

7

Luxury Tourist Destinations

Introduction

This chapter will endeavour to identify the characteristics of a luxury tourist destination. It will investigate if there is a 'magic formula' for determining which will be perceived as luxurious, involving traditional criteria such as unique product attributes, for example a world renowned beach or retail offer together with high end hotels and restaurants. Is it important to have a reputation from the past to be seen as luxury today or can a place be seen as luxury from day one, as countries build new resorts from nothing in an attempt to earn 'tourist gold'? Are the presence of celebrities and high prices for everything pre-requisites for anywhere that wishes to be seen as a serious luxury destination?

I will suggest that in many ways the question of whether somewhere is a luxury travel destination is as much a matter of emotion as it is of fact.

We will also consider whether a mass market destination can have small luxury destinations within it, such as a large-scale single ownership all-inclusive resort.

At the end of the chapter I will explore the idea of a fashion cycle in relation to tourist destinations. I will also pose the question of whether the destination is beginning to play a less important part in the vacation experience as it becomes a mere backdrop to the activities of tourists.

Figure 7.1 endeavours to identify some of the key factors that influence the perception of a place as a luxury destination. I believe that all of these factors identified have an impact on perceptions of whether a place is a luxury destination.

Historical reputation

Until recently the historical reputation of a place was very important to its image, but we need to remember that until the last few decades international tourism was focused in relatively few parts of the world. In that situation a few iconic locations became bywords for luxury amongst the tiny minority of the world's population that was able to travel internationally.

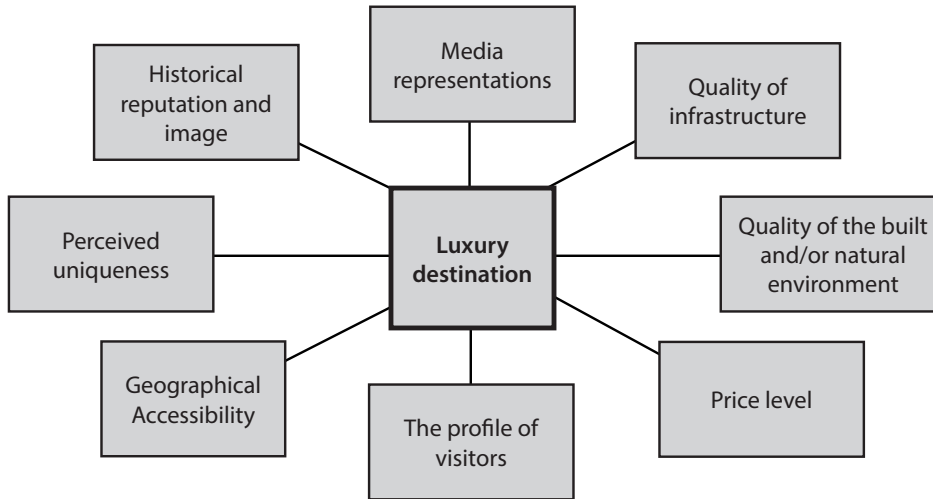


Figure 7.1: Factors that may determine if a destination is seen as a luxury destination

The French Riviera is an example of such a destination and its reputation continues as a luxury destination, in some markets, long after it has probably ceased to be chic and exclusive and inhabited only by rich tourists. Reputations can certainly exist long after the reality has changed. Bali is often seen as a luxurious and exotic destination yet the reality is now that it is a mainstream mass market long-haul destination. Many people might say a place such as Dubai is a luxury destination yet it has no historic reputation as such for it has only been developed as a tourist destination over the past twenty years.

Media representations

I would like to argue that media representations are today, perhaps, the single most important factor influencing the reputation of a destination. One main reason for this is that unlike some of the factors in Figure 7.1, media representations will have affected the image of a destination for tourists who have not visited it. Media is now truly global and is part of our life through every waking hour. Media representations of destinations can, of course, be both positive and negative, although in relation to luxury they are usually the former. Just some of the ways in which the media may impact on destination image are as follows:

- Celebrity endorsements or visits, e.g. George Clooney getting married in Venice.
- Movies and television shows that feature a particular location.
- Travel magazines and glossy lifestyle magazines that see travel as a vital element in a luxurious lifestyle, for example Condé Nast.
- So-called reality TV shows that feature travel and tourism in any way.
- Consumer reviews of places and vacation experiences placed on various social media platforms.

We need to recognise that destination image today is created much more by the media, than it is by the work of destination marketing organisations who, I believe, generally have only a marginal effect on how destinations are seen by consumers.

Uniqueness

For many commentators, uniqueness is linked to the idea of luxury because it represents a form of exclusivity. But it is a strange idea in tourism because every place and every vacation is in reality unique. Perhaps it is really about the perception of uniqueness, and uniqueness as a positive, for something can also be unique but negative!

Quality of destination infrastructure

I believe that most tourists would say that the quality of infrastructure is vital to any destination that wishes to be seen as a luxury place to vacation. The most important elements of the infrastructure would include:

- Transport links both to and within the destination; these will be judged in terms of criteria including convenience, reliability, comfort and safety.
- The accommodation stock in terms of the star ratings of hotels, locations, and services available.
- The availability of opportunities for eating out, whether upscale fine dining restaurants or 'unique' experiences such as eating under the stars in a desert.
- Retail opportunities, from the gold souk of Dubai to the designer brand stores of London or Paris.
- Upmarket entertainment facilities, including casinos, opera houses, theatres, and fashionable night clubs and bars.
- Visitor attractions and sightseeing opportunities that carry status in the tourism market.

Quality of the built and/or natural environment

The quality of the built and/or natural environment is also seen as an important factor in the luxury market. Most so-called luxury destinations have physical attraction, whether it be beautiful buildings or a stunning natural setting. However this is not always the case. Dubai does not have a spectacular setting and has few beautiful old buildings. However it does have unique ultra-modern buildings and is set in a desert. But it would be hard to imagine anywhere being seen as a luxury destination if it was on a flat featureless plain, with rubbish in the streets, and modest buildings made of concrete within the last fifty years!

Having said that, I will later argue that destinations may become less important than what goes on in them; in other words perhaps they are becoming simply a backdrop for what consumers want to do, rather than a focus for their travels.