

Space Travel and Medical Tourism

This paper introduces the first IMEX 'Focus on trends', a new series of occasional reports on likely opportunities for the MICE sector. It looks at the imminent developments of tourism to the edge of the earth's atmosphere, and also at the already burgeoning demand to travel overseas for surgery and other health/cosmetic procedures. The former is yet to be proven; the latter is happening on a considerable scale already. Both concepts have applications to meetings and incentive travel markets because they can be aspirational and sought-after. Caveats include costs, safety concerns, and the limited numbers likely to be involved. Nevertheless, the two issues are expected to impinge increasingly on MICE thinking in future whether from the point of view of imagery, or educational programmes, or the potential for successful engagement by individuals or small groups. It can be predicted that whilst the concepts at present appeal most to the very rich, that in each case the opportunities will become more accessible to large numbers within a matter of years.

Space Exploration

First, travel to the edge of the earth's atmosphere. The world's first private space explorers have already flown, each spending millions of dollars for a week's 'holiday' travelling to the International Space Station. Rival space transportation operators have now selected locations for their mission control centres and spaceports.

After 40 years of stop-start debate it seems that all the serious concerns about G-forces, 1200° temperatures, re-entry manoeuvres, speeds exceeding 2000 mph, and problems of landing safely, are – hopefully – solved. It seems likely that within a couple of years (and after hundreds of test flights), the first re-useable spacecraft will take off for a sub-orbital 2½ hour journey 'to the stars' comprising a five-minute experience of weightlessness – private floating about – plus a remarkable view of the earth. All this after a few preparatory days of medical checks and pre-flight familiarisation.

Three or four competitors are racing to introduce us to this era of personal space flight. The likely cost will be around 200,000 dollars per person, but affordable tickets for tens of thousands of travellers will no doubt follow. The special benefits of such an experience are its once-in-a-lifetime quality, the boasting opportunities back home, plus the chance to gain local, or even national, celebrity standing. 'Ordinary' people will wear astronaut wings with pride! Virgin Galactic already have 10m USD in deposits from enthusiastic rocketeers. To sum up, what was once science fiction is about to become everyday reality.

Medical Tourism

In contrast, health tourism is already here. Patients are travelling offshore in search of faster, cheaper and safer surgical procedures and cosmetic improvements. As an example, some 170,000 foreigners journey to India each year to sort out their hip, knee, and spine problems, or to have heart and other operations that cost only 25%-30% of the price of equivalent private care in their own countries. The equipment is the same as that used in western hospitals, the doctors are equally highly trained, and it is not surprising that numbers are rising annually at 15%. Medical tourism in India is a business that could be worth £1.2 billion by 2012. This seems quite reasonable given the rising costs of treatment in Europe, coupled with the increasing demands of an ageing population. What is called 'International Patient Care' is already a seamless process, with the guests buying inclusive arrangements that feature air travel, local transportation, translation services, air-conditioned five-star accommodation, together with their personalised choice of global cuisine. Shortly it will be possible to buy a package arranged between Taj Hotels and the Apollo group of hospitals.

For less serious operations there is now the concept of tourism for plastic and dental surgery, as exemplified by some spa resorts in Bulgaria. Reduction or augmentation for parts of the body might cost up to 10,000 Euros in Germany, but from only 2500 Euros in Bulgaria. Equivalent savings apply for dental work on bridges, crowns and implants. Such medical practices now sell their services as tourist packages: for instance, seven nights in a four-star hotel in Istanbul for liposuction to reduce the size of your stomach costs 5000 USD. Similarly, a hair transplant would cost some 4600 USD for 10 nights in a five-star hotel. In Malaysia such opportunities are

promoted by a company calling itself 'Beautiful Holidays', and a typical promotion uses the catchy phrase, 'Sun, Sea and Scalpels'. South Africa, particularly, is attracting strong demand from Europeans somewhat dissatisfied with their 'looks'.

Focus group comments

IMEX invited a focus group of MICE experts to comment on these two cutting-edge tourism themes. The idea of motivating prize-winners by sending them into orbit currently appeals to around only 15% of decision-makers; however, the comments of these were positive: 'with 33 billionaires and more than 80,000 millionaires in **Russia**, we are already receiving requests' whilst from **America** came the following reply: 'I can see owners of businesses, or managing directors (both are key categories of risk-takers) looking for the next frontier and entertaining this option'. A view from **Italy** stressed the potential 'once space travel becomes normal and safe'. In contrast was a **Swiss** expert, who said 'I think I will only see this happening from my grave!'

Unsurprisingly, the appeal of medical tourism is already stronger amongst MICE specialists, with around a third sounding potentially interested in the topic. One typical reply is 'Yes, I would like to meet suppliers for these treatments at business tourism exhibitions'. Another said 'I have already received enquiries for programmes involving cosmetic treatments, and have been asked to do research and develop my knowledge of specific hospitals, professionals, operations, and costs'.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from the changes in attitudes that space and medical concepts are bringing to tourism? The following seem appropriate to discuss:

- we now engage in the '*experience economy*'. People value memories above mere materialism
- it is getting more challenging to brag – the threshold for boastful holidays is rising, and people will increasingly seek out destinations that impress precisely because they are unknown, exotic, or difficult to get to
- MICE exhibitors may wish to focus on the treatments that are offered locally as much as on hedonistic experiences
- people will want more individualised holidays, and delegates at conventions will want more personalised programmes

- what we are seeing is tourism demand being driven by innovative marketing, fashion-mania, rising levels of wealth, exciting technological advance, live-for-today attitudes, and above all, a search for personal fulfilment at whatever the cost.

However, it should be stressed that such an agenda is not necessarily attractive to every country or religion. It is therefore vitally important that the tourism industry continues to play an increasingly responsible role in working to reduce multi-cultural tensions in all parts of the world.

Ends