



VFR travel: It is underestimated

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ABSTRACT

Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel is a substantial form of tourism worldwide. In Australia, official data measure VFR in one of two ways – purpose of visit or type of accommodation. However, this is only a measurement of those factors; it is not a measure of the size by volume of VFR travel. Yet tourism practitioners often mistakenly use these data to state the size of VFR travel in their destination. Based on quantitative research undertaken in three contrasting destinations in Australia, estimates for the size of VFR travel in those destinations is provided. These results highlight that using official data for measuring VFR travel will underestimate this segment in any Australian destination. Using the VFR definitional model as a conceptual model, this research has estimated that VFR travel represents 48% of Australia's total overnight tourism market.

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1. Introduction

More than twenty years ago, Jackson (1990) raised awareness of VFR travel by asking the question “VFR Tourism: Is it underestimated?” in a seminal paper of that title. Over the past two decades, other researchers have added to the VFR literature, however the question of how underestimated is VFR travel remains. This paper attempts to answer the question raised by Jackson (1990) by showing that VFR travel is underestimated.

In answering the question, this paper will use the term VFR travel rather than VFR tourism. Travel and tourism terms are often used interchangeably to mean the same thing (Page & Connell, 2009). However, tourism and travel are not the same. Whilst most scholarly work in the field of VFR has used the better-known term ‘VFR tourism’, it is most likely that the work has captured some travellers, who are not necessarily tourists.

Travellers are not necessarily tourists, depending on which definition for tourism is adopted. There are many different definitions for tourism and tourist. The issue of defining tourism is not simplistic and “firms, industrial and governmental organisations and academics with interests in tourism have tried to formulate definitions which are more precise than that of the dictionary” (Leiper, 1979, p.391). Some definitions are economic, some are technical, whilst others are holistic (Leiper, 1979). Some definitions will include a parameter of a distance travelled, a length of stay, or a purpose of visit. Therefore, depending on what definition of a tourist is used, a VFR traveller may not qualify as a VFR tourist.

According to Leiper (2004) a definition for a tourist also includes “a search for leisure experiences from interactions with features or characteristics of places they choose to visit” (p. 35). A person travelling to a destination to: attend a wedding, assist a daughter to care for a newborn baby, or visit an ailing relative could not be included as a tourist under Leiper's (2004) definition, and it is likely that many people would agree that people in those scenarios are not a ‘tourist’. Those people in the scenarios above would identify themselves as travelling for the purpose of visiting friends and relatives and fall under the official data as VFR travellers. However, they are not tourists. They are travellers. Thus, the term VFR travel is deliberately selected for this paper to appreciate that it is more accurate. For, it cannot be stated with certainty that all respondents included in this research were tourists. However, they were all travellers.

2. Literature review

VFR travel is recognised as a large form of tourism worldwide. It is also likely to be the oldest form of travel (Backer, 2011) as travelling to visit friends and relatives has always been socially important. One of the earliest recognised VFR travellers was Celia Fiennes, who between 1685 and 1712 created itineraries around visiting friends and relatives (Leiper, 2004). However, despite being an old form of tourism, scholarly interest in VFR travel is relatively new.

Jackson's (1990) paper sparked research interest in the area of VFR travel throughout the 1990s. A series of research from around the world was generated in the following years. A special edition of an international journal (The Journal of Tourism Studies, 1995) was dedicated to VFR. This special issue combined research on VFR travellers undertaken in Australia, the USA, Canada, the Netherlands,

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and Northern Ireland, to provide a broad analysis of VFR from various parts of the world. All studies (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995; Meis, Joyal, & Trites, 1995; Morrison, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995; Seaton & Tagg, 1995; Yuan, Fridgen, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995) found that VFR travel represented a significant part of the overall travel market in those parts of the world. The interest that was generated in the immediate years following Jackson's (1990) article resulted in a realisation that VFR travel had been previously neglected and underestimated (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995; Hay, 1996; King, 1996; McKercher, 1994; 1995; Morrison, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995; Seaton & Tagg, 1995; Seaton, 1994; Seaton & Palmer, 1997; Yaman, 1996).

Whilst Jackson's (1990) seminal article is now more than two decades old, it still serves as a reminder that many people who are VFR travellers may not actually identify themselves as VFR travellers. They may quite rightly state that they are on holiday. Therefore, official data that measures VFR travel by purpose of visit will underestimate the size of VFR travel.

This point is only part of the problem. Official data are not a tool for measuring the size of VFR travel. In Australia, official tourism data present VFR in two ways – by purpose of visit or by accommodation type. These data are mistakenly used to state the size of VFR travel, but they were not intended for that purpose. After all, VFR travel was originally developed as a residual category for trips that could not be classified into other categories (Hay, 2008). As such, it is not possible to know the size of VFR travel on a global level. In fact, it is not even possible to know the true size of VFR travel in Australia or at a destination due to definitional issues.

This definitional issue was raised by Backer (2010a) who explained that whilst VFR travel is rarely defined in the extant literature, definitions that have been offered are not consistent. VFR is commonly categorised by purpose of visit, but it can also be categorised by accommodation type (Seaton & Palmer, 1997). Different percentages will be attained depending on which classification is used, and neither should be considered a comprehensive definition. In a number of cases (for example Hu & Morrison, 2002; Lee, Morrison, & Lheto, 2005), no definition was provided but the authors stated that data were collected by purpose of visit, which reveals an assumed definition for VFR travel in this manner. Yuan et al. (1995) defined a VFR traveller in such a way, stating that a "VFR traveller is one who reported visiting friends and relatives as the major purpose for the trip" (p. 19). Similarly, McKercher (1995) stated "that the primary purpose of most participants in this type of travel is to visit with their friends and relatives is axiomatic" (p. 246).

VFR travel has also been defined by their accommodation (Boyne, 2001; King, 1994; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2006). King (1994) stated that VFR travel is categorising visitors by the type of accommodation that they used. Boyne, Carswell, and Hall (2002) proposed that "a VFR tourism trip is a trip to stay temporarily with a friend or relative away from the guest's normal place of residence, that is, in another settlement or, for travel within a continuous settlement, over 15 km one-way from the guests' home" (p. 246). Similarly, Kotler et al. (2006) stated that "VFR, as the name suggests, are people that stay in the homes of friends and relatives" (p. 748).

However, not all VFR travellers who stay with friends and relatives state a VFR travel purpose (Jackson, 1990; 2003). Not all people who travel for VFR purposes stay with friends and relatives (Backer, 2010a). Therefore, purpose of visit definitions will capture different people than accommodation definitions will. A more inclusive definition is that "VFR travel is a form of travel involving a visit whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives" (Backer, 2007, p.369).

To illustrate the problems of only using accommodation type or purpose of visit definitions, official data can be observed (Table 1). When reviewing official data for details on VFR travel, the

Table 1
Visitors in Australia 2008–09.

| | Purpose of visit VFR share of visitors | Accommodation VFR share of visitors |
|------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| New South Wales | 34% | 39% |
| Victoria | 34% | 38% |
| Queensland | 31% | 37% |
| South Australia | 32% | 39% |
| Western Australia | 31% | 40% |
| Northern Territory | 11% | 17% |
| Tasmania | 27% | 34% |
| Australian Capital Territory | 33% | 37% |
| Australia | 32% | 38% |

Source: adapted from Tourism Research Australia, 2010.

proportion of visitor nights for VFR purpose of visit is typically different to the proportion of VFR by accommodation type. Based on Australian State and Territory data (Table 1), VFR proportions based on purpose of visit in each state/territory is lower than VFR by accommodation type.

Neither the proportions in the purpose of visit column nor the proportions in the accommodation type column can be used to state the size of VFR travel in those States and Territories. Neither column captures *all* VFR travellers, therefore understating the size of this form of travel. That is, not all travellers staying with friends or relatives will self-classify themselves as VFR, instead identifying themselves as a holidaymaker (Jackson, 2003). In addition, not all travellers staying with friends or relatives will have a VFR purpose of visit. Therefore the data considering the number of travellers staying with friends or relatives will necessarily underestimate the size of VFR travel.

Similarly, not all VFR travellers stay with the friends or relatives they have travelled to see (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995; Lehto, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2001; Seaton, 1994). Some people travel to a destination for the specific purpose of visiting a friend or relative but stay in commercial accommodation rather than with that friend or relative. The percentage of visitors in commercial accommodation who are actually VFR travellers has been reported to be between 8.7% and 10.5% (Backer, 2010a). Therefore, data presenting VFR by accommodation type will also underestimate the size of VFR travel. This poses definitional problems. Seaton and Palmer (1997) recognised this problem and highlighted that VFR trips by accommodation were more than double the size of those that had been defined by purpose of visit. The lack of a clear understanding of the numbers of VFR travellers hides the significance of this segment of travel, which has ramifications for allocation of resources and marketing campaigns.

In order to measure the size of VFR travel it is first necessary to understand that there are three different types of VFR travellers. Referring to official data by purpose of visit or accommodation type will only provide the measurement of two of those three groups. To understand the size of VFR travel in a destination, the three VFR types would need to be ascertained and aggregated. Backer (2010b) used a matrix to explain this (Fig. 1). The first of these three types are PVFRs – 'pure' VFRs who stay with friends and relatives and state VFR as their main purpose of visit (Backer, 2010b). These are represented by a 'tick' in the left hand top box. Secondly, there are CVFRs – Commercial accommodation VFRs who stay in commercial accommodation but who have come to the destination with a VFR purpose of visit (Backer, 2010b). These travellers are represented by the tick in the top right hand box. There are also EVFRs – who are in a sense 'exploiting' VFRs as they are staying with friends and relatives but visiting them is not their main purpose of visit (Backer, 2010b). These VFR travellers are depicted by the tick in the bottom left hand box. This category will also include those VFR travellers who stay with their friends or relatives but do not consider themselves to be VFR travellers as they identify themselves as holidaymakers (Jackson, 1990, 2003).

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