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Review: Niche Tourism – Contemporary Issues, Trends & Cases

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Book Review

Niche Tourism – Contemporary issues, trends and cases

Marina Novelli (ed)

Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann; Oxford; 2005; ISBN 0-7506-6133; 264pp; £24.99

Tourism as a seemingly ubiquitous activity, certainly within western-centric societies has attracted much serious academic debate over the past few decades. This book adds to that debate, and examines one of the fastest growing areas within the tourism sector. The book uses the concept of 'niche tourism' as a counter-point to the homogenous and undifferentiated mass tourism product, and essentially provides an overview of multiple niche tourism products. From space tourism to gastronomic tourism, the book's central tenet is the view that 'even the most extreme corners of the human imagination can be catered for in a packaged way' (p.8), thus providing the rationale for niche tourism production and consumption. Within the opening introduction, the contributing authors readily admit to the contestability of the niche tourism terminology, and acknowledge the 'niche' term is 'borrowed' from the realms of marketing segmentation, and also note that 'niche' as a concept is rooted within the discipline of ecology. Even so, the authors contend that 'usage of the term is not without its semantic problems [but] has taken on a common-sense meaning' (p.7). Hence the reader is led to understand that this common-sense meaning incorporates two extremes of the niche tourism spectrum: macro-niches which occupy relatively large market shares (e.g. cultural tourism); and micro-niches which have undergone further segmentation from its parent niche (e.g. geotourism).

It is these macro and micro tourism niches, and subsequent discussions that form the crux of this book. Divided into four key parts and nineteen chapters overall, with various contributing authors, the book provides the reader with a set of theoretical, management and implication issues for the rather eclectic niche tourism offer. Part One, with the theme of special interest tourism focuses upon niches where consumer motivating factors are driven by bespoke and specific experiences. Here the reader will find useful, if not broad, discussions on niche tourism areas such as photography, genealogy, geology, gastronomy, and transport. In addition the area of youth tourism is discussed, with a focus upon the student travel market. Dark tourism, the seemingly in vogue subject of the tourism academic world is also afforded a chapter which

provides some constructive insights into the theoretical aspects of commercialising death and destruction within postmodernity.

Part Two examines tradition and culture based tourism, and notes this type of tourism activity 'engages those tourists who have the desire to learn, to experience, to discover and to be part of the host environment' (p.99). This section of the book, amongst other things, incorporates themes of authenticity and commodification by exploring niches that cover 'tribal tourism'; 'cultural heritage'; 'peripheral regions'; and 'research tourism'. Whilst discussions held on tribal tourism and its focus upon cannibal tours in particular, may be considered a 'micro-niche' of dark tourism, it could be suggested by sceptical readers that research tourism, (with its focus upon educational research and the lack of a leisure or recreational orientation) stretches the niche tourism concept to its conceptual limits. Even so it raises the profile of so-called research tourism and allows a definitional debate to develop.

Part Three revolves around activity based tourism, where the consumer is 'inspired by the desire to pursue an activity' (p.143). This part of the book presents chapters on those niche products where the consumer is involved at varying levels of engagement. As a result, discussions on 'small ship cruising'; 'sport'; 'wildlife'; 'volunteer'; and 'adventure' all offer a set of management issues and sector implications. In addition to this, the chapters offer theoretical underpinnings to these niche product offerings which the reader will no doubt find beneficial.

Part Four concludes the book by offering discussions on the future of niche tourism. Whilst the rest of the book concentrates on niche products already on offer, this section of the book focuses upon (possible) future niche tourism commodities. The central theme of Part Four examines niche tourism from a technological and ethical perspective. Indeed, the claim by the author is that the 'future of the niche tourism consumption process seems to be in scientific projects and in businesses strategic attempts in making tourism more of a sophisticated sector and possibly fairly managed' (p.211). This is then manifested through chapter discussions on 'space tourism'; 'virtual tourism'; and 'ethical tourism'. What is clear however is that by the end of the book the reader is left with a feeling that niche tourism, in all of its product manifestations, is perhaps a panacea for sustainability within the tourism domain. Indeed in the epilogue the question is briefly raised whether niche tourism is a way

forward to sustainability. With the book's suggestion that niche tourists themselves offer a more sophisticated set of practices and principles than their counterparts within the mass tourism sector, is the end result an ethically consumed (if not produced) tourism product? Of course further analysis and debate will help clarify this issue.

One of the major strengths of this book is its structure, and the format which it adopts. With the majority of chapters offering contextualisation of core concepts through examination of pertinent case studies, the reader is allowed an opportunity to understand theoretical underpinnings through practical and real-life examples. However, it may have been useful to ensure that all chapters which discuss a niche tourism area include a contextualising case study, as those which do are clearly the stronger for it. Even so, salient concepts are reinforced with a plethora of judiciously selected diagrams, models and tables, all of which add to the clarity of writing that is evident throughout the book. A key feature, and one which will no doubt appeal to those teaching niche tourism, is the ever functional and useful inclusion of possible essay and exam questions at the end of each chapter. Along with recommended websites and some further reading suggestions, the reader is signposted to relevant material and resources.

In conclusion, the book is a valuable addition to the literature in the sense it offers a 'one-stop shop' approach to an otherwise eclectic range of tourism products. The book combines consumption and production perspectives with success, and in no way does the book pretend to be a definitive textbook or manual on the subject of niche tourism. Instead it offers a rich set of inputs for future further discussion, and makes valuable contributions for additional considerations, reading and research. For this reason the book will be a useful addition to bookshelves belonging to tourism undergraduates, academics and practitioners alike.

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