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Tourism in Africa

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Tourism in Africa

Tourism is the fastest developing enterprise in Africa and currently one of the continent's major investment opportunities, viewing its 6% growth rate for the last decennium. Africa receives 4.8% of all tourist arrivals in the world, and 3.3% of the receipts and although it is not at the heart of the global tourist market, this modest proportion of the world's number one industry is still important for the continent. Global tourist dynamics do depend on the situation in the developed world, but less on the situation in financial markets. Though tourists' choice of international destination is often fickle and fleeting, a clear pattern has emerged for Africa: just one third of tourists go to the Maghreb countries, over a third to Southern Africa, almost a quarter to East Africa, and the remainder are spread over the rest of the continent, but mainly West Africa.



Tourists taking pictures after a mask performance, Sanga
[Photo: Wouter van Beek, 2002]

Africa is an unusual tourist destination as its attractions are quite different from those of the rest of the world. First and foremost, Africa is the parallel universe, a continent where – according to popular perception and the tourist brochures – history has halted, and people live as in time immemorial, following their age-old traditions. Their thatched villages are set in a borderless expanse of bush where wild animals normally only seen in zoos roam wild: in short, a vision of pristine wildness. A totally different vision of Africa is generated by the western media: a continent beset with climatic and political catastrophes, wars and genocide, droughts and famine. That particular Africa has to be helped through emergency and development aid. These two visions are both extremely biased, if not plain wrong. Africa as 'wild and unspoilt' or as 'suffering and dependent' coexist

in the Western view almost without touching, the first, the African myth of tourism, the second, one of development interventions.

Tourism and development

For a long time, tourism has been a non-issue for the development establishment. On the one hand it sometimes was viewed as an example of neo-colonialism, on the other strictly a matter of private business. The picture of the rich western tourist gallivanting on the plains of East Africa, taking photos of well-kept wild animals while people were starving on the roadside, was not encouraging. And for those who visited the indigenous cultures, the notion of the zoo was easily replaced by that of the 'human zoo', wealthy westerners taking pictures of bare-breasted women in front of thatched huts. Recently this has changed; after all, tourism has been shown to be a major source of jobs and revenue for local people, so it does, in fact, have development potential. Also most African countries want to develop their tourist industry, considering it a welcome source of income, even if some have inflated notions of future revenues.

Approach and results

It has become clear that tourism is here to stay, that people can earn money from it and that even if our western sensitivities are to some extent shared by African governments, the host countries emphatically favour tourism. It has also become clear that making money out of tourism – though definitely possible – is not so easy and that tourism interacts with ecological, political and cultural dynamics that may run perpendicular to the economic exigencies of the new industry. It is these dynamics that form the main angle of the African Studies Centre's research on African tourism.

Tourism research at the ASC focuses on people interacting with people in the context of the tourist encounter on the one hand and on the exigencies and dynamics of eco-oriented tourism on the other. African tourist destinations are quite diverse, with various niches of tourism situated in different countries. Game parks abound in East and Southern Africa, while ethnic tourism is to be found more in West Africa, with some special spots of 'romance tourism' in the continent's extreme east and west, and in Gambia and Ghana the peculiar 'heritage' or 'roots'

tourism – mainly for African American tracing their cultural heritage and origins. So except for South Africa and Kenya, which do combine a number of important other attractions with its game parks, African tourism is more or less one-dimensional. The major architectonic high-points south of the Sahara is believed to lack global appeal as monuments of world history or 'wonders of the world'. Also most of Africa (except South Africa) has little or no internal tourism, as black Africans have not (yet) taken to tourism in their own or neighbouring countries; those Africans that do travel tend to visit their families, preferably in the capitals of Europe. In North Africa travelling is dominated by family visits from the diaspora.

Thus, research on African tourism implies research on international and intercultural relations, not only important for the revenue that tourism accrues but also as a microcosm of South-North relations. The research at the ASC zooms in on three processes of these dynamics.

Research topics

The first process is the cultural exchange involved in tourist encounters. Situated in West Africa, mainly among the Dogon of Mali and in the Mandara Mountains of north Cameroon, this research takes the angle of the host population in its reception of tourists, guided by the question as to what happens when people from very different cultures meet face to face under such paradoxical circumstances. Tourists have been coming to both areas for a considerable time, Dogon country being one of the major hot spots of West African tourism, and of ethnic African tourism in particular. The notion of the 'tourist bubble', the network of infrastructure to receive and host international guests, is crucial here.

The second process, situated in the Maasai area of Kenya, is the problematic of ecological scarcity. The tourist infrastructure puts a premium on the ecology in several ways. One is water, as most parks are situated in semi-arid areas and tourists consume large amounts of water. Also the growing human population clashes with the exigencies of maintenance and the expansion of tourist infrastructure and parks. In the context of a longitudinal geographical study of southern Kenya, this project follows the expansion of tourism from the perspective of marginalized groups, with the added pique that the Maasai themselves are considered one of the tourist attractions.

The third aspect is politics. Both in national and international politics tourism has become an issue. Game parks in particular have long been an arena in which the interests of conservationists, hunters, dealers in rare animals and ani-

mal products, and protagonists of local cultures and geopolitics interact. Serving as a safety corridor of old, many of these game parks are situated along national borders and are now being transformed by peaceful inter-action, with sometimes imperialistic overtones. One such case being studied is the Transfrontier Park, which includes parks in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.



Covane Community Lodge near Limpopo National Park, Mozambique [Photo: Marja Spierenburg]

These processes give African tourism a special flavour, in which the major interests of the African Study Centre, development, politics, connectivity, ecology and cultural encounters come to the fore.

These ASC tourist studies are being done in close cooperation with research institutes in the relevant countries in Africa, informing general tourism theory and debates in the disciplines of anthropology and geography, as well as development policy.

For a full list of references, please see www.ascleiden.nl/publications

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