

A SERVICE PERSPECTIVE OF LUXURY TOURISM

Ni Luh Eka Armoni¹, Ni Made Ernawati², I Wayan Jendra³
¹²³Tourism Department, Politeknik Negeri Bali, Indonesia
email: ¹luhekaarmoni@pnb.ac.id, ²madeernawati@pnb.ac.id,
³wayanjendra@yahoo.com.

ABSTRACT

This paper reporting the service aspect of luxurious tourism, is a part of a broader study identifying elements constitute luxurious travels. It is a qualitative study involved 48 respondents who are members of 7 different Facebook travel groups. Data collection was conducted by posting a discussion topic on luxury travels to the Facebook groups. It is identified that service of luxurious tourism products is premium and personalized, wherein VIP handling is not a special service, rather a basic standard that needs to be met for elite customers. It is the ability to satisfy customers beyond expectation, exclusive supreme products only few people can afford, which is not easy to be provided. Nevertheless, above and beyond the design and the delivery of the exclusive high quality services and after performing the very best effort; luxurious service sometimes means serving customers with heart and sincerity reaching the human side of people; meeting the needs of high class customers intuitively, when facing and anticipating matters beyond human control. It is expected that the analysis could enrich the discourse on luxurious tourism products, assist in resolving the puzzle of a perfect service, perfecting the imperfect.

Keywords: travelers, elites, luxury travels, prime service.

INTRODUCTION

It is a challenge for the workforce in tourism industry, especially the luxury tourism to deliver a flawless service, as quality service is not a choice but a standard. Nonetheless, elite travelers which comprise 3% of travelers which represents 20% of the total tourism expenditure (Mintel, 2010) demand luxury travel products which include premium service. These products are characterized by the use of top class materials and demand prime service which is highlighted by the privilege of speed, comfort, ease, productivity, exclusiveness, elevation and other traveling features that only a few can afford. Thurlow and Jaworski (2014) argue the elites conduct their travels to perform their social status; thus, traveling is not purely undertaken for the sake of taking a journey.

The super VIP standard service for the super elites and the contemporary movement of 'global common, wellbeing and equality of people' are a paradox

(Birtchnell and Caletrio, 2014); nonetheless, super elite travelers contribute a significant proportion to the worldwide traveler digit, and considering the economic contribution made, it is worthwhile to cater for their needs. This research investigating 'service' in luxury travels is undertaken within a context of respondents across market segments; as it is defined by Urry (1973) in his early work of the 70s, elites include people who are able to travel for non-work purpose which indicates status. This study aims at identifying what precisely is the services required by the elite travelers and how the providers of luxury travels cater for these needs.

CONCEPTS

Service

Kotler and Armstrong (2012) define products in general as something that are marketed and observed, owned or consumed, so that the needs and wants of customers can be satisfied. From tourist's perspective, the tourism product is generally perceived as tourism 'experiences' (Frochot and Bata, 2013). Morrison (2002) defines the tourism product as a mixed assortment of services and goods provided to customers. Every product comprises of tangible and intangible elements, amounting in different proportion depending on the nature of the business. Being a service industry, tourism products contain a higher proportion of service compared to tangible element. Service is a vital and crucial element in tourism.

Ronald (2013) argues that offering and providing quality products in tourism industry comprises three vital parts, which include: the products, the delivery system and most important is the service. The writer further stated that quality service is not an option it is an obligation to succeed in the industry; service is a competitive advantage which is difficult to imitate. Service is rooted from empathy which places oneself in the customer's shoes, and asks the question: if I were this customer what might I need, and endeavour to assist them. Sometimes, doing the extra miles for customers means stepping beyond duty and use personal facilities and time. These endeavours will ensure customers have a memorable experience and create potential repeat guests, and often a free words of mouth promotion for the business. Thus, service is for all tourism customers, what is the specialty of service for the elite travelers.

Luxury Tourism

Strong (2006) argues that operating a luxury travel business means providing elite travels that create a lasting memory and transformative experience that enhance the life and the style of the customers. Further described, the elements of luxury travel could include: personalized VIP service, no queuing, people wait to serve; personal butler, house keepers, gourmet chefs, arrangement of once in a life time individual unique event. The business is supported by experienced, firsthand knowledge and dedicated staff with solid respect for discipline, logic, organization, and constant pursuits of progress.

Birtchnell and Caletrio (2014) argue that the features of elite are expressed through luxurious materials, success, good life, personal-life style, power and high status. Harding, the sales director of the Cruise Line Ltd (in Johnson, 2013) supported by Birtchnell and Caletrio (2014) describes luxury travel as: "...to undertake a new experience and immerse oneself in a new destination; whilst, indulging in the very best levels of personal and attentive service, lavish and sumptuous accommodation, exquisite and unrivalled levels of gastronomy and informative and educational guides". These authors depict luxury travel that fits the description of the luxury for the super elites.

According to Birtchnell and Caletrio (2014) a classic concept of elite was proposed by Urry (1973) in his early work of the 70s and stated that elites include people who are able to travel especially for non-work purpose which specifies status. With this definition, the frame of elite is expanded, it argues that anyone who could afford travel for leisure is an elite. The discourse elicits two types of elite: one being referred to as the 'classic elite' (Urry, 1973), whilst, the other is the 'super elite' (Dagnaux and Granjon, 1990) which referred to as the 'few' by Carlton (1996).

A more refined concept of luxury tourism emerged recently, Fitzsimmons (2017), supported by Schensul (2017) points out a perspective and explains that 'luxurious is not about materials but about experience and service, something precious, rare, invested in emotional value. A similar perspective, Thurlow and Jaworski (2014) view elite travelers as people who could afford travel for leisure, and further discuss

about the elites who conduct their travels to perform their social status, and identified two indicators for luxury travels which include: luxurious materials and the symbolic of luxury. The latter is inevitable as the value of materials is subjective and differentiated by '...the eye of the beholder or in the creative mythologizing of the marketer' (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2014: 2). Therefore, a question arises: is a private toilet in the Himalaya a symbol of luxury?

Nonetheless, coming to service both the classic elite and the super elites need similar service, exclusivity, non-franchise product, spoilage in nature, cater for every need every time and everywhere; and all are provided by skillful and knowledgeable people. A note has to be taken that the characteristic of elite travels 'to show status' is equally applicable for both types of elites.

RESEARCH METHOD

This is a qualitative study; involving 48 respondents who are members of 7 different Facebook travel groups in Asia. They are well travelled people; some work for travel businesses, they sell and handle luxury travels marketed around the world; or they are the luxury travelers themselves. A request of opinion on luxury travels was posted to the Facebook groups. The discourses were closed when the discussion became exhausted or no more opinion is posted on the matter. A ten-page tabulated qualitative data was gathered at the end of the data collection. Further, the data was classified based on theme. Some themes emerged, these include: facilities and amenities of luxury travel, services of luxury travel, market of luxury travel, standard and expectation of the luxury travel market (Sukmawati, Ernawati, and Nadra, 2018; <http://ojs.pnb.ac.id/index.php/IJASTE/article/view/900>). These themes are not clearly separated from one another, they are rather in association and in connection among each another. Therefore, this paper discusses issues across themes and classifications. It looks at the aspect of service in luxury travels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Regardless of the luxury types: super elite or classic elite, when comes to service both demands top grade. Service for luxury travels are featured by

exclusiveness, personalized, professionally tailormade, attention to detail and basically nothing beyond thinkable. This service contributes in the formation of an authentic experiences or fantasy of experiences where in everything has to be excellent. The following are some quotes expressed by the study participants:

- A: Luxury is what you can think of and receive as you wish.
- B: I write about luxury travel. Very high standard of service amid beautiful comfortable surroundings would be a good start.
- C: Luxury is something hard to get, usually very expensive, in short supply, unique, much less industrialized than the average for the market, with plenty of capable and knowledgeable persons involved, well-designed, respectful of the values held by the target demographics, etc.
- D: The things they wanted would've cost so much money because of the inconvenience of how they wanted it, but not necessarily the product (raw organic farm to table meal) when the pricing went over \$800.

There is a tight argument on 'hiccups' that might occur any elite travel, one argued that a prompt action has to be taken to address the situation; as it is assumed for the very high price paid, they are entitled to receive perfection, it is expressed:

If that hiccup is handled in a fashion that addresses their status, don't you think? Lose my luggage and it'll be fed-exed the next day. Lose the luggage of \$65,000/week guy, and you get on the phone with a personal shopper, start writing checks and getting sizes and pull in all resources to make it right. Anything less and it could get ugly.

However, some respondents who have the experience of handling expensive luxury travel assuring that and when come to the human limitations after the very best effort made; it is suggested to reach out for the human side of people, to handle elite travelers to meet their needs with intuition. Some elite travelers (Fitzsimmons, 2017) also search for authenticity (Ernawati, Murni, Jendra, in press). Whilst, Chen and Peng (2014) argue there is an increase number of travelers who value and appreciate 5 star service. The respondents' expressions are presented in the following:

- A: so many even billionaires are actually laid back and nice when there are hiccups- maybe because were so grass roots and they want to learn from us as a meditation group
- B: you would be seeing a very different side - a human side - how lovely that must be! I used to really enjoy seeing people arrive for vacation very uptight and already angry and demanding and I knew within in a day or so they would be relaxed, shirt untucked, hair messed up and much nicer. Travel and tourism

is a wonderful industry to be in of that reason, you do get to see all sides of people.

C: Its only my opinion but I am many years in the travel and tourism industry and I have found that the "luxury market" simply wants their needs met intuitively.

CONCLUSION

Luxury means many things for different people. Some people identify luxury as something that is not normal something beyond what they usually have in everyday life. Some others define it as: 'to obtain necessities easily and comfortably. When further explored, some respondents argued that luxury is boiled down to experience: commitment to spoil the guest, beyond expectation, personalized, and attention to detailed. However, in regard to service, the general opinions include: good experience, spoilage, attention to detailed, and personalized.

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