

***ALTERNATIVE FUTURES FOR YOUTH TOURISM
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA***

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One of the jobs of a futurist is not only to help you think usefully about the futures, but also to encourage you to see how remarkable is the present, in light of the past as well as the futures. So today, I want to remind you briefly about the history of the travel industry, and to share with you some possible alternative futures for the industry over the next 10 to 50 years. I will focus on alternative futures for youth tourism in Southeast Asia.

IN THE BEGINNING

Humans have been on Earth only a very short time. Probably only 50,000 years as talkative *homo sapiens, sapiens*.

For most of our history, humans have been few, weak and relatively harmless.

But we have always liked to move.

STAGES OF ECONOMIC CHANGE

In fact for most of humanity's brief time on this Earth, we have been nomads, moving about in a veritable Garden of Eden so abundant with the riches of life that no one had to work or own anything. We could just move around as we pleased, taking what we wanted from the bounty of nature around us. Because we lived this way for so long, moving about from place to place is probably in our genes.

AGRICULTURE AND CIVILIZATION.

It was only 5000 to 10,000 years ago that property first became important, and only 2000-3000 years ago that most humans became stuck on farms and villages, caring for

plants and animals, and growing food instead of wandering about and taking whatever we wanted freely from abundant nature.

INDUSTRY AND URBANIZATION

It was only three hundred years ago that many humans began living in cities and working in factories making industrial products, and buying and selling things to each other.

INFORMATION AND WEALTH

Now, within the past fifty years, more humans live in cities than in agricultural villages and farms. And many work in office buildings producing, well, not much of anything but paper with words printed on them.

We still eat, though fewer and fewer of us are farmers.

We still have industrial products, though fewer and fewer work in factories.

And more and more of us have so much wealth and leisure time that we can play sports much of the time, and travel around the globe just for the fun of it.

We have become wanderers in abundance once again.

DEEP POOLS OF POVERTY AND MISERY

Well, of course, not everyone has.

Far too many people in the world are desperately poor, without enough to eat and drink. They may have leisure time, but they are too poor and sick to enjoy it. It is a struggle just to survive.

But it is the expectation of many people in the world that they, or at least their children, can become rich enough that they too can have big houses, big cars, and plenty of time to travel wherever and whenever they want.

CONTINUED ECONOMIC GROWTH

This is the promise of "economic growth and development".

We are told that if we work hard, invest our money, and follow the advice of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, our nation will develop and we will get rich.

That is what happened first in England, then in North America, then in western Europe, then in Japan, then in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea.

China and India, once poor, now are becoming rich.

And we in Southeast Asia are becoming rich, and expect to become richer still, and leisured like other nations have before us.

IMPROVING TRANSPORTATION TECHNOLOGIES

At the same time more humans were becoming rich we were also becoming able to travel faster and farther at less and less expense.

First by our feet, and the feet of other animals,
then propelled by boats and wheels,
then sped forward by iron horses and steam ships,
then horseless carriages: automobiles--more and more automobiles,
then airplanes flying ever faster and farther;
and then spaceships to the stars.

So, what is next?

Teleportation?

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

And while we were becoming rich and more mobile we were also developing new means of communication.

First, we learned to talk, and have become very talkative indeed.

Then a few thousand years ago, we learned to write--slowly, and by hand.

Then a few hundred years ago, we invented the printing press and could spread ideas by the printed word more cheaply and easily.

Then the radio--sound without pictures!

Then silent movies--pictures without sound!

Then talking movies in black and white becoming eventually movies in living color.

Black and white television, color television, tape-delayed television and cable television.

The computer, and networked computer systems, getting ever smaller and smaller as they became more powerful, through satellites and satellite-linked electronic communication systems

What is next?

True virtual reality, perhaps?

INCREASING HUMAN POPULATION

And while we were becoming richer and able to move more easily over the Earth, communicating with anyone, anywhere, anytime, we humans were also becoming more and more numerous. We increased from nothing to over six billion in the blink of an eye, with most of the growth coming in a flash over the last 100 years.

FROM NOMADS TO MIGRANT WORKERS TO LEISURE TOURISTS

At first, only the very religious, or the very adventuresome, or the very rich could travel.

Travel was at first dangerous, slow, and expensive.

Two to three hundred years ago, many people in Europe took dangerous, slow and expensive trips from Europe to Oceania and the Americas in search of new lives.

Now, many people from poorer parts of the world travel to the richer parts in search of new jobs and new lives. Much travel today is of poor people moving to places where they hope to become richer.

But as more humans became richer and more mobile and more communicative and more numerous, many people, first in developed nations, began traveling around the world for fun, as tourists.

A new industry arose based on all of these miraculous developments.

THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

Because we had transportation and communication technologies along with an economic system that enabled people to purchase airplane tickets, make hotel room reservations, rent automobiles, book tickets to tourist attractions from any part of the world to any other part of the world,

and to do it all simply by swiping a plastic card through an electronic reader--no cash needed to go anywhere or do any thing--

the travel industry grew and grew and grew and become one of the biggest industries in the world!

Miracles on top of miracles on top of miracles led us to the present where not only older people but more and more young people have enough money and leisure time that they too can wander around the world in pursuit, not only of jobs and a new life, but also simply for the fun of it.

THE YOUTH TRAVEL MARKET

"In 2004, there were 1.6 million international visitors to Thailand under the age of 25, and 2/3 of them were from the Asia-Pacific region."

Intra regional youth travel for jobs has been high in Southeast Asia for some time, but youth travel for pleasure is growing even faster.

AND NOW, THE FUTURE!

So what lies ahead for tourism?

Experts say that "The Asia-Pacific youth market is still in its infancy just as the industry was in post war Europe." They expect the youth travel market in Southeast Asia to grow and grow over the coming years just as it did in Europe after the Second World War. With the number, percentage, wealth, and leisure time of youth in Southeast Asia growing, they must become your major target, experts say.

Many of these youth are single with no intention of marrying or raising a family. They have lots of disposable income, and are free to travel whenever they want.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FUTURE.

But wait.

Can we be sure this is the future?

It may be the immediate future--the youth market in Southeast Asia may grow for the next several years, and you should take advantage of that. But what about the long run? Is youth a sustainable market? Are they the "most likely future"?

I have been a student of the futures for a long time, and I know it is a big and common mistake to assume that trends will continue.

It is a fundamental flaw of humans to believe that whatever is happening now will continue to happen into the future.

For example, we believe that if things are good now, they will be good forever.

Don't worry! Be happy!

In the early 1990s, we were confident that this was the Asian Century and that we would prosper forever.

But there was a horrible financial crisis in 1997, and for many years, we believed the future was going to get worse and worse.

But look at us now! We are wealthy again and all trends are upward, and will be forever.

Similarly, we believe that if the number, percentage, and wealth of youth in our societies has been growing in the past, that it will continue to grow into the future. Let's build our industry around them, we say!

This is a very dangerous, though very common, assumption.

TRENDS ARE NOT DESTINY

While it is possible that our economies will continue to grow in the future as they have in the past, and that youth will increase as a major market segment, there are other alternatives you need to consider.

Some of them are not very pleasant to consider at all, though you must. Others are so fantastic that they may seem to be science fiction.

But many aspects of your ordinary daily lives now would seem like "science fiction" if they had been foretold 25, 50, or 100 years ago. So it is essential that you consider carefully what currently seem to be very strange things.

There are very good reasons to believe that the global political-economic system that has dominated the world since the end of the Second World War may not continue much longer.

GLOBAL AGING

First of all, in all so-called developed nations, and in most rapidly developing countries, neither the number nor the percent of youth is growing.

Much--perhaps most--economic growth in the past has been heavily dependent on continued population growth. But in more and more parts of the world, population is no longer growing.

Whereas all nations experienced a youth bulge in the past, almost all developed countries now are experiencing a youth gap. Instead, the number and percentage of old people--and of very old people--is growing, and many of them are comparatively healthy and wealthy.

Old people, not youth, may be a better long-range market for you.

Of course, among the nations of Southeast Asia, there is great variability. For some countries, the youth bulge is over and aging is setting in. This is the case for Singapore, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia. For others, the youth bulge is expected to continue for another few years, as in Brunei and Cambodia. For Malaysia, the Philippines, and Laos, the youth bulge may extend even longer

But while the countries of East and Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America are aging, the countries of South, Central, and Western Asia are still growing with a very substantial youth component.

Globally, population is still growing, even though in many developed countries, population is declining with alarming rapidity--such as South Korea, Japan, Russia, Italy, Poland, and many other European countries.

So you may still find youth to target, but you will need to do so carefully.

But can we be sure that anyone--young or old, rich or poor--will be able to continue to move around the globe as easily as many have been able to do in recent decades?

END OF OIL?

Many experts fear that the world is running out of cheap and abundant oil before a new substitute becomes available.

Demand for oil is increasing dramatically, but current sources of oil are rapidly depleting. Getting the remaining oil from existing sources will take much more money and time--and energy--than before.

That is part of the problem: it takes energy to get energy, and at some point it will take more energy to get the oil than there will be energy delivered by the oil itself.

This is the "net energy" question. And it is often overlooked.

Also, while new oil reserves may exist, as yet undiscovered, many experts are skeptical. They feel that new ones that might be found are nowhere as plentiful as the ones we are using now, or have already used up.

We need to face the possible rapid end of cheap oil.

ALTERNATIVE ENERGY SOURCES?

What about alternative energy sources?

Many potential alternatives to oil exist. But none of them exist now on a scale or price that equals oil, and many do not provide a liquid fuel that we require.

We can hope for technological breakthroughs but it will take more than hope--it will take a lot of money, energy, talent, research, sacrifice, and luck if we are to avoid a major energy shortfall in the foreseeable future.

Remember that we need oil not only to fly. We need oil to eat. The agrobusinesses that feed the world depend on huge amounts of petroleum. And there are many other things we do that depend on oil. The competition for declining sources will be fierce.

So the future of tourism looks challenging when energy futures are evaluated carefully.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE?

But what about global warming and sea-level rise?

Or what about water shortages, or the spread of new and renewed diseases--diseases which tourist travel itself will probably help spread?

Energy shortages are only one possible cause of the collapse of the travel industry. The challenges are manifold.

TOURISM: A FRAGILE INDUSTRY.

While tourism is the world's largest industry, it is also one of the most vulnerable.

Tourism depends entirely on people continuing to have lots of money and spare time. Given the fact that our global economy rides on a rising sea of debt, if there were to be a global depression--and that is entirely possible--one of the first things to go would be discretionary travel.

Even business travel might essentially vanish, with what little global interaction still required being provided by electronic communication and not travel--as preferable as travel might be.

TOURISM REQUIRES SAFETY AND COMFORT

Tourism requires safety and comfort.

If "terrorism"--or rather the irrational fear of terrorism--continues and spreads, more and more travelers may be both afraid to travel and totally frustrated by the increasingly intrusive "security" measures they must endure in all aspects of the trip.

Why put up with the indignity of being searched as though you were a terrorist just to go to a tourist destination where you have to endure the indignity again?

or perhaps actually become the victim of a terrorist attack!

Please understand I am not predicting that tourism is over for these, or other reasons. I am not. Rather, I am saying that as leaders of the industry, you need to address these challenges and not ignore them. But you need also to understand that it may be equally misleading to assume that tourism will continue to grow as a world industry in the future as it has in the past.

ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE FUTURE

And that is the key here:

Tourism may grow, but perhaps not as it did in the past.

Current forms of tourism may end, but what arises from the ashes may be completely different tourism from what we know now.

The world may be like a caterpillar, spinning a cocoon around her old body, and unable to imagine the beautiful butterfly she will eventually become.

TRANSFORMATION

Many futurists--such as myself--believe the world may be in the midst of a major transformation, from an society where the production of goods and information was the focus of life, and where each person's individual and collective identity was determined by the nation-state, to a world where images, dreams, and play are primary and where the cosmos is our playground.

DREAM SOCIETY

I call this a Dream Society of Icons and Aesthetic Experience.

It is driven by interactive electronic technologies currently experienced most vividly through the computer and internet games that are so popular with young people everywhere in the world.

Those games may foreshadow the future. Observe them carefully. No! More than that, you should play them happily yourselves, if you want to experience the futures!

The games themselves derive from images and dreams created by Hollywood, Bollywood and other movies; from anime by Disney and now by Japan, Korea, and India; from popular music by the Beatles and now by K-pop; and from Disneyland and other theme parks.

And, of course, from the dreams created and sold by the global travel industry itself.

Yes, tourism should be a major feature of the Dream Society of Icons and Aesthetic Experience.

But anything that is based on "place"--on people moving to a physical place to experience something--has many challenges ahead.

In a Dream Society, Communication triumphs over Transportation.

Yes, we will still "go", but we may more frequently "be there" virtually and not physically.

UBIQUITOUS SOCIETY

Many futurists say that electronic communication technologies will become so small and smart that they will be embedded in everything around us. They call this the "Ubiquitous Society"--meaning that intelligence will be not just in humans, but in tiny electronic chips all around us.

I think there is more to the future than even electronic ubiquity. I believe that humans will themselves change as a consequence of genetic engineering on the one hand and artificial intelligence on the other.

The world of the future will be largely artificial, with many intelligent life forms, some human, but many posthuman.

ARTIFICIAL TOURISTS

So, where do robots go for their vacations? What is the future of tourism for artifacts and cyborgs?

TO MARS!

Well, how about space? How about the Moon and Mars?

Exploration and settlement of the Moon and Mars will not be by humans alone. It will be robots and artifacts and cyborgs, along with some old-fashioned humans, who will live and thrive on Mars and elsewhere in the solar system and beyond.

So youth tourism in Southeast Asia?

Sure. That is a worthy short term goal, and you should prepare for it.

But I hope there is someone out there who is ready to move beyond tourism on Earth and is willing to begin to prepare for tourism on Mars, where the artifacts play.

Thank you!