

THE WORLD IN 2019: WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT

Forecasting Is Futile.....but Fun

Tours d'horizon are all the rage at the start of a new year. January inevitably brings a host of soothsayers, doom-mongers and assorted pundits peddling predictions for the year ahead. These range from statistics on potential growth and decline to 'listicles' of what's hot and what's not.

The former (statistical predictions) are scientific only in that they tend to be straight-line, but unwarrantable, extrapolations of last year's trend; whereas the latter ('listicles') are invariably down-the-pub, back-of-an-envelope imaginings. In other words, both are questionable. This is simply because, to quote Nobel prize-winning physicist Nils Bohr, "prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future." Nor, however, are they always wildly wrong, especially when written by experienced trend-watchers and travel gurus.

So, in the interest of what we hope might pass for informed entertainment, we've come up with a few predictions about the world in 2019. These are based on a modicum of evidence, years of experience, and pure conjecture. This is neither comprehensive nor restricted to the big guns. It looks at new kids on the block as well as established destinations and tries to read the runes from UNWTO's latest figures for 2018, published in January.

Less Dabble, More Depth

The smart money is on boom times for Central and South East Asia and parts of South America, recovery for formerly terrorism-troubled destinations in South East Europe and North Africa/Middle East, and a steady, but unexciting, performance for Europe and North America, who will bump along at world average growth levels.

We reckon people will be seeking less dabble and more depth, outdoor excitement and internal nourishment, and dinner party kudos from visiting the latest uncharted places. But, sadly, we see little sign of unsustainable, unfettered growth being seriously addressed.

Few Surprises amongst the Big Beasts

While the fortunes of the big beasts of international tourism fluctuated, all of the top 5 with over 50 million visitors posted at least some growth:

France (+c.8%),
Spain (+c.1%),
USA (+c.7%),
China (+c.2%)
Italy (+c.5%).

But the most sluggish performers amongst the top 10 were China (+c.2%), Spain (+c.1%) and the UK with a startling deficit at c. minus 5%, being the only one to post a decline.

The UK's poor performance relative to the others is astonishing, particularly given sterling's weakening against the Euro since the Brexit vote in 2016, albeit with intermittent volatility. Reasons are opaque, although some are rushing to blame Brexit. Other variables, which might affect the UK's performance, are not immediately obvious, but there is, as yet, no conclusive evidence of a Brexit link.

New Kids on the Block

More interesting, perhaps, are the new kids on the block. A Balkans revival is in full swing: Slovenia (+c.24%),

Albania (+c.16%),
Montenegro (+c.14%),
Bosnia-Herzegovina (+c.14%),
Serbia (+c.13%)
Macedonia (+c.12%).

Four countries are booming against an otherwise below average growth rate in South America:

Ecuador (+c.51%),
Colombia (+c.30%)
Peru (+c.22%)
Guyana (+c.18%).

And, Central Asia is spicing up the competition for adventurous travellers: Kazakhstan's investment in tourism over the last few years appears to be bearing fruit, with growth at +c.22%; while hiking tour operators are falling over themselves to promote Georgia as the latest uncharted destination, which grew at +c.11% last year. And islands in the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific

Oceans are making their presence felt, with considerable growth in the South Pacific, albeit from a very small base: Tuvalu (+c.36%), Tonga (+c.28%), and Solomon Islands (+c.18%).

Putting Growth in Perspective

It would be remiss, as tourism continues to grow exponentially around the world, to ignore the wider implications of this growth. It's not just the volume, but also the pace, of growth, which is concerning. For instance, it took Vietnam only eight years to reach 13 million arrivals, whereas Thailand took 25 years to go from 6 million to 15 million.

More than ever before, destinations need to commit to managing growth sustainably. Otherwise there is a serious risk of killing the tourism goose that lays the golden economic development egg. Established destinations are struggling to achieve this. But 'new' destinations have an opportunity to learn from mistakes made by others and build a sustainable visitor economy from the start, before their honeymoon is over. Time will tell.

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For Yellow Railroad's New Year complete 'Big Blog' see [HERE](#)