CREATING A TOURISM DESTINATION FROM AN AIRPORT HUB

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Countries and destinations looking to develop their economies and create employment for their residents often see tourism as a key source of foreign investment income. Not only does Travel & Tourism, directly and through its supply chains, support 10.4% of global GDP and one in every ten jobs across the world, but the growth of Travel & Tourism has been sustained at a level above that of the global economy for each of the past seven years.

Whether to visit family, take holidays or have business meetings face-to-face, 55% of all overnight visitors travelled to their destination by air in 2016. Aviation route development is a key factor in Travel & Tourism’s success.

Over time and through a strategic approach, some aviation hub cities have been able to extend the stays of transit visitors into multi-day stopovers and to encourage visits to the city as a final destination in its own right. Developing this move from transit hub to destination relies on a number of key factors. The destinations that have had greatest success in making this transition have benefitted from a combination of:

- A strong national airline that is both financially and reputationally strong.
- Solid destination appeal with robust inbound tourism.
- Excellent airline connectivity, sufficient infrastructure, and favourable regulatory frameworks developed through established stakeholder partnerships.
- Vertical or central integration and long-term vision of both aviation and the destination.

**STRENGTH OF NATIONAL AIRLINE**

To be a compelling and viable hub, a destination must have strong national airline with a solid international reputation.

Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore are three cities that have been particularly successful at developing beyond their airport hubs. WTTC’s research on the economic impact of Travel & Tourism to cities shows that the direct contribution from the sector to their economies is significant. In 2017, Travel & Tourism’s direct contribution in Dubai represented 10.1% of the city’s GDP - a near doubling of its contribution just a decade earlier (6.1%).

Strong growth in Hong Kong has meant that the sector now provides 4.5% of its GDP, up from 3.4% in 2007. For Singapore, it is an interesting indication of the strength of its overall economy that despite a significant increase of Travel & Tourism’s direct contribution from US$8.3 billion to US$12.8 billion in the decade to 2017, the city-state has managed to keep Travel & Tourism’s contribution at a steady level. At 4.1% of Singapore’s economy in 2017, the share of the sector’s direct contribution to GDP is almost equal to the 2007 level (4.0%).

Other cities such as Mumbai and Delhi are strategically very well placed and have reasonable connectivity, however neither Air India nor Jet Airways have yet developed the financial or reputational strength that creates sufficient demand from an international market. While they have a much stronger...
position in their domestic market, there, Indian low cost carriers tend to dominate.

Icelandic aviation has taken full advantage of deregulation which has facilitated the tourism boom to the island. While admittedly a niche destination, it has been able to attract tourists from various parts of the world due to its favourable geography and unique attractions. The island has been able to position itself as a global shopping destination, attracting tourists from around the world. The airport has also been able to attract tourists from other parts of the world, particularly from Europe, through its well-connected flight network. The airport has also been able to attract tourists from local and regional markets through its strong marketing efforts and the presence of cultural and historical attractions on the island.

**VERTICAL OR CENTRAL INTEGRATION AND LONG-TERM VISION**

A number of destinations have used vertically or centrally integrated strategies to transform their aviation hubs. This has included strategies such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Dubai, which have used vertical integration to create a single authority for airport operations. This has allowed for better coordination between airlines, airports and government authorities, as well as the wider tourism industry and supply chains in the destinations.

**CONNECTIVITY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS**

Global travel revolves around access which in turn relies on both supportive infrastructure and favourable regulatory, economic and legislative frameworks. A well-connected hub airport helps to support wider regional development as networks are built to support the linkages a country has with the rest of the world and destinations become more accessible.

Of course, receiving and processing visitors arriving from the newly connected cities requires investment in building and maintaining well-designed transport and security infrastructure with sufficient capacity to accommodate both current and future demand.

Regulatory and economic frameworks which reflect the needs of the country and support air transport growth are key to connectivity. Since the 1990’s, deregulation and the introduction of open-skies agreements have resulted in the growth of global aviation and increased competition.

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**DESTINATION APPEAL**

Clearly, having a favourable geography, a strong base of business demand and tourism products that are attractive to the markets it serves are essential for any destination from a tourism perspective, and especially so for a hub that is looking to encourage stopovers.

IATA forecasts that the number of air passengers will double from 4 billion in 2017 to 8.2 billion by 2037. Certain parts of the world will be better placed than others to capitalise on the opportunities from airline growth. Areas of the world with populations that have a high propensity to fly or cities that are nestled between these areas, such as those between Europe and South-East Asia, are likely to fare best from an international hub perspective. A number of North America airport hubs may be less well positioned for some inter-continental transit, however, they all benefit from a large flying population. The product mix and marketing development for these destinations may be more influenced towards the regional or domestic markets.

PWC3 points out, however, that even with a favourable geography, there are limits to hub development in areas with a limited home market. Their analysis shows that the largest Middle Eastern hubs fall behind those in Europe in terms of overall hub connectivity or hub connectivity from their region to other specific global regions. PWC recognises that direct origin-destination demand was unlikely to have ever supported the degree of connectivity that is enjoyed today in the Gulf States and that the development of intercontinental hub connectivity has allowed ‘the creation of something out of nothing’.3

The prime focus for transit visitors will be convenient flight and connection times and the airport experience. Hubs looking to extend may have opportunities to provide new and increased competition for connectivity and a niche positioning of the destination, taking advantage of new aircraft technology, open skies agreements, low cost developments and airline network restructuring.4 A staying visitor will also want a positive airport experience after a simple connection from their home airport. Indeed, academic research has shown that the arrival airport is the first place that tourists evaluate the service quality of a destination and significantly influences its image.5 Stayover tourists will also be looking for a location that has an established and unique sense of place with interesting attractions and supportive visitor infrastructure.

The extent to which a hub could develop itself as a destination with attractions that encourage visitors to stay longer depends on this ability to extend reach beyond the airport. Novel and interesting tourism products are created constantly to position destinations such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Dubai as attractive tourist destinations, while all three cities have also worked to position themselves as global shopping destinations.

**SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY**

3. PWC
Emirates provides additional consolidation through owning hotels, adventure travel agencies and tourist attractions. This central control has allowed both Dubai and Singapore to create the linkages and complex network systems between aviation, attractions, accommodation and public transport systems to plan the longer-term development of a tourism product offering that incudes high quality shopping and leisure facilities.

The trend to airport privatisation is growing however, and the governance structures that support the Travel & Tourism in Singapore and Dubai are not replicable in many places around the world.

While privately owned airports may have an operations strategy that may not immediately lend itself to promote the city or destination it represents, they tend to be more pragmatic and less political, and typically have more money to invest than a government-owned airport if the case for sufficient financial returns for developing tourism can be made. Toronto’s Pearson’s 2017-37 Master Plan places important emphasis on how airports are shaping land use in the metropolitan areas around them and the opportunities that could arise from stronger coordination of off and on-airport planning.

For private investors in airports where the traffic mix is more “D” [destination] than “O” [origin], it is very much in their interest to develop tourism to their city or region. A good example is Athens, which is partially privatised. The airport has invested very actively to develop Athens as a “cool” tourist destination, not just a transit stop for the Greek islands. Other examples of privatised airports investing to increase tourism include Lisbon [part of ANA, the Portuguese national airport company owned by the French concession company Vinci], Budapest and Bologna.

Again, while niche, Iceland is another interesting example of a less vertically integrated approach, but one with a clear vision. The central focus to support tourism was generated through need for the country to rebuild after the collapse of the island’s banking sector in the 2008 financial crisis and the 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull volcano. The 2008 collapse was the impetus for industry diversification and the subsequent devaluation of the currency supported a move to Travel & Tourism. In 2010, however, the global media spotlight fell on the island for many days while airspace was closed across Europe. Capitalising on the timing, the government and tourism stakeholders came together to invest in the biggest ever marketing campaign for Icelandic tourism: Inspired by Iceland. The innovative campaign was wildly engaging for the international travel and media community and was supported by the flag-carrier, Icelandair, which expanded its route network to capture the cross-Atlantic air traffic and developed and heavily promoted a consumer-friendly stopover programme to encourage visits to the island.

The exponential growth of tourism in Iceland since 2010 however, has meant that, unlike in Singapore and Dubai which have been planned incrementally, issues brought about by a lack of long-term planning mean that over-crowding is rife in certain hotspot locations and the management of tourist numbers are creating management challenges for the island authorities.

CONCLUSION

The examples above help to illustrate that the potential for extending tourism beyond an airport hub requires a coordinated destination strategy, bringing together not only the natural partners of airline and airport, but the wider Travel & Tourism industry players.

Strong airline connectivity from a national airline that is strong both financially and reputationally, and sufficient infrastructure to support the growth of passengers that arise from an increase in point to point services are also key. These rely on a favourable regulatory framework in both aviation and in visa facilitation to allow visitors to freely cross borders and for market competition to build new and competitively-priced routes.

Extending beyond the hub also relies on there being something beyond the hub for people to see and do – tourism cannot operate without supporting attractions and infrastructure to suit the market it is appealing to. Coordination here with local industry and destination authorities is essential. Joint marketing plans and stopover packages can be created to cater to a market of travellers looking for new destinations to experience.

Building attractiveness of a destination can start with the hub as research shows that the national carrier and home airport can function as extensions of the wider destination by showcasing the culture and service of the wider destination. Satisfying these attentive passengers is crucial for encouraging stayover traffic.

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The World Travel & Tourism Council is the global authority on the economic and social contribution of Travel & Tourism.

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) is the global authority on the economic and social contribution of Travel & Tourism. It promotes sustainable growth for the sector, working with governments and international institutions to create jobs, to drive exports and to generate prosperity.

Members are the Chairs, Presidents and Chief Executives of the world’s leading, private sector Travel & Tourism businesses. These Members bring specialist knowledge to guide government policy and decision-making, raising awareness of the importance of the sector as an economic generator of wealth.