

**Editorial**

## Cyber-tourism: A New Form of Tourism Experience

It has become fashionable to identify and define specific types of tourist activity such as heritage tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism and so on. To add yet another specific type of tourism, in this case cyber-tourism, to the language of tourism risks the danger of the concept being lost amongst the many other identified types of tourism activity or simply being swept up in an aggregate sense as another type of niche tourism. However, to fail to identify cyber-tourism as a new and specific form of tourism experience risks allowing the many opportunities available in the cyber field being dispersed amongst other already identified types of tourism activity. This special issue recognises the existence of cyber tourism as a new type of tourism experience that entails the use of new technologies to achieve a tourism experience. Prideaux and Singer (this issue) define cyber-tourism as an electronically simulated travel experience that is a substitute for a physical tourism experience. They suggest that this type of tourism will allow participants to travel to places via new technologies free of the usual restrictions of time, distance, cost and human frailty.

The contemporary world is more open to travel than at any time in the past. Few borders are closed to travellers, and cost rather than politics is the major inhibitor to travel. From the standpoint of 2005, the opportunities for further expansion of tourism appear almost boundless. The global economy continues to grow, powered by the expansion of the US and Chinese economies. War on any major scale looks less likely than any time in the past century and new technologies, particularly in transport and IT, appear to lay the foundation for continuing growth of global tourism flows. The factors that may inhabit future economic growth include rising fuel prices, declining oil reserves and global warming. Yet on these issues there is optimism rather than pessimism as the centuries' long belief in the ability of new technologies to fix major social, health and environmental problems continues to pervade global society and is an underlying philosophy of national governments.

Against this background of emerging concern, some would say crisis, over declining oil reserves and growing concern over global warming, the global tourism industry continues to exhibit unswerving faith in the long-term growth of international and domestic tourism. Even repeated crises such as September 11 in the US, numerous other terrorist attacks, the SARS epidemic and the Asian Tsunami of 2004

have not reversed the overall positive growth in international tourism arrivals. What the situation will be in one or two decades, if the current faith in almost limitless growth is proved to be false, will be for the future to decide.

Irrespective of the actual shape of the future, demand for travel will continue to exist although perhaps in forms different from that we understand today. Tourism is a product of affluence and peace. If either of these conditions were to alter for some yet unpredicted reasons, perhaps a new cold or even hot war, or a shift from globalism to a more narrow nationalism, demand for travel will continue although in a form that is different from that that we are familiar with today. It is at this point that cyber-tourism may offer affordable alternatives to some forms of physical travel.

Cyber-tourism in the many forms described in this special issue will continue to grow particularly as new technologies are developed and introduced into the global marketplace. The reason for growth may be the result of positive forces including continuing peace and global economic growth, negative forces such as a reduction in affluence or a less peaceful future global political system or just because the technology is available.

The papers in this special issue explore a number of the fascinating aspects of cyber-tourism that are currently beginning to emerge. For example, Vijayakumar and Dileep examine how new communications technologies have been employed by Ayurveda medical practitioners to promote the value of this ancient form of Indian medicine and develop it as a new tourism experience. Myung, Morrison and Taylor take a different perspective and examine how new cyber technologies can assist convention organizers decide on which facility to choose for their conference, perhaps foreshadowing new forms of business-to-business relations in a future cyber-world. Buhalis and O'Connor expose the reader to how new Information Communication Technology networks have the potential to revolutionize the tourism industry. At a different level, Benckendorff, Moscardo and Murphy's paper examines how new technologies can be applied to enhance the visitor experience while Cooper and MacNeil look at the potential of virtual reality. Forrester and Singh bring to our attention the increasing number of contrived landscapes where experiences are sanitized and commodified and that increasingly rely on technology to offer new levels of escapism.

Anwar and Hamilton's contribution suggests some future applications for cyber-tourism technology at the national level, examining a range of implications for Australia. Ross's contribution explores a range of very significant issues related to the ethical dimensions of cyber-tourism by noting the concern that some commentators have expressed that it may eventually destroy the mechanisms used by individuals to create social capital.

The papers in this special issue touch briefly on the possible range of issues that will emerge as cyber-tourism, in its many forms, evolves in the future. As has been demonstrated many times in the past, yesterday's science fiction has an uncanny habit of transforming itself into today's science fact. Some of the ideas canvassed in this special issue have a science fiction like quality but in the future may become science fact. Richard Branson's announcement (The Courier Mail 2005) that commercial space flights operated by Virgin Galactic will commence in 2008 with a ticket price of AUS \$275,000 per seat for a seven-minute experience of space demonstrate the validity of the fiction to fact continuum. It is highly probable that in the next few years further advances in science will create opportunities for cyber-tourism to offer a far wider variety of

experiences and with a greater sense of authenticity than is conceivable today.

The danger is that the blurring of reality and fantasy will impact on some currently accepted paradigms of tourism operations. How the tourism industry responds will determine whether in the future tourism shifts towards the entertainment industry or remains, as it is today, a major identifiable industry. There are also a range of ethical issues that will need to be addressed. How will the ability to enter the cyber realm, where the impossible in the physical world becomes the norm in the cyber-world, change peoples' perception of reality and even identification with a physical or cyber self? Will the opening of the mind to the possibilities of cyber experiences give external agencies direct access to a person's mind? These are significant questions that must be addressed before technologies of this capability are introduced, rather than after the technologies have been introduced.

#### **Reference**

THE COURIER MAIL (2005). Countdown Initiated for 2007 Virgin Space Flight. 28 July: 15.

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Guest Editor