

Author's copy of Naumov, N. & Green, D. (2015) Mass tourism. In Jafari, J. & Xiao, H. (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Tourism*. New York: Springer.

Mass tourism

Mass tourism refers to the movement of a large number of organized tourists to popular holiday destinations for recreational purposes. It is a phenomenon which is characterized by the use of standardized package products and mass consumption. Conceptually, this type of tourism features standardized leisure products and experiences packaged for mass tourist consumption (Poon 1993).

History and development

The beginning of mass tourism is largely related to various changes, which occurred in the industrial societies in the second half of the 20th century. In fact, history of mass tourism begins from 1851 when Thomas Cook led a mass of tourists to the Great Exhibition to London (Page 2012). The growth of leisure travel and its importance was a result of the increased spending power, personal mobility, development of public transport, and internationalization in modern communities (Bramwell 2004). The emergence of paid holidays, increased leisure time and the development of railway networks and air transport, most notably the jet engine, contributed to an increased number of holidays (Manera, Segreto and Pohl 2009). Most vacations were constructed as recreational experiences, mainly at summer and winter leisure resorts.

Initially, the tourist flow was from industrial regions to the seaside areas in France and the United Kingdom and to winter resorts in the Alps, but the massive development of many coastal areas actually began in the post-war period with Spain and Italy in 1950s, followed by Malta, Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, and former Yugoslavia in late 1970s and 1980s. The western Mediterranean coastline is still the best example of mass concentration of tourists, but new destinations have also emerged, such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Israel. Eastern Europe is also a developing region with Croatia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria, as well as Turkey, increasingly regarded as new mass markets. The development of air transport and charter flights have popularized long-haul destinations, including Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Maldives, and Mauritius.

Contemporary challenges and future perspectives

The development of mass tourism has been characterized by continuity and change in the form of new challenges, trends and perspectives for development. The expansion of air transport, the

implementation of computer reservation systems and online bookings have largely changed the overall concept of mass tourism resulting in new products and activities for tourist consumption. This rapid development, however, has brought both positive and negative consequences. The economic benefits, such as job creation, increased income, and foreign exchange earnings, are often the rationale behind developing tourism facilities. However, its sociocultural and environmental consequences can outweigh the potential benefits. The sociocultural impacts tend to generate negative effects and can lead to the loss of culture, staged experiences, and over exploitation of cultural resources for tourism purposes (Page 2012). Mass tourism is also blamed for a wide range of negative environmental effects, such as overcrowding, air and water pollution, depletion and degradation of natural resources, and litter (Poon 1993). Some notorious examples are the extensive overbuilding in the Spanish coastal resorts, land degradation in Egypt, child abuse in India, drugs, and alcohol distribution in Thailand and Eastern Europe. These negative implications have largely been discussed with the idea of finding alternatives which follows the principles of sustainable development.

Despite the negative consequences and the increased popularity of individual travel bookings, mass tourism is still the dominant form of leisure activities and an important economic generator. Its scale and significance suggest that it is unlikely to be replaced by any alternative forms like rural tourism, heritage tourism, nature-based tourism or ecotourism, and the like. Thus, the focus should be on minimizing the impacts of mass expenditure, rather than promoting an alternative (Page 2012). Increasingly, the concept of “sustainable mass tourism” is gaining popularity, emphasizing that reducing the negative impacts is the key for long-term ecological and environmental sustainability (Weaver 2007).

Mass tourism is a worldwide phenomenon closely linked with the history of the tourism industry. Often associated with sun, sand, and sea experiences, this particular form of tourism has long been considered as the dominant feature of international tourism. The development of international tourism, however, as well as the changing consumption and behavioural patterns of tourists have resulted in various changes related to the nature and extent of mass tourism activities. Tourists now seek wide and diverse products, new recreational activities and experiences. New destinations have also emerged attracting organized tourists not only to large resorts but also to small historical cities, urban attractions or rural areas.

All these changes suggest that further research is needed to revisit the conceptual framework of mass tourism. It is by no means certain that various changes have emerged since

the beginning of mass organized holidays in the post-war period, which suggests that the meaning of the term needs to be re-examined. Future research shall also explore the decline of traditional tour operators market, the rise of tailor-made holidays and low-cost travel, and how these trends influence marketing and management strategies of tourism and destination management authorities.

See also: Beach tourism, charter tourism, holiday, leisure, package tourism.

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