



Innovation strategies and technology for experience-based tourism[☆]

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Abstract

Tourism is undergoing significant change and facing new challenges—that call for new perspectives. At least two dimensions of the change can be identified:

- new forms of tourism, characterized by the tendency to depart from mass tourism;
- the diffusion of information and communication technologies, with a pervasive effect on the creation, production and consumption of the tourist product.

The limited success of most attempts to exploit produced windows of opportunity indicates that we are facing a pre-paradigmatic phase of transition. Innovative attempts gain new strategic value when viewed from a perspective that values experience as an important new attribute. Such a perspective has significant consequences for the growth of destination strategies, policies, and the integration of the information-society dimension.

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1. Introduction

Being part of the service sector, tourism has inevitably been associated with developments in new technologies and refreshed by organizational and structural innovations. There has been a trend to flexibilization of the tourist product by a form of customization, despite the pressure from tourist operators who still advocate packages of mass tourism.

The trends towards ‘advanced’ facets of the service ‘post-industrial’ (information) society—customization, flexibilization—render knowledge the new decisive

competitiveness factor. Inescapably, this leads to the consideration of learning as a dynamic capability. In the competitive landscape of tourism, any location or business aiming to do better than others, should become either a learning region or a learning industry. Even more, emerging alternative tourism has to engage the element of culture, which gains in importance and has to be continuously transformed.

Thus, a principal dimension of innovation in ‘new tourism’ emerges along the culture—knowledge dipole. However, the main effort for change in tourism (both on policy and management) has concentrated until now on the exploitation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in a defensive manner and with limited transformative effect, as a means for cost cutting and accelerating transactions and information exchange. Two core questions emerge: first how can culture, knowledge and innovation foster new tourism? And second, how might this be related to new technology?

Recent changes in the tourist industry are summarized in Section 2, stressing the fact that new forms of tourism gradually emerge in the place of conventional tourism. In Section 3, it is demonstrated that ICT-based innovation may have sustainable competitive effect only

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when it is integrated within a knowledge-creating strategy, focused on the accumulation of intelligence on tourists, destinations and providers. Section 4 suggests that the emergence of new tourism—as well as innovation in the tourist product itself—can be considered under a new framework of analysis that distinguishes experience as a distinct value attribute. The implications of this approach for the understanding of production, restructuring and change in tourism are outlined in Section 5. In Section 6, suggestions are put forward for the development of experience-focused strategies and the opportunities emerging for the exploitation of ICTs. The paper concludes suggesting that the articulation of experience-staging strategies may generate new windows of opportunity for the creation of interactive learning processes that take advantage of ICTs in a way that is substantially beneficial for destinations.

2. Conventional tourism in trouble

The tourism industry is undergoing significant restructuring. The combination of mass and conventional tourism has so far formed the major part of the organized tourist business, with non-mass alternative tourism having the smaller part of the pie. Mass tourism may, under certain conditions, be alternative, as conventional tourism may be non-mass or individualized. The term ‘conventional’ refers to the type of activities the tourists follow (for instance the ‘4Ss’, i.e. sea, sun, sand, sex), while the term ‘mass’ predominantly refers to numbers of tourists. The term ‘conventional’ is relative, as tourist tastes tend to differentiate and converge to certain standards and directions. What by most is now accepted as alternative tourism has progressively developed many trends related to special interests, i.e. special tourist tastes, or certain broader ‘tourist ideologies’ that have evolved, such as chick tourism or ecotourism. Evidence that alternative, or thematic, tourism has gained pace, comes from a broad international experience (Skayannis, 1999).

According to Green and Chalip (1998) ‘anecdotal data indicate that tourists’ desire to watch or to do sport while traveling, has increased substantially in recent years’. Ritchie (1998) refers to the increasing bicycle tourism providing evidence from New Zealand. This ‘active lifestyles’ trend is not only related to sports. Ecotourism—underpinned by the contemporary environmental problems—experienced a growth of demand that ran ahead of the supply of its products (Diamantis, 1998). This seems to apply not only to pristine areas but also to areas that look natural and are aesthetically pleasing (Chirgwin & Hughes, 1997). Pleasure, in some cases, becomes the primary issue. As argued by Ryan, Hughes and Chirgwin in relation with the Fogg Dam,

(Northern Territory, Australia) ‘ecotourism is a hedonistic experience rather than concerned with learning’ (Ryan, Hughes, & Chirgwin, 2000). So, the concept of ecotourism is quite broad (Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998), but the link to conservation and local development is obvious.

Alternative tourist activity is sometimes related to individual traveling. Lew (1998) presents evidence of an increase in the numbers of non-group or Free and Independent Travelers (FITs). This trend of tourists’ self-perception as travelers, rather than as tourists, has led to the emergence of specialized tourist agencies promoting a form of ‘benign tourism’ that ‘encourages greater responsibility and sensitivity to host community needs among travelers’ (Kelly, 1997).

Mass conventional tourism is different from the majority of service industries in the sense that it is based on material provisions: food, shelter and natural settings form the basis of traditional tourist industry, sometimes supplemented by historical heritage (also in its material form). Intensive exploitation of the resources a destination may enjoy leads to saturation, environmental degradation, stress on infrastructures and ultimately the deterioration of the services provided.

The determinants of tourism, be it the product, the producer, the consumer, or the location, undergo significant transformations. Meethan (1998) argues that, in the era of ‘post-tourism’, traditional tourist destinations must restructure or face decline, particularly domestic-dependent coastal resort tourism. Change occurs at at least three levels.

- (a) The tastes of tourists (the consumers of the tourist product) change in different directions. This, of course does not involve ‘all’ tourists. The majority still seek the consumption of the ‘4Ss’, but the numbers of those in search of ‘something different’ is growing. A growing number of new operators specialize in alternative tourism or offer thematic packages, and an increasing number of operators include such options as part of their traditional packages. The profile of the tourists changes accordingly. While tourists who still prefer mass tourism are predominantly lower income, those opting for alternative experiences are mostly in higher income (or higher spending) brackets. So tourism, by this classification, is somehow class determined (leaving aside the very high-income groups that have always been non-mass and semi-conventional).
- (b) There has been a change in the mode of supply of tourism locations and attractions. Destinations are undergoing changes resulting from complex processes. Tourists discover new locations and activities, which eventually become fashionable, subsequently organized, and then market their

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