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The Luxury Consumer in Tourism, Hospitality and Events

Introduction

Having looked at the luxury travel market let us now focus on the building blocks of the market, namely the individual consumers, for any market is simply the product of the actions of many individual consumers.

In this chapter we will explore the idea of a luxury consumer in tourism, hospitality and events by using the conventional idea of motivators and determinants. We will also endeavour to put forward ideas about a typology or typologies of luxury consumers. At the same time I will suggest that not everyone is interested in luxury travel, even if they can afford it.

Motivators

Motivators are a vital part of consumer behaviour in the luxury market as in any other market. They represent the desires which stimulate travellers want to:

- Take a vacation in the first place
- Take a particular type of vacation.

In the context of luxury we will not focus on the first of these as it will be taken as a given. Instead we will concentrate on the second issue, the type of trip taken.

The tourism literature contains a number of models about motivators which differ a little from each other. Figure 5.1 sets out one such model (from Horner and Swarbrooke, 2016) which is not atypical. It is important to remember that such models are concerned with the tourism market in general not the luxury sector alone. We will look here at how it applies to the luxury sector.

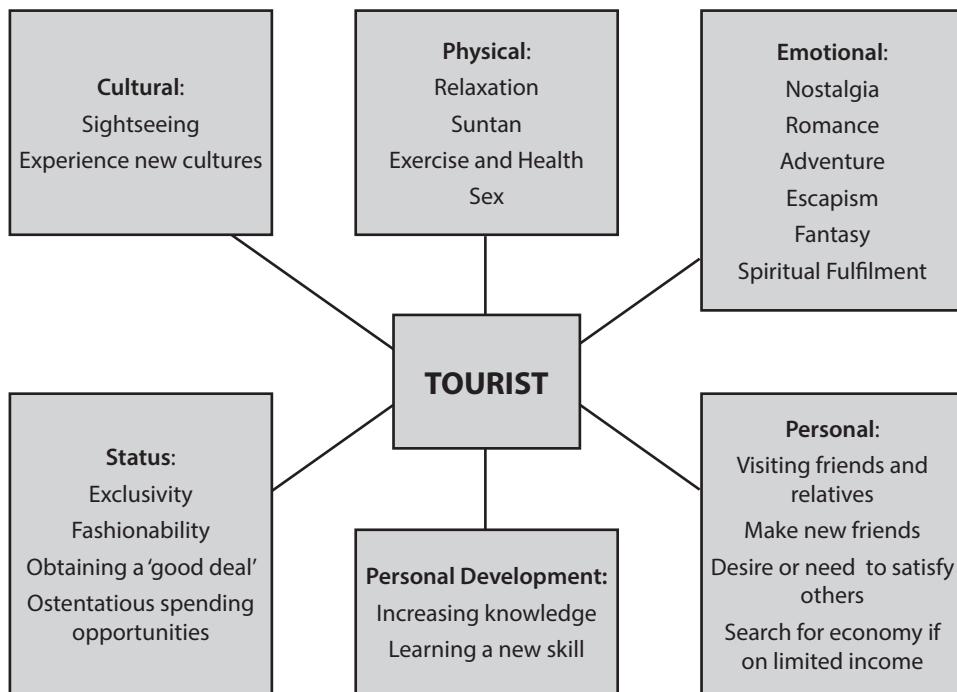


Figure 5.1: Conventional general motivators of tourist behaviour

Source: Horner and Swarbrooke, 2016

I would like to suggest that the most of these motivators are as applicable to luxury travel and leisure purchase decisions as they are to decisions in the rest of the tourism, hospitality and events market. I also contend that the desire for 'status' is perhaps the single most important motivator, particularly in terms of ideas such as 'exclusivity' and 'ostentatious spending opportunities' and even 'fashionability'.

Some may well simply consume luxury experiences for their own private pleasure. However, given that most tourism, hospitality and event consumption takes place in public or at least publicly accessible spaces, it seems likely that luxury consumers also seek to gain status within various communities through their consumption activities. The business class passengers may well enjoy the envious glances of economy class passengers when they take their place at the front of the aeroplane; or the high end hotel guest who is whisked up to the executive floor for a private check-in while the rest of the guests queue for the standard ground floor check-in. The luxury consumer may admire the immediate status they receive at such times from strangers, but the status is probably enhanced if the people in their social circle or neighbourhood find out about their luxury experience even if the traveller has to tell them themselves. And better still if they can post text and images of their experience on social media for the world to see.

We can make a further observation about the nature of motivators in luxury consumption. Luxury status can be gained as a result of buying experiences in response to factors other than those identified in Figure 5.1 as 'status'. This could mean the person who gains a fantastic natural sun tan in the winter in the UK, thanks to a holiday on a Caribbean island. Alternatively, status may be gained from seeing a world-renowned but isolated and little visited cultural site, or doing a cookery course in Thailand, or getting the autograph of a music star during a gig. Indeed most of the factors in Figure 5.1 have potential elements of status attached to them which could suggest luxury.

However, it is worth noting, as we have earlier in the text, that status is not only about spending lots of money or experiencing something exceptional. In this age it may also be gained when one finds a deal that means your flight ticket costs less than everyone else on the aircraft.

If one is interested in ideas of luxury, one needs to be aware that there are both 'expressed motivators' and 'real motivators'. People may answer the questionnaire of a researcher with a list of motivations, but these may or may not be 'true'. This may be because they wish to conceal the truth or because they do not fully understand their own motivations! Another complicating factor is that most travellers and leisure consumers do not consume alone. They are usually with partners, families or friends, so then the issue is the extent to which motivators are shared or not between those travelling and consuming together.

Finally in this section I would like to raise a point about the relationship between motivators, luxury and status; and that is what might be termed 'lifestyle'. I believe that those consuming tourism, hospitality and events experiences purchase products and services that they believe either:

- Are an extension of their normal lifestyle, or
- Represent an aspirational lifestyle they wish they lived, or
- Represent a lifestyle they hope other people will think they lead, or
- Perhaps a bit of all three.

The second and third cases are both based around the interaction between the consumer and the world outside themselves. The aspirations will be based on a comparison between the true lifestyle of the consumer and that of others which the consumer sees as superior. The third point it is about the consumer seeking approval from, and acceptance by, other people, whoever they may be.

Furthermore, the rich person who travels in luxury all the time, is likely to see luxury as an example of the first point. However, for the person who buys luxury priced experiences that are a 'once-in-a-lifetime' or 'special occasion' purchase, their consumption is likely to be much more about either the second point or the third or a mixture of both.