

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF BUSINESS TOURISM: A CASE OF MAURITIUS

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the prospects of business tourism in the small island developing state of Mauritius. Mauritius is predominantly known as a beach holiday resort for hedonist tourist and limited attention has been provided to business tourism. Past studies have revealed that business tourism provides significant economic contributions, however little academic attention has been provided to business tourism in small islands. The research highlights the characteristics of business tourism in Mauritius with a focus on the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions market. The study discusses the characteristics of business tourism emphasizing on its prospects and challenges as a tourism development strategy in Mauritius. A qualitative approach was adopted where key informants in the business tourism sector were interviewed to examine topic under scrutiny.

JEL: L83, O15, O24

KEYWORDS: Business Tourism, Events, Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Mauritius

INTRODUCTION

Mauritius is a well-established beach resort in the Indian Ocean and strategically positioned at the intersection of Africa and Asia, at 855 km east of Madagascar (Bramer Asset Management, 2010) with a population of 1,3 million (CSO, 2011). However, Mauritius has not been performing at its peak for the past few years (AHRIM, 2012). This is due to the decline in the number of international tourists from European markets following the Euro zone crisis and the result of direct competitors such as Maldives, Seychelles and Sri Lanka (AHRIM, 2012). While Mauritius recorded a negligible increase in its number of international tourist arrivals in 2011 compared to 2010 (+3.2%), growth was higher in competing destinations, with +18% for Maldives, +11% for Seychelles and +31% for Sri Lanka. Therefore, to sustain its tourism industry as one of its major economic pillars, efforts need to be carried out to remain competitive.

On a global basis there is an unprecedented interest for business tourism in attractive and quality surroundings. As stated by the World Travel & Tourism Council (1999), to make Mauritius a strong brand, it should promote other tourism products like event tourism. Diversification of tourism has the potential to add value to a destination's product offering to attract tourists. However, it also represents a challenge for the local stakeholders on various fronts. This study was initiated to investigate a topic which is yet unexplored in small island destinations. The aims of this study are to examine the characteristics of the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events (MICE) sector in Mauritius, its prospects to tourism industry and the challenges involved in MICE tourism. The next sections discuss the literature review followed by the methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MICE: A Component of Business Tourism

Business tourism is a highly profitable segment of the tourism industry and consists of all trips related to the travel of employees or business interests (Haven-Tang *et al.*, 2007). It relates to meetings and conferences, incentives, exhibitions, trade fairs, incentive travel, events and corporate hospitality (BTP, 2005). The MICE industry has grown over the past decades. It is not only known as a service industry but also as one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry (Dwyer & Forsyth, 1997; Hing *et al.*, 1998). This industry combines different sectors such as trade, transport, travel, leisure, accommodation, food and beverage, venues, information technology and finance. Described as a multifaceted industry (Dwyer & Mistilis, 2000), the MICE acronym consist of the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (Dwyer & Mistilis, 2000; Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008; Getz, 2008; McCartney, 2008; Rogerson, 2012; Gibson *et al.*, 2012), which in most destinations fall under the umbrella of the events industry (Getz, 2008).

The UNWTO defines a *meeting* as a structured event which brings people collectively to argue a topic of common interest (UNWTO in CIC, 2011). Meetings can be held for commercial or non-commercial reasons but is mostly generated by the corporate sector as its high yielding, with millions of meetings held all over the world on a daily basis (Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008). What makes a meeting qualify as part of the tourism business is that it engages in some of the services of the tourism industry, and is generally held away from the location of the organization running it (Davidson, 1994). The terminology *meetings* can also be used to cover a wide spectrum of events such as conference and seminars not containing an exhibit component (Seekings & Farrer, 1999; Fenich, 2005).

Incentive travel is a universal management instrument that uses an outstanding travel experience to reward participants for improved levels of performance in support of the organizational goals (SITE, 2013). It can be defined as an all expenses paid travel (Rogers, 2003) which is used by organizations as a motivational factor to encourage the productivity and performance of its employees in meeting the desired goal of the organization in terms of sales and that of its business partners in terms of support (Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008). It targets business groups where the host destination promotes potential opportunities it has to offer to businesses in terms of discount prices and the buying power it offers to its corporate buyers. However, with the complex nature of this component of the MICE, it is becoming increasingly difficult for corporate clients to decide which destinations should be chosen for their 'incentive'.

Conferences are participatory meetings that are designed mainly for the purpose of discussion, finding and sharing information, solving problems and consultation. Conferences are usually limited in time and have specific objectives. Similar to what meetings are, conferences can be defined as (CIC, 2011) *an event involving 10 or more people for a minimum of four hours during one day or more, frequently held outside the company's own premises*. In most conferences, attendees have two main objectives, especially if they are attending conferences abroad. First that of attending the conference in itself and second that of making the most of the destination or venue in which the conference is being held.

Exhibitions bring suppliers of goods and services together with buyers, usually in a particular industry sector (Allen *et al.*, 2002:15). Exhibitions are also known as *expositions*, because they are intended to bring together different suppliers in an environment where they can display and promote their products or services to the attendees on the show floor. The main focus of these events is the business to business relationship (Fenich, 2005) for either promoting new products or gaining new clients (Jurisevic, 2002).

Prospects and Challenges

Business tourism brings several contributions to the tourism sector and the destination. The economic impacts of the MICE industry, especially that of events have been addressed by many researchers in the field (Gartell, 1991; Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999, 2000; Sherwood, 2005; Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008; Getz, 2008; McCartney, 2008; Ford, 2011; Li Ting & Zheng Gu, 2011; Gibson et al., 2012; Rogerson, 2012). MICE is characterized as having the *Three Highs* – *High growth potential, added values and beneficial innovation*. It also offers *Three Larges* – *large output, opportunities for employment and industry associations*; and *Three Advantages* – *advantages over industries in human resources, technological know-how and the efficient utilization of resources* (Janakiraman, 2012). Attendees of MICE activities are known as high spenders that meet the needs of yield driven tourism strategies (Braun, 1992). Business tourists spend more, not only on hotels and restaurants but even on leisure activities such as visits to retail and local attractions such as museums and theaters' (Clark, 2004). In fact they have been found to spend three times more than an average leisure tourist (Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008). This in return generates foreign exchanges and creates job opportunities (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999; Bowdin et al., 2001; Page, 2003).

Governments support the MICE industry because of its economic benefits (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999; Dwyer et al., 2000). MICE tourism attracts invaluable business to a region and in return brings high returns to local economies, both directly and indirectly (Davidson, 1992; Bowdin et al., 2001; Lawrence and McCabe, 2001; Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008). The economic multiplying effect makes it a viable and lucrative industry. However, studies have shown that governments can also bring their support to the MICE sector through other ways such as treasury loans, investment incentives, tax concessions, training programs, and promotional and marketing campaigns (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999). Countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia have developed world class facilities due to government support in many ways (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999). Furthermore, governments play important roles in promoting training and accreditation standards (Dwyer & Mistilis, 2000). However, the challenge for governments is that they are required to invest large sums of money which they would rather spend on their priority agenda item. The MICE sector is not always on the priority list of governments who prefer to inject funds into national services such as health.

The setting up of infrastructure required for MICE needs to be well-planned and executed so that positive attributes can benefit the destination (Ranchold, 2004). The planning and implementation of infrastructures such as transport, Information Technology (IT) and purpose built conference and exhibitions venues should be adequate to support the demand for MICE. For example, a total of 1197 exhibition halls worldwide have hosted no less than 30,700 exhibitions in 2010 alone attracting some 2.8 million exhibit companies and over 260 million visitors (UFI, 2011). The available space for holding exhibitions has been on the increase since 2006 with a forecast of an addition of 198 projects for venue building worldwide. The MICE sector is experiencing a rise in demand (Getz, 2008) and in order to supply adequately the industry, infrastructure development is essential.

Many destinations' economic and human resource progress is linked to opportunities in job creation and human resource development that the MICE industry offers (Hiller, 2000). This can also contribute to satisfy the sustainable development agenda of governments in terms of alleviating poverty while engaging locals in employment. Skills can be trained in three ways through MICE: skills for the service industry; marketing and in environmental management (Solberg & Preuss, 2005). These skills need to be put to good use so as to become or remain competitive in an industry that increasingly faces competition (McCartney, 2008). To remain competitive, the MICE industry needs to recognize people as a core asset (Weber & Ladkin, 2003). Skills in areas such as management and marketing have been seen to be on the scant side in regions such as Asia Pacific (Dwyer and Mistilis, 1999) but human resource developments in these areas have been well under way. Another concern in the MICE industry is employee retention as

organizations fail to recognize employees as *resources and not just part of the production process* (Hillier, 2000: 447). The tourism industry is highly labor intensive and demands a higher percentage of people to work at operations and front line levels. These same jobs are the key ingredient to quality service and improved service standards (Torraco & Swanson, 1995). The dynamism of the MICE industry offers a range of job opportunities that could contribute to the decrease of unemployment rate (Hobson, 1996). However, the industry needs to also develop a code of ethics to ensure that the industry conforms to labor laws (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach to primary data collection to explore the MICE industry in Mauritius. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 5 Key Informants from the MICE sector including the Destination Marketing Organization, the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA). The interview was semi-structured in nature and consisted of a list of pre-set questions by the researcher and further questions were asked during the interviews to probe into topics emerging from the responses. Interviews were conducted in the month of March 2013 and lasted for around 30 minutes. Secondary data was also used and consisted of analyzing information related to MICE on the website of the MTPA.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case of Mauritius

Mauritius is placing special interest on business tourism as a component of the tourism industry while promoting itself as a high profile destination. The interviews reveal that the MICE product is targeted at international tourists and the trend for the average length of stay for MICE tourism is 3 nights including 1 Gala dinner and 1 day trip. The most attractive MICE segment for Mauritius is incentive travels as they can bring significant economic revenues given that they are high spenders who require up-market products and services. Thus, the destination needs to propose exclusive packages which no one has experienced before and constantly surpass itself to create a *waow* factor or unique experience, mixing business and pleasure (Davidson, 2003). The delegates of MICE represent a typology of tourist that destinations covet as they represent high quality visitors because of their high spending powers (Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008). This spending power contribute to the economic impact that is derived from those attending events in the MICE sector as they spend on hotels, restaurants, retail, attractions (Clark, 2004) and other services. It is also acknowledged that business tourists pay more as the leisure tourists for the same facility, because business travel often need better quality services or extra specialist facilities, compared to leisure tourists (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2001). However, respondents noted that with the global economic crisis, budgets tend to be more restricted.

To be competitive business tourism destinations, the later need to possess appealing characteristics for hosted buyers who are generally intermediaries or corporate organizations involved in organizing incentive travels, conferences, meetings or events. Mauritius is perceived to be well-positioned in the MICE market and a respondent emphasized that *MICE tourism in Mauritius is not amateur and we are used to the specificities of the industry which requires attention paid to details, long-term planning and several components of industry plan and work together*. A MICE event requires the successful collaboration of various suppliers such as example, IT, audiovisuals, décor, entertainment, attractions, transport, accommodation, food & drink, and the provision of infrastructure and support services. For a country aspiring to become a destination for events and conferences, these elements must be present (Shone, 1998).

Mauritius is promoted as an exclusive destination with a set of key attributes which makes it competitive business tourism with a unique selling proposition. The destination possesses a high class image,

hospitality of local inhabitants, service quality in hotels, creativity of human capital to provide unique experiences for hosted buyers, luxurious accommodation, fine gastronomy, mix of cultures, high class conference amenities, varied coastal and inland activities, state-of-the-art telecommunications infrastructure, safety and security and value for money which are also promoted on the website of the Destination Marketing Organization, the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA), www.mtpa.mu, the national organization under the aegis of the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure responsible for promoting Mauritius abroad as a tourism destination. Mauritius is identified as a MICE-friendly destination and the website states that Mauritius:

possesses all the key ingredients that are required for successful meetings, incentives, conferences and events. The quality and variety of accommodation, the attention to detail in service delivery, state-of-the-art conferencing venues, and the vast number of additional activities on offer all guarantee genuine value for money.

However, on the MTPA's website, the MICE market is referred to as the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and *Events*. Events has replaced the traditional terminology *exhibitions* since destination marketers and travel intermediaries perceive that the latter is not considered appropriate as international MICE tourism tends to be characterized by events rather than exhibitions which is perceived by the international travel business market as an obsolete terminology at destination level. The MTPA works in close collaboration with local hotels and destination management companies to promote the MICE tourism product to an attendance of major outbound markets with international hosted buyers in international fairs. The two main MICE international fairs which Mauritius participate in are the Incentive Travel and Meetings Association (ITMA) and the IMEX (the worldwide exhibition for incentive travel, meetings and events).

As compared to other exclusive beach-resort, competitors in the region such as the Seychelles and Maldives, Mauritius has well-developed infrastructure as well as ease of access to inland sites which makes it a suitable option for MICE markets. As opposed to Mauritius, other small islands in the region are characterized by limited levels of development in terms of infrastructure to host large events such large conference venues, a lack of hotel clusters to accommodate delegates for major events, limited road infrastructure connecting strategic locations and limited logistics for example in terms of large vehicle fleet necessary for transporting tourist groups simultaneously. Given that Mauritius is a bilingual country (French and English speaking), it has no difficulty in providing professional translators who are essential in hosting such events. A respondent also stated that delegates often travel with their spouses and the hotels in Mauritius provide a variety of in-house activities for the former as well as ease of access to sites of interest outside the hotels.

Despite being a small island, Mauritius has adequate capacity to meet the infrastructure and logistics requirements for hosted buyers. Moreover, the country benefits from the only state of the art conference venue in the Indian Ocean, namely the Swami Vivekananda International Convention Centre which can hold 3,500 individuals. It is located around 15 minutes from the capital city, Port-Louis and around 45 minutes from major clusters of hotels in the North and the West coast. For very large events, delegates are accommodated in hotels located mainly on the north and west coasts of the island and are then transported to the conference centre. However, in Mauritius, there is no one stop shop to accommodate the full spectrum of services for large events, hence needing the collaboration of outsourced suppliers which triggers the multiplier effect in the economy. On the other hand, individual hotels may hold their own meetings and conference as many of them have comprehensive facilities including leisure, restaurants, conference and banquet facilities for around 300-600 individuals and can thus easily hold meetings and conferences within a single location.

Developing a good supply of air travel to meet the demand of the MICE industry is of crucial importance. Hosted buyers consider a host destination that not only is found in an attractive setting, but one that is easily accessible. To facilitate access and increase the number of international tourists arrivals, a state of the art airport is under construction at a costs of Rs 11 billion (385 million USD) and should be operational by April 2013 with the provision to accommodate 4.5 million passenger traffic per year which is doubling the figure of the existing airport. The main markets for MICE in Mauritius are Europe mainly France, UK and Germany, and South Africa. It is important to note that MICE tourism is a global market. For example, a pharmaceutical company may have its headquarters in London but different branches all over the world. Hosting an incentive travel in Mauritius would thus entail that the group will consists of employees from different parts of the world. Despite being a long haul destination for Europe its main MICE market, Mauritius has daily flights from Europe and other destinations, thus access is not perceived as a barrier although South Africa remains an important market due to its proximity to Mauritius. MICE consumers would moreover use local transportation systems to move from one area to the other and in such cases conditions of roads need to be improved.

MICE tourism is highly valued as a catalyst to develop attractions, image and branding at the destination (Priporas, 2005; Getz, 2008; McCartney, 2008) thus creating opportunities for Mauritius to diversify its tourism product as it has long promoted itself only on its exclusive beach resort attributes. The MICE sector has therefore become an important focus for established markets, building on the need to identify and strengthen the strategies that lead to competitiveness (Weber & Ladkin, 2003). In order not to lose out on the opportunities, business destinations like Mauritius need to incorporate the development of the MICE sector in its Tourism Master Plan with particular attention on how it should be developed taking into consideration sustainability issues as this type of tourism requires hosting a large number of tourists and the development of mega infrastructures. Moreover, there is a lack of statistics on the MICE market in Mauritius and respondents interviewed stated that MICE may have already contributed to around 100 000 international tourists annually. The government needs to provide support to gather statistical information on the industry so that there is a better analysis of demand in relation to supply for better forecasting. Poor industry information can increase the risk of poor products and services leading to hosted buyers losing interest in the destination.

In Mauritius a large section of the private sector, namely three to five star hotels have invested in the provision of conference centers as an added product to their resorts. They are thus able to host banquets and conferences for groups. In these cases much of the activities occur within the hotel premises, with usually an organized day trip outside the hotel. In some cases, conference attendees hire taxis for visits to places of interest such as the Capital city. However, much of the services associated with the MICE trip are consumed within the hotel. Moreover, MICE tourism contributes greatly to the up-market hotel industry, airline companies, tour operators and other suppliers of products and services related to events. However, attendees are often mostly clustered in large resorts resulting in these powerful organizations receiving much of the benefits as well as airline companies and established destination management companies. Thus, the challenge is to ensure that benefits of tourism reach the segment of Small and Medium Tourism Enterprises (SMTE) which may represent 95 per cent of tourism sector (Rogerson, 2012). Although respondents mentioned that MICE tourism contributes to SMTEs such as the local craft market, it is only to a negligible extent since MICE travel is consumed over an average of three nights leaving little room for outside consumption. It is thus important to broaden economic opportunities for locals through the provision of supply chain linkages to incorporate local suppliers to enhance inclusive development (Scheyvens, 2011). Similarly, Mitchell and Ashley (2010) emphasize that linkages with local suppliers can be a successful way in which tourism businesses can contribute to local development by incorporating small suppliers into corporate supply chains.

MICE require a panel of people which could lead to an increase in employment. To cater for the needs of the demanding nature of customers that the MICE industry attracts, there is a need for destination to have

people with the right skills and drive to work for this industry. Hosted buyers are experienced consumers of MICE tourism and if unsatisfied will not purchase the Mauritian MICE product.

As mentioned earlier, skills in areas such as management and marketing have been well developed in regions such as Asia Pacific (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999) and in Mauritius, human resource development in these areas have also been well under way. A concerning issue is the retention of employees working in the highly labor intensive tourism sector in Mauritius. The MICE industry demands a higher percentage of people to work at operational and front-line levels and in the case of Mauritius, front line jobs are not well remunerated. It cannot be stressed enough that these same jobs are the key ingredient to quality service and improved service standards (Torraco & Swanson, 1995) for a memorable experience and the possibility of customer retention. There may be various plans to develop new programs either internally, or at national level through Universities, but if the industry itself shows poor management and reward of its human resources, the industry is directly to suffer. There is a growing concern to revise the wages offered, amongst other motivational sources, for the MICE industry and the tourism industry in general otherwise Mauritius may find itself with serious human resource shortages in the tourism sector. Mauritians are looking beyond the local horizons for better job prospects. This brain drain has considerably impacted upon employee turnover figures in the tourism sector where the cruise industry is enticing the hotel employees with higher pay packages and long breaks thus draining the talents of the Mauritian tourism industry.

MICE bring delegates from different countries to the destination and this can create strong positive word of mouth. Mauritius is also in constant contact with the press. For example, Mauritius organizes familiarization trips and press trips to maintain contact with press and for publicity purposes. The destination also holds in-house training with hosted buyers to market the MICE tourism product. Moreover, to obtain greater visibility for MICE tourism, sometimes co-branding efforts are organized with hosted buyers as well as product launching in the destination which reinforces the marketing efforts. Apart from enhancing the image of the destination, MICE can also have other social benefits such as events can be a trigger for Mauritians to revive their culture and show solidarity. In essence, events can become an opportunity to improve social relationships, for strengthening abilities to understand one another and for community well-being (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The study was undertaken to investigate business tourism which is yet explored in Mauritius. The aim of this study was to elaborate on the characteristics of business tourism and to investigate the prospects and challenges of business tourism in Mauritius. This paper has identified that business tourism consists predominantly of the MICE market, however, at the destination marketing level, there is more focus on Events as a component of MICE rather than the traditional Exhibitions component. The study revealed that MICE tourism has several prospects in Mauritius. The island has numerous quality hotels with high standard services to accommodate business tourists as well as facilities to hosts events, conferences, meetings and incentives. However, the conditions of other infrastructure such as roads should be improved. Although no official figures regarding the contributions of MICE was available at the time the research was conducted, this type of tourism has the potential to generate economic benefits. However, it is uncertain to which extent it is indeed contributing to the well-being of the different strata of the community. Given that this type of tourism tends to be consumed over a few days within restricted settings, it creates few opportunities for the tourists to venture out of the establish circuits, thus resulting in a lack of economic and social linkages with locals. MICE tourism has the potential to generate employment, however, the tourism sector in Mauritius is going through a crisis as many experienced tourism staff have quit their job to work in the cruise sector for financial reasons. Moreover, although there is the potential for further development in business tourism in Mauritius, caution needs to be exercised with regards to the type of infrastructure to be developed taking into consideration the

destination's small and fragile environment while at the same time maintaining its small exotic island cachet which is its core tourism asset. Moreover, business tourism and its future development should be integrated in the tourism strategic plans taking into consideration how it should be developed in the sustainable tourism development context. To further comprehend the contributions of business tourism in Mauritius, future research could investigate the extent to which it has contributed to the different spheres of the destination community.

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