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The Future of Visitor Attractions

Introduction

This chapter explores the future of visitor attractions by using the examples of theme parks and world-renowned tourist attractions to illustrate the possible developments in this area. The chapter considers the impact of social media on visitor attractions and the associated phenomenon of 'overtourism' to demonstrate the types of problems being faced by visitor attractions and reflect on how tourism authorities are addressing these issues.

Theme parks and other visitor attractions

Attractions are arguably the most important component in the tourism system and could be described as the main pull factor for tourists to travel to particular destinations (Dann, 1981). Since attractions are the core of the tourism product, if there were no attractions then tourism as we know it would not exist (Swarbrooke, 2012). While no clear definition exists of visitor attractions, they can be split into four main types, namely:

- Features within the natural environment, such as rainforests, waterfalls, beaches, lakes and rivers;
- Human-made buildings, structures and sites that were designed for a purpose other than attracting visitors, but which now attract substantial numbers of visitors who use them as leisure amenities, e.g., places of religious worship such as cathedrals and temples;
- Human-made buildings, structures and sites that are designed to attract visitors and are purpose-built to accommodate their needs, such as theme parks and amusement parks; and,
- Special events (Swarbrooke, 2012).

A popular type of purpose-built attraction is the theme park. When a visitor buys a ticket and passes through the turnstiles, this signals they are entering

a different space. This space offers a variety of rides, restaurants, shops, and shows that are all themed around one or several past, exotic, or fictional cultures which are 'geographically, visually, and ritually separated from the rest of the world' (Freitag, 2017: 706). Theme parks have different admission policies that include, pay-as-you-go and pay-one-price, but all visitors have the opportunity to spend on food, souvenirs and other related purchases. In the future, theme parks are expected to increase in number due to the growth in urban population, the rise in the middle-class population with associated increase in disposable income and, an increase in international tourism expenditure (Business Wire, 2019).



Figure 5.0: Walt Disney Resort, Orlando, Florida. *Source:* L. McCartney, 2020.

Probably the best-known theme park operator is Walt Disney which operates Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando Florida that encompasses Magic Kingdom, Animal Kingdom, Epcot and Hollywood Studios. Walt Disney World Resort is a key player in Orlando's \$75.2 billion tourism

industry as it attracts 75 million visitors annually, accounting for 70% of the region's tourism market share, with these visitors spending money at local hotels, restaurants and shops (Bilbao, 2019). In addition, the Disney Company operates Disneyland Resort, California; Hong Kong Disneyland Resort; Shanghai Disney Resort, China; Tokyo Disney Resort; and, Disneyland Paris. As with all successful theme parks, Disney is continually introducing new rides utilising new technology as a way of investing in its theme parks. Disney is also interested in achieving maximum return from its intellectual properties. As a result, a new ride centred on the latest Star Wars release called the Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance ride, based at the Hollywood Studios theme park in Orlando, opened in December 2019 to correspond with the associated movie release. The ride consists of a 15-minute experience, with pre-show and post-show elements to create one story. This may help to minimise the feeling by visitors of standing in a very long and time-consuming line to enter the ride (Bilbao, 2019).

Other theme parks have reported the introduction of facial recognition technology to replace paper or online tickets. For example, the new Universal Studios theme park under construction in China will use facial recognition for admissions, payments and queueing. The facial recognition cameras will be linked to an electronic payment platform, with the new technology allowing visitors to use their faces to join express queues for rides, pay for meals and open lockers (MacDonald, 2019). Since waiting in line is one of the aspects of a theme park which is not popular among tourists, the introduction of virtual queuing would go some way to make the visitor experience more positive. Torres *et al.* (2018) note that queues have been an endemic problem in the theme park and attraction industry and theme parks have tried to alleviate waiting by creating virtual queues, improving queue design, and developing interactive experiences while waiting.

Research has shown that visitors to theme parks have the potential to be 'delighted' with their experience and the aspects most likely to create a positive experience being positive value perceptions, limited waiting times in queues for the rides, an excellent core product, quality food and beverages, servicescape, pricing decisions and sensible admissions policies (Torres *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, guests who are 'outraged' with their experience describe various aspects of their visit to the theme park which create negative experiences such as the perceptions of value, long waiting periods in queues, poor customer service, low quality or deficient core products, poor quality of food and beverage, poor facility maintenance, aggressive pricing decisions, poor staff selection, training, and working conditions or aggressive admissions policies (Torres *et al.*, 2018).