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The Evolution of the Concept of Luxury in Tourism and Hospitality

Introduction

Throughout this text I will be arguing that the nature of luxury is changing rapidly in response to a wide range of complex and disparate factors, many of them not even barely understood yet. These factors are influencing the idea of luxury in their own right, but it is the results of the interactions between the factors which are perhaps of most interest. It is my opinion that the evidence of this change is clearly visible around us, but the process by which it is happening and the pace of change is much harder to detect.

In this chapter we will seek to explore the myriad factors which are shaping the evolution of the idea of luxury in tourism, hospitality and events, and will try to explore some of the relationships between them. Clearly, whatever can be said in a few pages will be a simplification of reality because what is happening varies from place to place as do the factors driving the change.

Figure 3.1 sets out to illustrate, in diagramatic form the factors which I believe are changing the concept of luxury. Before we go on to look in detail at how these factors affect the concept of luxury let us simply note that the relationship is not purely one way, for the idea of luxury itself certainly influences some of these factors in return. For example:

- The luxury sector makes a major contribution to many national economies.
- The aspiration for luxury and how it is manifested lays behind many consumer fashions and trends.
- The idea of luxury is a powerful one in the world of politics; for some politicians it is a carrot to dangle in front of electors to help secure their vote while to politicians on the left the existence of luxury lifestyles for the few are evidence of the inequities and unfairness of a society.

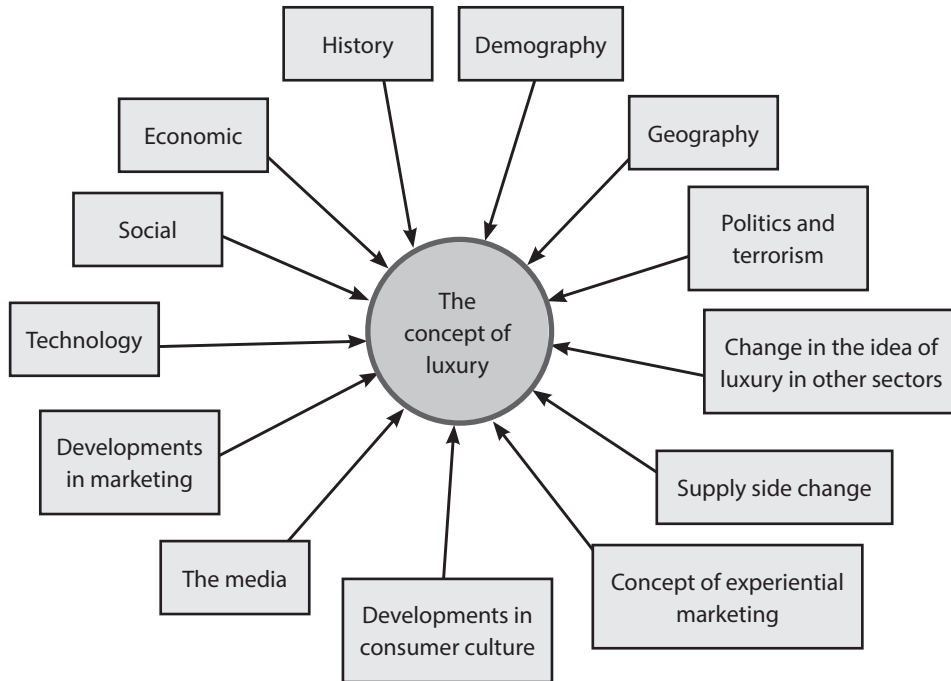


Figure 3.1: Factors which are influencing the evolution of the concept of luxury in tourism, hospitality and events

- The luxury market is one which is highly attractive to industry players who will invest heavily in new product development to attract luxury consumers.
- The desire to experience so-called luxury has been a prime motivator for people to buy the increasing number of 'lifestyle' magazines that have proved such lucrative ventures for publishers in recent years.
- Technological innovation has been driven often by the desire to create products aimed at the luxury market with high disposable income and a desire for new experiences.

However the main focus of this chapter is in how all these factors are affecting the evolution of the idea of luxury and so we will now return to that subject

Historical factors

This point has been alluded to in the first two chapters but it needs to be said again here. The ideas about luxury that have been dominant until now have clear roots in history, dating back perhaps two or three hundred years, although some would argue they have a much longer history. For me, our construct of luxury has been driven by three main historical factors as follows:

- The tastes and activities of European royalty and aristocracy which have influenced attitudes towards everything from interior design to food, architecture to fashion. While the influence of such people has waned dramatically it is always there in the background. Take a look at many luxury hotels in Paris, for example, which reflect the tastes of the 17th and 18th centuries.
- The tastes and activities of the wealthy class that emerged from the grime and suffering of the industrial revolution in Europe and the USA. This group of people, who did not inherit wealth but instead gained it through their own efforts, became increasingly powerful throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The rise of this class coincided with the railway and steamship age. Alongside the aristocracy, but in ever larger numbers, these people were at the heart of what has been called the 'Golden Age of Travel', a nostalgic term for the time when travel was the preserve of a fortunate small minority within societies. Conspicuous consumption was important, whether it be through travelling first class on ocean liners, buying art, or gambling at the casino.
- The tastes and activities of colonialists, who tended to be from Europe and found themselves spending prolonged periods of time or even the rest of their lives in far-flung places. For them 'luxury' often appeared to mean creating things that would remind them of 'home' in their new home, such as the English country-house style buildings of the hill country in Sri Lanka or hill stations of India or Malaysia. They also exported to their new homes things from their birthplace, from sports to social institutions. This travelling class was also the origin of some of the most famous hotels in the world, such as *Raffles* in Singapore or the *Eastern and Oriental* in Penang, Malaysia.

In recent years though we have seen changes taking place that have had an impact on the concept of luxury. We will now examine a few of these changes.

What all three groups had in common was they came from or formed a very privileged class in societies where most people could barely earn a living and mere survival was sometimes a struggle. In their age, any travel for pleasure was a luxury by definition, because only a few could afford it. While great discrepancies still exist, the gap in most countries has declined and there are larger groups in most societies forming a buffer between the mega rich and the ultra poor.

The other thing that the three factors highlighted above had in common was that they were largely European phenomena. That is not to say that such elites were purely European, although the second group largely was until the rise of the USA as an industrial power. However, only in Europe did these three elite groups define luxury on a global scale, due to the forces of industrial development and colonialism. Also, it was in Europe where we saw the rise of leisure travel, whereby those with wealth used their privileged position to indulge in leisure travel, starting perhaps with 'The Grand Tour'.

Traditionally too, all three groups had another great advantage and that is the availability of time. Most of them either enjoyed inherited wealth and had no need to work or were rich enough to pay others to manage their businesses. So for them travel could be a leisurely affair, so they could have 'the luxury' of relaxing over a prolonged period of time. So, luxury became associated with a slow pace of life, giving one the chance to savour experiences.

However, from the early 20th century onwards the position has been changing and will continue to change. First, as we will see when we look at the economic and geographical factors, the distribution of wealth changed first from Europe to the USA and then from these two to Asia. While many ideas of luxury from Europe were taken on board, first in the USA and then in Asia, they have somewhat different perspectives on the meaning of luxury.

While our own era has also seen the growth of economic elites based on 'earned wealth', it seems now that even the rich no longer have the luxury of time. Making money seems to offer little chance for lengthy vacations and the much faster pace of life has reduced the opportunities to simply 'stand and stare', no matter how rich you are. Even if you are lucky enough to fly in a private jet, a seven hour flight from London to New York will never be as relaxing as a seven day sail from Southampton to New York on an ocean liner. If luxury is about rarity value, then time is now a luxury for almost everyone.

As we will see in Chapter 7, history has also had an influence on where luxury travel takes place and what constitutes a luxury destination. Before air travel, all places thousands of kilometres from Europe were *de facto* luxury destinations for the European travellers, because the journey would take days if not weeks and cost enormous amounts of money. Today a German tourist can get up and fly to India for a few hundred Euro and arrive in time for a late dinner that evening!

At the same time, places change and the rise of mass market tourism has changed some formerly exclusive destinations into mass market honeypots, not least because of their inherited reputation as upscale places to be and be seen. The French Riviera is a good example of this phenomenon but few recall that in the 1950s, Benidorm, the icon of modern mass market tourism, was a place for famous artists but few other tourists

These historical factors are continuing to influence the evolution of the concept of tourism, hospitality and events, not least because when tomorrow dawns even today becomes history!