
Section 1: Contemporary Tourism Systems

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Contemporary Tourism Systems

Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- Understand the core elements in the service dimension of tourism.
- Understand that the tourism experience does not exist independently of the interaction of tourism consumers and producers.
- Recognise the different stages in the tourism system and their implication for the tourist experience.
- Appreciate the importance of scale of analysis in studying tourism.
- Identify some of the key constraints on tourism related travel.
- Understand the characteristics that are used to define concepts of tourism, tourist and mobility.

Introduction

Contemporary tourism is at the same time one of the most significant yet misunderstood phenomenon in the world today. It is something that is engaged in by many people in the developed world, and increasingly in developing countries, and is regarded as an important mechanism for economic development. The extent of tourism activities across the globe and the sheer number of people who travel mean that tourism is often described as one of the world's largest industries. Yet tourism is simultaneously an agent of socio-cultural, environmental and

economic change at both a local and global scale. Given the popular image of tourism as being connected to leisure and fun, the scope of the study of tourism is serious indeed.

This first chapter examines some of the key concepts by which we analyse and describe contemporary tourism. These concepts lie at the core of the field of tourism studies and set out the domain of tourism research. Because tourism is essentially an experiential industry, that is people are consciously seeking to purchase particular ephemeral or intangible experiences, even if the tourist does not necessarily think of it that way, tourism is regarded as a service industry. Therefore, the chapter first discusses the service dimension of tourism, a theme that runs throughout this book. The chapter then goes on to outline the concept of the tourism system and its implications with respect to understanding how tourism is consumed and produced, and approaches to defining tourism, tourist and mobility including some of the constraints on mobility.

The service dimension of tourism

The essential characteristics of services are that they cannot be produced without the agreement and cooperation of the consumer and that the outputs produced are not separate entities that exist independently of the producers or consumers (Hill 1999). One of the key service characteristics of tourism is that the main location at which the consumption of experiences occurs is outside of the normal home environment of the purchaser. Although tourism is a service industry this does not mean that it is completely intangible - far from it. Tourism is based on a complex set of infrastructure and physical resources that have a significant impact on the places in which they are situated and, in the case of greenhouse gas emissions from transport for example, at a far wider scale. However, the tourist is purchasing the experiences provided by this infrastructure and set of resources, and not the infrastructure itself. Because tourism is an experience-based product it means that in order to be able to understand tourism phenomenon we need to be able to understand both its consumption and production. This is an almost deceptively simple statement but its implications are enormous: tourism cannot be understood by looking at one aspect in isolation; consumption cannot occur without production and vice versa. The inseparability of production and consumption is therefore one of the hallmarks of tourism, with the value of the tourism experience therefore being determined by both the consumer and the producer of the experience and the tourism product (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1: Locating the tourism experience and tourism product

This inseparability also means that the factors that make up consumption and production are constantly feeding back into one another, thereby influencing the development of tourism products and their appeal to consumers.

In seeking to understand contemporary tourism we are therefore seeking to understand the interrelationships between consumers and producers and the variety of experiences that are created. Yet one of the distinguishing aspects of tourism from other service and experience-based products is that it refers to the experience of people voluntarily traveling outside of their place of permanent residence. This therefore means that the primary focus of much of tourism is on the places or destinations that people travel to in order to satisfy their motivations for particular experiences. The mobile nature of tourism provides another really important dimension in its understanding in that, because the service and tourist experience does not exist independently of the direct interaction between consumers and producers, it therefore cannot be stocked or have its ownership transferred. In order to understand the tourist experience we therefore have to be able to chart how it changes over time to see how the different elements of consumption and production come together to produce different experiences and therefore different outcomes for the consumer and the producer.

The tourism system and industry value chain

In order to be able to understand the complex and dynamic nature of the contemporary tourism experience many researchers utilize the concept of a tourism system. A system is an assemblage or interrelated combination of things or elements forming a unitary whole (Hall 2008). At its most basic, the tourism system consists of consumption and production and the experiences that are generated. To increase our understanding of tourism we are also interested in identifying those elements and factors that contribute to tourism consumption and production.

Given that movement is integral to tourism, one way in which the tourism system can be understood is through the travel paths taken by individual consumers. This approach is usually termed a geographical system of tourism and consists of four basic elements:

- a *generating or source region* – the permanent residence of the tourist and the place where the journey begins and ends;
- a *transit route* – the path through the region across which the tourist must travel to reach his or her destination;
- a *destination region* – the region which the tourist chooses to visit and which is a core element of tourism; and
- the *environment* – that surrounds the other three regions.

The geographical tourism system model is useful for identifying the flow of tourists from one location to another and the importance of connectivity between the generating region and the destination (Figure 1.2). Of course there might be more than one destination and therefore a whole system of destination regions and

transit route regions can exist for some tourists. Nevertheless, the basic form of the geographical tourism system is sufficient to illustrate a range of important dimensions of tourism.

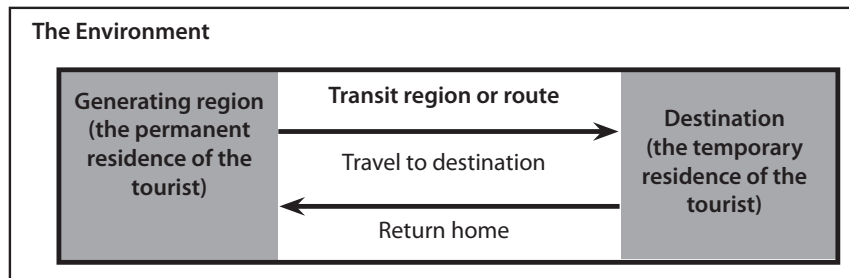


Figure 1.2: The geographical tourism system

- 1 While the destination is the focal point of tourism activity, tourism will have affects over all elements of the tourism system. For example, while assessment of the economic and environmental effects of tourism can clearly be undertaken at the destination, a full assessment of impacts as a result of a tourist trip will need to include not only what happens at the destination but also in getting to and from that destination.
- 2 Destinations are accessible to tourism source regions. Such a statement may seem to be obvious yet its implications are profound. Different destinations will be variably accessible to source regions and vice versa. This means that some destinations will have natural advantages over others in relation to their accessibility and therefore potential market area. This is a factor that destinations will seek to exploit in competition with other destinations (Hall & Page 2006; Coles & Hall 2008).
- 3 In relation to travel to the destination, different elements of the system will have different productive components even though they are used by the same consumer. The different elements that enable the production of tourism are identified in Table 1.1. In examining Table 1.1 it is important to realize that it does not suggest that the elements that have been identified only occur in specific regions, rather it highlights the relative importance of various aspects of the tourism industry from the perspective of the consumer as they go from one stage of their trip to another, and hence from one part of the tourism system to another.

The different production components of the tourism system also make up the tourism industry value system or value chain (Figure 1.3). At an industry level, the economic value of tourism over the longer term is dependent on the capacity of the tourism businesses within the system to maximize service qualities and experiences for tourists. The value chain is also consumption driven as the tourist travels through the tourism system and usually commences via contact with the distribution system that includes tourism intermediaries, such as travel agents and online travel brokers, e.g. Expedia.