

Book Review

Asian Tourism Sustainability

Balasingam, A.S. & Ma, Y. (Eds) (2022)
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Reviewed by:

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This multi-author work joins the dialogue on sustainable tourism in Asia at a critical juncture, i.e. in the aftermath of Covid-19. Hence, the authors could opportunely contrast between the pre-Covid vantage point and the post-pandemic sentiments. Sustainability is, of course, at the heart of tourism, especially in Asian countries that are struggling to find a balance between development and environmental protection.

The book is divided into three parts and consists of ten chapters. Part one deals with stakeholders’ perspectives and sustainability; Part two focuses on Covid-19 and its impact on tourism sustainability; while Part three frames (in a forward-looking manner) the issues of sustainable tourism in Asia. A common theme is the authors’ concern for mass tourism, over-tourism, overcrowding, over-commercialization and environmental degradation (p. 12). At the same time, the tourism industry is impacted by pressing global environmental phenomena, notably climate change.

What is the role of tourism stakeholders in tackling these challenges? Indeed, to what extent should responsibility lie solely with tourism stakeholders when these issues are complex, multi-faceted, and partly contributed by other industries? In Chapter 1, Balasingam and Ma discuss the evolving concept of sustainability and how the shifting goal post complicates targets and accountability (pp.1-15). Who should be tasked with exploring solutions to these problems that confront tourism? Chapter 2 (Legaspi and Dela Santa) advocates public-private collaboration and corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a means to mitigate the negative environmental impact of tourism (pp.19-35). Asian tourism can be sustainable – Chapter 3 (Balasingam) uses the Miso Walai Homestay in Malaysia to showcase a successful community-based tourism model (pp.39-59).

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An indispensable ingredient of sustainable tourism is, of course, community buy-in and participation. Other success factors are discussed in Chapter 4 (Wong and Kler), with a specific emphasis on community well-being and social sustainability (pp.65-78). It can be observed that the authors place the host community at the heart of sustainable tourism. Chapter 5 (Long and Ooi) adds another dimension to social sustainability by highlighting the need to promote positive social experiences among tourists (pp.81-95). Ultimately, it is important to adopt a holistic approach toward tourism sustainability, recognizing its social, economic and environmental dimensions, as Chapter 6 (Ma and Yang) reminds us (pp. 101-116).

Covid-19 is a game changer. Sustainable Asian tourism should now be approached from a different lens. Should governments and tourism players seize the opportunity to make a fresh start? What does the revival of Asian tourism entail – how should it evolve in light of the pre-Covid challenges of mass tourism and over-tourism? Chapter 7 (Subandi, Doughty and van der Duim) and Chapter 8 (Tjiptono, Yang, Setyawan, Adi Permana and Widaharthana) explore these issues in the context of Indonesia, navigating through the concept of the ‘new normal’ with critical reflections and reformulations (pp. 123-156).

What is the scorecard of Asian tourism? Where lies the priority? Is tourism consuming resources with scant regard for the future generation – in direct contradiction to the concept of sustainability espoused by the Brundtland Report? Chapter 9 (Dahles) highlights sustainability challenges in Cambodia (pp. 163-173). Chapter 10 (Ooi) concludes with an exploration of the moral limits of the market, which inevitably leads us to ponder on the values and mechanics of capitalism (pp. 177-194). The author asks: Can Asia offer alternatives to doing better sustainable tourism? This is possibly the million-dollar question that Asian tourism stakeholders should address.

The book offers a compact glimpse of the Asian tourism landscape where sustainability challenges are concerned. Admittedly, Part 2 and Part 3 are comparatively shorter. A more in-depth analysis of the impact of Covid-19 would be ideal. Similarly, a greater emphasis on the future of tourism would cast more light on tourism planning and development, mitigation and revival strategies, and community engagement and support. In short, the reader would benefit from a more precise roadmap for Asian tourism. Nevertheless, seeing that the world has just emerged from the worst scourge of Covid-19, perhaps a tourism roadmap is premature.

Tackling Asian tourism is arguably a Herculean feat. Asia is geographically vast and culturally diverse. Since the region is far from homogenous – the scope for breadth and more nuanced analysis is endless. Hence, it is not possible for the chosen case studies to fully encapsulate the sustainability debate in Asian tourism, and I doubt if this was the editors’ intention. Instead, the book presents selective snapshots of the tourism challenges that some Asian destinations confront.

More than 500 participants from 30 countries gathered via the online hybrid platform. The conference discussions revolved around understanding the tourists’ new needs, particularly the expectations of Muslim travelers and the innovations and new ideas to meet those needs to propel the tourism industry forward post-pandemic. Based on the thematic content analysis, essential findings are discussed and presented regarding Islamic tourism assessments from the international community’s perspectives. This report highlights the power of Islamic Tourism and Muslim-Friendly branding towards sustainable tourism in economic revitalization, employment opportunities, tourism industry capacity building, and long-term environmental, heritage, and culture preservation.

The Ambassadors and Leaders Forum was among the main event of WITC. The Uzbekistan and Tajikistan ambassadors, together with representatives from the Saudi Tourism Authority, Indonesia Halal Lifestyle Centre, and Penang Halal International, highlighted their national policies, vision, and resources in developing their respective Islamic Tourism strategies and plans of action. The Uzbekistan Ambassador emphasized the need for global policy unification that synergizes tourism and local culture. On the other hand, Penang Halal International argued for limited collaborative structures and networks between Islamic tourism stakeholders for knowledge-sharing and data exchange. Meanwhile, Southeast Asia Saudi Tourism Authority shared their post-COVID-19 pandemic standard operating procedures for Umrah and Hajj travelers. The Saudi government initiated a tourism policy to attract the international tourist market to be aligned with the Saudi 2030 master plan.