southeast Asia and South America) **Ecotourism:** responsible travel to natural areas to conserve the environment and sustain well-being of the locals – safaris (Kenya), rainforests (Belize) and national parks (Kruger) **Educational tourism:** travel to educational institutions or attending personal interest classes as cooking, crafts, ikebana, etc.



Ethnic tourism: involving indigenous people directly either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of attraction **Gambling tourism:** travelling for gambling at casinos (Las Vegas, Monte Carlo) **Heritage tourism:** visiting historical or industrial sites, old canals, vintage railways, battlegrounds, etc. **Health tourism:** for improving one's health, relieving stress, visiting health spas and resorts, hot springs with medicinal properties, etc. **Hobby tourism:** individual or group travel of like-minded individuals sharing similar hobbies (garden tours, ham radio DXpeditions, square dance cruises) **Inclusive tourism** (or 'tourism for all'): by involving those with functional limits or disabilities to destinations employing suitable practices and universal designs **Literary tourism:** covering places, events and settings from stories, lives of authors, routes of fictional characters (Sherlock Holmes, London), or haunts of novelists (Dublin, the Lake District, U.K.) **Medical tourism:** for availing free, less expensive or advanced health care systems unavailable in one's homeland or to forgo long waiting lists for surgeries, non-invasive procedures or treatments not covered under insurance, or for what is illegal

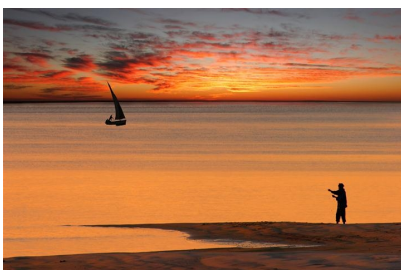
in one's own country, e.g., abortion, euthanasia (Dignitas in Switzerland) **MICE tourism:** travel combined with business as attending meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (Singapore, Bangkok, Jakarta) **Perpetual tourism:** involves wealthy individuals on vacation for tax purposes, to avoid being resident in any country. **Sports tourism:** skiing, golfing, scuba diving, snorkeling, or attending special sporting events as the Wimbledon, Olympics, Grand Prix, etc. **Urban tourism:** visiting interesting cities for experiencing cultural heritage (museums, art galleries, theme parks), trade/business opportunities (fairs, exhibitions), and entertainment facilities (cinema, theatres, shopping malls) as London, Paris, Rome, Beijing, Tokyo, etc.

The rapid development of the travel industry is closely related to the incredible leap of technology enabling potential customers to obtain a wide gamut of information about a tourist product/destination from print and electronic media.

Information Technology (IT) has changed the best practices in the travel industry and provided opportunities for business expansion in geographical and operational areas. The Internet and the world-wide-web have revolutionized the distribution of tourism information and sales with the Computerized Reservation System and Global Distribution Systems enabling availability, update and support for reservations, confirmation and purchase processes in transportation, accommodation and tour operations at the mere click of a button from anywhere in the world thereby, widening choices among best possible travel options.

Virtual sightseeing has started a breed of armchair or virtual tourists who do not travel physically but explore the world using the Internet. Information on shopping, entertainment, etc., can be obtained from videotext while hi-tech equipment provides multi-lingual guided tours through museums and shopping complexes.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) is emerging as yet another important component in the countries' strategy to facilitating tourism development in an economic, environmentally sustainable and spatially balanced manner. Co-operation between Government authorities i.e., transportation planners, information departments, development agencies, national parks and national tourist organizations and private enterprises i.e., airlines, hotel chains, tour operators are developing leisure amenities to address the needs of resident communities, develop tourism infrastructure (roadways, railways, bridges, airports, waterways, power, water, sewerage, solid waste management, convention centers, etc), and quality tourism products.



To enlist PPP in tourism mega projects often myriad tax waivers (luxury, sales, entertainment, etc.), are announced for benefitting private entrepreneurs. Under the PPP model, tourism projects are developed in the build, own, operate and transfer; build, operate and transfer; or build, own and operate modes.

Brand campaigning in tourism by generating awareness and interest about a destination, event or product through aggressive marketing and promotional strategies, media campaigns, press conferences, production of publicity materials, travel trade briefings, seminars, workshops, familiarization trips, road shows and advertising strategies by the Government, non-government organizations (NGOs) and travel trade is gaining stronghold. Besides focusing on targeting key decision makers, corporate end users, IT, insurance, automotive industries and direct selling companies (radio, television and newspapers) are being targeted.

The Incredible India campaign wherein the brand equity of India is being created in the international arena with special niche markets/products being encouraged including medical tourism, heritage and spiritual tourism, adventure and eco-tourism and cultural tourism is an example. Non Resident Indians and Persons of Indian Origin are being particularly targeted as also the short/medium haul markets of the Gulf, West and South East Asia.

The present times have also witnessed new professions in travel and tourism in addition to the traditional ones. Festivals, conferences, meetings, celebrations and event management have emerged as prospective areas.

Travel writing for professional magazines and journals is emerging as an interesting avenue with travel writers translating through their distinct style all that is observed into publishable stories loaded with lead paragraphs, descriptive passages, interviews, quotes, facts and photographs. Preparation of travel documentaries, portraying thrill-seeking adventures and travel tips as a viewing option about people, journeys and countries is in.

Comprehensive assistance for itinerary planning for tourists (domestic/foreign and individuals or groups), media groups and trade bodies is rising in demand too. Research and consultancy with a distinct focus on tourist destinations (rural and urban), the industry, Government-private sector is becoming popular.

Tourism NGOs working on alternative tourism have made their presence felt in destination planning and sustainable tourism management with local residents with minimal negative impacts on the natural, socio-economic and cultural environments and optimizing overall economic returns.

Likewise, promoting tourism awareness and education for **sustainable development** among all tourism stakeholders for benefitting indigenous communities, managing tourism impacts and recognizing the importance of dialogue, partnerships and multi-stakeholder processes is gaining popularity.

The gradual process of globalization over the past decade, improvement of infrastructure, progress in standards in the hospitality industry etc., are all pointers to the direction in which the tourism industry is

heading and it is therefore very important for the industry not to lose its objectivity at this stage.

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