

Tourism Trends Visualised

Five interrelated trends will dominate tourism in the Asia-Pacific region in coming years argue SHTM Director, **Professor Kaye Chon** and Associate Director, **Professor Haiyan Song** in a recently published meta-analysis of industry magazine articles. The researchers identify the ways in which emerging developments should interact with each other and manifest across subregions in the near future. This, they write, will help the industry to overcome the problem of not being able to “see the forest for the trees”.

The Importance of Trends

Differentiating trends from fashion or hype, the researchers note that trends have a time element, are more universal than fashions and are less related to direct publicity than hype. As a direction in which something is developing, “a trend is essentially a continuance of the past and the present (with or without changes) and is dynamic in nature”.

Most crucially for the tourism industry, trends are usually related to positive images of destinations. “Something that will enhance destination image”, the researchers reason, “is more likely to continue into the future and become a trend”. With that continuity in mind, they note that the World Tourism Organisation recently identified three major trends which they used as “frames of reference” in their own analysis – the rapid development of e-commerce and e-marketing, fast-track travel and that “everybody is chasing Asian tourists”.

The Articles

Analysing 776 news articles from the websites of two travel trade magazines – TravelWeekly and TTG Asia – the researchers identified 13 mega trends. These included travel becoming more activity-interest based; China and

India continuing to drive the tourism industry; low cost carriers developing rapidly; travel agents transforming into travel consultants; tastes and travel spending becoming polarised; online transactions increasing; social-environmental awareness rapidly developing; competition and cooperation amongst destinations for inbound tourists; more seniors and women travelling; the demand for culture- and health-related tourism increasing; health and safety as major travel concerns; an emphasis on the timely communication of accurate travel information; and human resource shortages.

Considering the prevalence of these mega trends throughout the Asia-Pacific region, the researchers isolated five specific trends that were both related to each other and crossed the subregions of Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Oceania for further analysis.

Destination and Travel Trends

A key finding from the full analysis is that tourists tend to select an activity first and only then a destination. The researchers suggest that national tourism organisations recognise this trend by “associating their destinations with certain 'unique' activities”, whether cultural, health-related or defined by age or gender. Using the example of New Zealand, they argue that bungee jumping – once a rare activity elsewhere – can now be experienced almost anywhere, but no other destination can offer tours of the sets used in the Lord of the Rings movies.

Another very significant trend, given the rapid pace of industrialisation and urbanisation in parts of the region, is an emerging “consolidated social-environmental awareness and consciousness”. This, suggest the

researchers, should lead to the creation, restoration and preservation of “urban nature” in key destinations and heavier regulation of the tourism industry to conform with social-environmental requirements.

When tourists have selected an appropriate destination, how they travel is also an important consideration. With the development of low cost carriers in the region, increased competitiveness and reductions in airfares have encouraged more frequent travel. This is likely to mean that annual long-haul leisure trips are replaced by more numerous short trips to various destinations, especially in the north and southwest of Asia.

Demographic Trends

Moving into demographics, the researchers draw on their analysis to argue that “the expansion of China’s and India’s middle classes will produce more outbound tourists, and they are already being chased by other countries in the region”. Commenting specifically on Chinese tourists as they become more seasoned travellers, the researchers suggest that tour operators recognise this trend and provide more cultural activities, as “travel is a form of learning to Chinese people”.

A focus on cultural tourism will also address the trend of more elderly people travelling throughout the region. Given that seniors tend to visit cultural and heritage attractions, national tourism organisations should work to preserve and promote local cultures. They will also need to monitor other social trends that come with aging, such as the increase in divorces when retired Japanese couples begin spending more time together. Marketing short holiday breaks to such people would be a wise decision.

A final demographic trend identified is the increase in families and women travelling throughout the region, with national markets already catering for various types of female tourists. The researchers suggest that the family tourism sector could benefit from theme parks being located closer to other family-friendly facilities such as shopping complexes and sports venues.

The Need for Communication

Yet all of these promising trends will not deliver benefits if the potential health and safety concerns of tourists are not addressed with timely communication. “Travellers”, write the researchers, “are now more concerned with pandemic outbreaks and terrorist attacks”. Long haul business travel and the burgeoning Chinese outbound market are the most likely to be affected if national tourism organisations do not closely monitor media reports of health and safety issues to mitigate their negative impacts. This should incorporate developing multilingual websites and closer coordination between government and inter-government bodies to issue accurate travel advisories.

In concluding their study the researchers note that tourism is “a combination of many sectors that, in turn, influence and are influenced by other sectors”. Likewise, the trends they identify cross subregions and interact with each other, as they will continue to do in the future.

Points to Note:

- Trends are more substantial across time than fashions and hype.
- In the near future, five main trends will dominate the tourism industry in the Asia-Pacific region.
- Trends towards activity-based tourism, increased social-environmental awareness and changing demographics will continue to influence regional tourism.
- Timely communication is needed to counter the trend of increased health and safety concerns amongst travellers.

Pan, S., Chon, K. and Song, H. (2008). Visualizing Tourism Trends: A Combination of ATLAS.ti and BiPlot. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 43, 339-348.