

Will the Advent of a More Responsible Type of Tourism Lead to the Convergence of Today's Highly Diversified Tourist Offers?

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Abstract

'Responsible' tourism is all the rage nowadays. Parallel to the offer commercialized by specialized tour operators on the sustainable niche, traditional tour-operators have also begun to claim the sustainability of their offer. One can henceforth ponder on the legitimacy of the names they appropriate. The aim of the study is to assess the sustainability of their offer and eventually their legitimacy in claiming themselves to be responsible.

The survey was carried out among 18 French traditional and 10 (in fact more because of regrouping) specialized tour operators on the internet sites and their catalogue perusals. Results shows that various actions have been undertaken, relayed by communication, to promote an environment-friendly sustainable tourism in the broad sense of the term. Awareness is therefore genuine; it remains nonetheless all too often symbolic.

The lack of transparency displayed by tour operators makes it hard to fathom for the ill-informed traveller.

Introduction

The forecast of the World Tourism Organisation until 2020 indicates a sustained unflinching growth of the international tourist sector over the last four years¹ which confirms that tourism is one of the fastest growing economic sectors.

Tourism is influenced by various trends that result in an offer of previously unseen tourist products. Among these evolutions, we shall be focusing on those which concern a more responsible kind of tourism, involving both supply and demand.

- A more responsible form of tourism

This responsibility encompasses all the partners involved in the tourist offer as well as the environment (nature and heritage). The term « sustainable » under the condition it truly

¹ World Tourism Barometer, WTO, www.UNWTO.org 2007. + 4% of the international arrivals planned in 2007. In 2020, these arrivals should exceed 1.5 billion giving rise to 2000 billion in revenues, excluding domestic tourism.

includes the three social, environmental and economic pillars would be perfectly suited if it did not lead to so much misunderstanding. The offers encountered, which claim to be specialized in a more responsible kind of tourism, have in turn taken on a variety of names : solidarity, ecological, green, ethical, fair, responsible, alternative, sustainable, participative, native, ecotourism, community-oriented tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, agritourism.... For the customers, this creates more confusion than clarity even if their specialization, whether environmental or solidarity, can easily be explained by their origins.

As a reminder in the appendix we have included the definitions given by the WTO (World Tourism Organisation) and UNAT (Union Nationale des Associations de Tourisme) of four terms that emerged to qualify a form of tourism that strives to be « different » and « responsible » (appendix 1)

- The evolution of customer demand

The customer, as a certain number of surveys demonstrate, rides the wave of sustainable development either to follow a trend, or through a genuine awareness of the stakes at hand. In larger numbers, the customers are increasingly concerned with the environment and advocate destinations in which their presence will not trigger an upsurge of environmental or social issues. They are also more active physically and intellectually speaking than in the past.

Among the more recent surveys, let us refer to two of them : the survey carried out by ATR (Agir pour un Tourisme Responsable) shows that 72% of the French claim to feel concerned by responsible tourism and 50% claim to be ready to invest in this kind of travel². The survey carried out by TripAdvisor.com is more internationally oriented³: 40% of international travellers claim to be concerned by the environment; 11 % among them have already purchased responsible trips; 25% are considering purchasing them; 38 % say they take this into account when selecting a trip.

In parallel, other publications⁴ emphasize the shift from hardline adventure tourism towards « lighter » nature tourism whose definitions we shall list.

“Soft activities are those where a more casual, less dedicated approach is taken to the activity or natural attraction, and a desire to experience it with some basic degree of comfort; whereas

² Novethic.fr –July 16th 07 – Véronique Smée « Tourisme responsable : comment choisir ? »

³ TripAdvisor.com – 31/05/07 « Are more Travellers becoming Eco-Friendly? » 1000 travellers interviewed throughout the world.

⁴ Eagles, Mc Cool & Haynes, 2002, *Sustainable tourism in protected areas*, United Nations Environment Programme, WTO and IUCN – The World Conservation Union, pp 21 to 23.

« hard » adventure or ecotourism involves specialist interest or dedicated activity, and a willingness to experience the outdoors or wilderness with few comforts”.

The tourism industry has responded to this range of interests by developing many types of niche market packages.

- The response of tour operators

According to their conception of responsible tourism and to their origin - adventure , solidarity or development tourism -, the specialist tour operators are responsible for the profusion of labels and enterprises ; the offer is therefore fragmented, eclectic and hard to decipher on a given market, which, though expanding, only represents 1% to 2% of the global market.

For their part, traditional tour operators embark upon more responsible operations while they are accused of much wrong-doing: mass tourism, destruction of the environment, overlooked socio-cultural impacts, etc... Those which until now did not much advertise the initiatives undertaken have begun publishing ethical charts in answer to the sustainable development trend.

The problematic of this research is hence to foresee whether the tourist offers of traditional and specialist tour operators might in the future converge, thanks to an evolution towards a more responsible form of tourism, in answer to a more pressing demand on the part of customers as well as the evolution of new technologies or promotion and commercialisation methods that may emphasize this phenomenon.