
Section 1: Contemporary Tourism Systems

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Contemporary Tourism Systems

Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- Understand the core elements in the service dimension of tourism.
- Understand that the tourism experience does not exist independently of the interaction of tourism consumers and producers.
- Recognise the different stages in the tourism system and their implication for the tourist experience.
- Appreciate the importance of scale of analysis in studying tourism.
- Identify some of the key constraints on tourism related travel.
- Understand the characteristics that are used to define concepts of tourism, tourist and mobility.

Introduction

Contemporary tourism is one of the most significant yet misunderstood phenomenon in the world today. It is something that is engaged in by many people in the developed world, and increasingly in developing countries, and is regarded as an important mechanism for economic development. The extent of tourism activities across the globe and the sheer number of people who travel means that tourism is often described as one of the world's largest industries. Yet tourism is simultaneously an agent of socio-cultural, environmental and economic change at both a local

and global scale. Increasingly, aspects of change have also given rise to concerns about 'overtourism', that is the capacity of places to cope with the numbers of tourists that visit them and their effects on the social and environmental fabric of a destination (WTTC and McKinsey & Company 2017) as well as, following the COVID-19 pandemic, 'undertourism', where there are too few tourists for the business, infrastructure and labour force ready to serve them (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2021). Given the popular image of tourism as being connected to leisure and fun, the scope of the study of tourism is serious indeed.

This first chapter examines some of the key concepts by which we analyse and describe contemporary tourism. These concepts lie at the core of the field of tourism studies and set out the domain of tourism research. Because tourism is essentially an experiential industry, that is people are consciously seeking to purchase particular ephemeral or intangible experiences, even if the tourist does not necessarily think of it that way, tourism is regarded as a service industry. Therefore, the chapter first discusses the service dimension of tourism, a theme that runs throughout this book. The chapter then goes on to outline the concept of the tourism system and its implications with respect to understanding how tourism is consumed and produced, and approaches to defining tourism, tourist and mobility including some of the constraints on mobility.

The service dimension of tourism

The essential characteristics of services are that they cannot be produced without the agreement and cooperation of the consumer and that the outputs produced are not separate entities that exist independently of the producers or consumers. One of the key service characteristics of tourism is that the main location at which the consumption of experiences occurs is outside of the normal home environment of the purchaser. Although tourism is a service industry this does not mean that it is completely intangible - far from it. Tourism is based on a complex set of infrastructure and physical resources that have a significant impact on the places in which they are situated and, in the case of greenhouse gas emissions from transport for example, at a far wider scale. However, what is being purchased by the tourist are the experiences provided by this infrastructure and set of resources, and not the infrastructure itself. Because tourism is an experience-based product it means that in order to be able to understand tourism phenomenon we need to be able to understand both its consumption and production. This is an almost deceptively simple statement but its implications are enormous: tourism cannot be understood by looking at one aspect in isolation, consumption cannot occur without production and vice versa. The inseparability of production and consumption is therefore one of the hallmarks of tourism with the value of the tourism experience therefore being determined by both the consumer and the producer of the experience and the tourism product (Figure 1.1). The

inseparability of consumption and production also means that the factors that make up consumption and production are constantly feeding back on each other, thereby influencing the development of tourism products and their appeal to consumers.

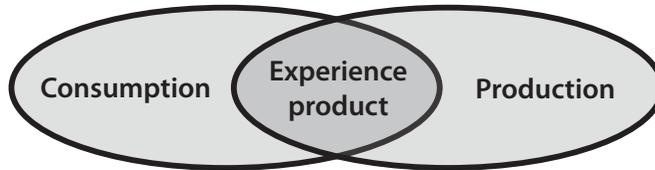


Figure 1.1: Locating the tourism experience and tourism product

In seeking to understand contemporary tourism we are therefore seeking to understand the interrelationships between consumers and producers and the variety of experiences that are created. Yet not all consumption experiences are the same. One of the distinguishing aspects of tourism from other service and experience-based products is that it refers to the experience of people voluntarily traveling outside of their place of permanent residence, whether it be internationally or domestically. This therefore means that the primary focus of much of tourism is on the places or destinations that people travel too in order to satisfy their motivations for particular experiences. The mobile nature of tourism provides another really important dimension in its understanding in that because the service and tourist experience does not exist independently of the direct interaction between consumers and producers, it therefore cannot be stocked or have its ownership transferred. In order to understand the tourist experience we therefore have to be able to chart how it changes over time, i.e. over the course of a trip or holiday or even a number of trips, in order to see how the different elements of consumption and production come together to produce different experiences and therefore different outcomes for the consumer and the producer.

The tourism system and industry value chain

In order to be able to understand the complex and dynamic nature of the contemporary tourism experience many tourism researchers utilize the concept of a tourism system. A system is an assemblage or interrelated combination of things or elements forming a unitary whole (Hall, 2008). At its most basic, the tourism system consists of consumption and production and the experiences that are generated. In order to increase our understanding of tourism we are therefore also interested in identifying those elements and factors that contribute to tourism consumption and production.

Given that movement is integral to tourism one way in which the tourism system can be understood is through the travel paths taken by individual consumers. This