

**DESTINATION ‘365’:
MANAGING TOURISM SEASONALITY**

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365 BY DESIGN

For any destination to operate as a solid, sustainable tourism economy the fundamentals of good business practice must be in place. Critical is consistency of supply and demand. In the case of the tourism sector this requires creating a '365' destination proposition which offers year-round experiences, thereby creating year-round visitation.

Development of a 365 destination is essential to ensure that the tourism industry is able to create and sustain the key drivers of sector economic and societal growth. These include:

- employment,
- revenue generation,
- infrastructure development,
- trade,
- investor confidence,
- societal identity, and
- return on investment.

Engineering of a year-round destination, one which is relatively immune to changes in tourism flow due to climate and/or activity, demands careful definition of the tourism segments which make up the total destination proposition. Careful management of flows of travellers, those from both the leisure and business segments, is required across the year.

Because the reality is - a surge in tourism activity may create exciting, inspiring highs in economic activity, but unless the highs are sustained throughout the year, the lows will result in people working within the tourism industry being let go, resulting in a drop in household income, a dent in economic activity, decline in payment of utilities and school fees, and decrease in education of the next generation...until the next high season allows for re-employment, repayment, re-attendance and rebuilding.

The net effect: direct, dramatic weakening of the social fabric that keeps all of the people of the destination safe, warm and hopeful.

CREATING 365

Central to this engineering of a 365, year-round destination is the identification of *niche* tourism sectors which the destination can offer, and ideally own, as pillars of their total destination proposition.

Niche tourism - the formal development and investment into tourism sub-sectors which are carefully, creatively and clearly strategically designed and promoted to attract travellers with specific, often sophisticated special interests - are fundamental to the establishment of competitive, visionary destinations.

Eco-tourism, voluntourism, medical tourism, cultural tourism, cruise tourism, wine tourism, religious tourism – all of these are examples of niche sectors which destinations have leveraged as areas of destination proposition gravitas.

For example:

- INDIA, home of Ayurveda and now a world-class medical tourism sector;
- NEW ZEALAND, a centre of 100% pure ecotourism;
- SOUTH AFRICA, where cultural tourism forms the backbone of the destination;
- SAN FRANCISCO, the self-declared “Gay Capital of the world”;
- SOUTH OF FRANCE, globally known as a centre of magnificent Food & Wine tourism;
- KENYA, a first-thought when it comes to classic, romantic African safari;
- DUBAI, with its exceptionally well established business tourism offering, immune to summer peaks in temperature;
- ALASKA, home of some of the world's finest boat and land-based whale and glacier watching;

- TAHITI, one of the world's leading honeymoon destinations; and
- EGYPT's Red Sea, a Mecca for the world's divers.

These sub-sectors become, in effect, tourism business units within the greater destination tourism offering. Their proposition is clear, their goals clearly defined, their target audiences and responding core messaging acutely carved out. Or, at least, they should be.

Often, however, niche tourism sub-sectors are created as secondary, temporary or tactical projects within the greater tourism sector mobilized for their incremental arrivals value alone. Such unfortunate occurrences suffocate the true potential of niche tourism. A great pity as, when developed and activated correctly, niche sub-sectors can in fact form the essential framework for destination competitiveness and traveller connectivity.

Visionary destinations, those building their tourism economy and tourism future through disciplined strategic management and commitment to legacy, recognise that the role of niche sectors is far more valuable than simply the numbers they bring.

Niche sectors not only have the ability to keep the fire burning, they can in fact determine the nature of the flame.

Their benefits are three-fold:

Firstly, and most obviously, niche tourism helps attract incremental arrivals. By resonating with specific target markets, niche tourism is able to attract visitation at, often, critical times of the year when the special interest is at its peak (i.e. cyclical).

Secondly, niche tourism allows for effective management of seasonality. By creating and activating niche sectors which can attract visitation during low season periods, the industry is able to raise the baseline of sector employment and economic activity, sustaining tourism-related economic stability and prosperity, as well as social harmony and unity.

Lastly, and of exceptional strategic importance, niche tourism allows a destination to achieve essential shifts in destination perception. This is particularly important for destinations seeking to banish out-dated and/or incorrect perceptions of travellers (and the world at large) regarding national identity, quality and capability.

A wonderful example of this is India - recognising the critical role which the tourism sector can play in building the nation for the future from the perspectives of employment, infrastructure, investment and poverty alleviation, the government made a conscious, clear, concrete commitment to sector development. The destination brand - simply incredible.

However, '*Incredible India*' still faced significant challenges with perceptions of cleanliness and sophistication of the destination. Already possessing a rich history in natural wellness and healing (*Ayurvedic* medicine) and with clear expertise amongst modern Indian medical doctors and services (with their affordability versus western facilities), the government of India wisely identified Medical Tourism as a priority niche sector. This prioritization was not only a means of attracting more visitors and building destination Brand equity – it was a powerful way of getting the message out to the world that India is clean, safe, skilled and sophisticated. An incredible move for tourism advancement.

365, 360 DEGREES

To effectively, sustainably and resource-efficiently contribute to destination growth and development, the creation of niche sectors must play a part in the overall Tourism Growth Strategy of the nation.

Specifically, niche sector development must clearly contribute to development of the sector through direct contribution to one of several of the following drivers of tourism economy growth:

- Increase in arrivals
- Increase in yield
- Increase in year-round visitation
- Increase in dispersion of travellers outside of the main tourism hubs
- Increase in destination Brand equity
- Increase in destination competitiveness
- Increase in opportunity creation for people of the destination.

Therefore, before a destination to identify and seek to develop a niche, some hard questions need to be asked including, *inter alia*:

1. How does this niche support:
 - The destination Brand?
 - Momentum of arrivals?
 - Attracting new as well as repeat travellers?
 - The overall image of the nation/region?
 - Lifting the low season?
 - The greater tourism and economic development mandate?
2. What is the competitive landscape for the niche, and can we effectively, sustainably, and credibly compete?
3. Is this a niche we can own?
4. Are we prepared to invest in the development and ongoing success of the niche to the point of:
 - Including it in the destination tourism strategy?
 - Provide adequate, ongoing resources – funds, people, intelligence?
 - Creating policy to ensure sector support at all levels?
5. *Why are we really wanting to do this?*
 - Who or what is the core motivation?
 - What legacy will it leave for Tourism, for other sectors and for the people of the destination?
 - And how insulated is commitment to niche sector development from political change?

Answering thoughtfully the above questions will ensure that niche sector development acts as a fuel that allows the destination's future to burn brightly...protecting it from creation of a niche which may in fact burn quickly and powerfully but leave behind a destination damaged by its flames.

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