

## **Industry keen to assert its green credentials**

*Roger Blitz*

Responsible travel is not as recent a concept as some might think. Eco-tourism first emerged in the 1970s in response to such developments as the destruction of the Amazon rainforest and poaching in Africa.

From those origins of low impact, conservation-driven responsible holidaymaking, a sizeable industry has been generated that touches every type of traveller.

Hotel groups seek to demonstrate better than their rivals how they conserve water, recycle materials and save energy. Airlines order more energy-efficient planes and develop environmentally friendlier airports. Cruise ships advocate waste management and recycling policies.

Meanwhile, travel procurers demand evidence from the industry of their green credentials, while international companies issue staff with responsible travel guidelines.

And sitting above all this are governments with regulation and tax instruments at their disposal to threaten or cajole travel providers and users into more responsible behaviour.

The backdrop for all this sometimes frenetic activity, however, is a trend towards more people travelling more frequently, and further.

According to the UN World Tourism Organisation, international tourism arrivals grew 6 per cent in 2007 to nearly 900m, 52m more than in 2006 and a rise of close to 100m in two years.

Airline fuel surcharges, exchange rate volatility, economic slowdown, terrorism, avian flu, foot and mouth, floods and hurricanes and the rest do not seem to stop them travelling.

The travel industry is falling over itself to create the infrastructure to support demand that shows no signs of abating at least until the middle of the 2020s.

Airports are sprouting all over China, existing ones are being redeveloped in London, Dubai and Madrid. The A380 double-decker plane is in the skies, and several new transatlantic routes are in operation following the Open Skies deal between the US and the European Union.

The development pipelines of hotel groups extend into both traditional destinations and those in emerging markets, as demand continues to outstrip supply.

It would be foolish to assume that such demand reflects public indifference to environmental matters. A report on world travel trends for International Travel Bourse, the annual trade convention, last November said issues relating to the environment and social responsibility were starting to influence travellers' choice of holidays and destinations.

In addition, customers were becoming sophisticated enough to voice scepticism about carbon offsetting schemes, the relatively new instrument used widely in the travel industry to establish green credentials.

However, the impact of climate change on demand is unlikely to be far-reaching. According to Global Insight, the research consultancy, government-led policies on climate change may by 2020 result in 50m fewer international arrivals. But that amounts to the same number of new arrivals in 2007 alone.

Further, governments continue to see travel as the route to economic growth and to fend off the strident protests of environmental groups, although the ongoing debate over the UK government's airport expansion policy will test its resolve.

In many smaller countries, tourism is a central economic activity, rather than a peripheral industrial sector, with tourism ministers being important figures in their government. The impact of this year's tribal violence in Kenya on the country's tourism industry has been swift and painful for its economy as a whole.

None of this prevents the industry from its rush to create responsible products. For some, the important factor is that the debate about travel and tourism's contribution to climate change is effectively over. The travel industry appears to have accepted that the argument is lost, partly because the public perceives aviation as a persistent polluter.

Some in the industry see the climate change debate as a marketing opportunity, seizing on the public's demand for proof of green credentials. Carbon calculators, offsetting schemes and joined-up green tour packages are the mainstays of the responsible tourism agenda, even if they receive variable customer reaction.

Parts of the industry are busily creating products for the green-conscious consumer: spas driven by wind turbines and solar heating, hotels using low energy bulbs and recycled material, safaris built around ecology restoration and the like.

In time, an audit of the responsible travel products, one independently verified and endorsed by the travel industry, will provide a recognisable guide to the value and quality of this nascent market. Until then, customers are left with a pinstickers' guide to what to trust and whom to believe.

Lyndall de Marco of the International Tourism Partnership, part of the Prince of Wales's International Business Leaders' Forum, comments on the progress of various areas of the industry.

"Hotels have started solidly," she says, but airlines are could do more, while tour operators are limited in their influence. But the people who develop hotels and new sites are not hoteliers or tour operators. They are from real estate. "More work has to be done there," she says.

Other parts of the industry may simply be off-limits to the practitioners of responsible travel.

For every initiative dreamed up in the luxury travel market to soothe the green conscience, there are sure to be many more that wipe out whatever energy saving was gained.

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