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Maldives as a backpacker's destination: Supply and demand perspectives

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Abstract

Tourism policies in countries are often driven not only by economic agenda, but they are also shaped by socio-cultural factors. Islamic countries have had different approaches to seaside tourism development. Since the 1970's and the opening to tourism, the Maldives have been developing strategies to contain tourists to private islands and minimize the contact with locals, whom would live on different islands. Tourism has long since been established as a 'luxury' destination, housing some of the world's most expensive resorts and top brands, while entertaining little to none middle and low-budget tourists. This situation has changed with the recent laws allowing operation of guesthouses in local islands other than the capital city of Male' and the island situated next to the international airport, some parts of the country have experienced a boom in guesthouse tourism. Opportunities for a variety of local business ventures (such as watersports providers, hostels and food outlets) opened up creating more community involvement, which contrasts greatly with the past tourism organisation. More and more guesthouses are opening in different islands and atolls of the Maldives, providing cheaper holidaying options and a more "authentic" experience compared to the one-island one-resort concept. This situation, by its novelty, creates new opportunities and challenges in the socio-cultural context of the Maldives and remains debated.

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1. Introduction

Tourism in the Maldives started in the 1970's after the discovery of its tourism potential with the white-sand beaches, clear waters; abundance of marine life and year-round sunshine. The construction of an airport was followed quickly with a tourism boom to a must-go sun, sand and sea luxury destination. The country also welcomed more than 1 million visitors in 2013 (MOTAC, 2013). Despite the development of tourists' arrivals, tourism has been firmly channeled to exclusive island resorts, from the first two resorts in 1972 to the 109 in existence at present day. Beyond these resorts, the current tourism accommodation infrastructure is also made of 20 hotels, 136 guesthouses and 163 Safari vessels. The resorts have always maintained a minimum of 3-star rating that has grown to include '6-star' rated resorts in recent years, catering to the high net-worth market. In the period of the last 10 years, Maldives has become one of the most expensive tourist destinations and has almost entirely neglected the lower-budget sector. As Scheyvens noted, for developing, third-world countries, budget tourists are not of much importance, and governments "tend to assume that more money is earned by attracting tourists who can afford luxury goods and services" (Scheyvens, 2002). Following official policy to keep tourism to high end resorts, budget travelers were not catered for in the past. However since the 2010's several guesthouses have opened on the islands accessible by local ferry from the capital city of Male'. Along with this, the few available activities are also middle-ranged price-wise (from point of view of budget travelers), and although several inner-atoll ferry routes exist, some with multiple stops and some being direct routes between the starting point and destination, since there is not much to do it seems unlikely that conventional "backpacking" could take place in the country. This brings rise to the question of the paper; whether backpacking could be done in the Maldives and what are the points of view from both budget travelers and suppliers regarding this notion. This paper studies the supply and demand perspectives of budget tourism sector in Maldives. The purpose of this paper is two-folds. First it examines the emergence of backpacker tourism in the Maldives in a supply and demand approach. It looks whether budget tourists can be catered for and by doing this could result in a positive development and assesses the possibility of backpacking in the Maldives. Second, it provides new light on the encounters between locals and foreigners in the context of backpacker tourism. It therefore illustrates the current changes in tourism in the Maldives.

2. Review of the literature on Backpackers

Pearce (1990) defined the term "backpacker" and distinguished this type of tourist from other tourists using five criteria: shoestring-based budget perceived as a core element of the experience, independently organised, a quest to meet and share with similar travellers, flexibility in itinerary and extensive time, adventure and adrenaline risk-taking that will establish their social-economic status among their peers. Since that backpacker research has been explored majorly from socio-anthropological and market perspectives. Backpacking has become a mass phenomenon despite its identification as non-mainstream, and somehow postmodern (Richards & Wilson, 2004).

However, developing countries governments often scorn international backpackers, professing instead an enthusiasm for pursuing higher-value, luxury tourism (Scheyvens, 2002) which echoes statements that wealthy tourists are being able to contribute more to a country's economy. But it has been found that in the long-term, backpackers have much greater economic potential in contrast to 'package-tourists' due to the nature of their travel habits; they tend to travel for much longer periods than the conventional tourist, have more flexible schedules, and interact with a wider array of local establishments such as taking public or other available local modes of transport where possible and staying in locally owned and managed guest houses and lodging. The spread of economic benefits within communities may be greater when catering to tourists on a budget, as more community members can participate. Catering to backpackers will not usually require community members to have any formal qualifications; rather they can develop skills on the job or build on their existing skills (Scheyvens, 2002). Budget travellers do not seek stiff establishments with high levels of service; instead they opt and seek for a laid-back, easy-going and carefree natured holiday. Local people and products can meet the needs of backpackers largely because they do not demand luxury services (Polit, 1991).

Culturally, backpackers are negatively perceived could be of the association of them being "hippy" or "drifters" as coined by Cohen, sometimes even to the extent of stereotyping them as unkempt, immoral and drug-taking individuals (Scheyvens, 2002). Brenner and Fricke (2007) indicated that while the members of the first generation of backpackers were often referred to as anti-consumerist 'drifters' a diversification took place during the 1980s as the

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