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VII International Tourism Congress – The Image and Sustainability of Tourist Destinations, Muscat, Oman, 2-4 December 2014 – Conference Report

Graham Busby, University of Plymouth

The first ITC to be held outside Europe drew on the hospitality of staff at Sultan Qaboos University working alongside those from the School of Tourism and Maritime Technology from IPL, Portugal. More than ninety delegates, from twenty-three countries, presented research papers addressing aspects of destination branding, competitiveness, sustainability, education, and management.

Seven keynote speakers addressed the conference; Professor Jafar Jafari (University of Wisconsin-Stout) spoke to the address “A nice place to live is a nice place to visit: tourism and community development”. In some respects, this might seem intuitive although this reviewer immediately thought of places such as Bourton-on-the Water, in the English Cotswolds – attractive but affected by so many visitors in the summer that he would not wish to live there. Jafari emphasised the need for community-based tourism and the importance of tourism training in this.



Plate 1. Professor Jafar Jafari, University of Wisconsin-Stout, USA.

Other keynote speakers on the first day were Professor Eduardo Fayos-Solà (Spain), Professor Maged Negm (Egypt), and Professor João Paulo Jorge (Portugal). With four parallel sessions, it was not possible to listen to the wide range of papers although vigorous debate was overheard concerning some at the coffee breaks. The research paper delivered by Peter Keage (PLKAdvisory.com) drew upon substantial experience as a consultant; in “Big forces at play – Oman’s tourism performance to 2030”, he clearly detailed the plethora of external factors affecting the country. With prices for many elements being controlled by corporations outside the country, he advised the audience that there is no dynamic packaging; this may be addressed in future with the establishment of a local low-cost carrier. Visually, his thoughts were well encompassed within the presentation slide shown below – outlining a basic regional package, compared with what could be achieved with an enhanced regional package.

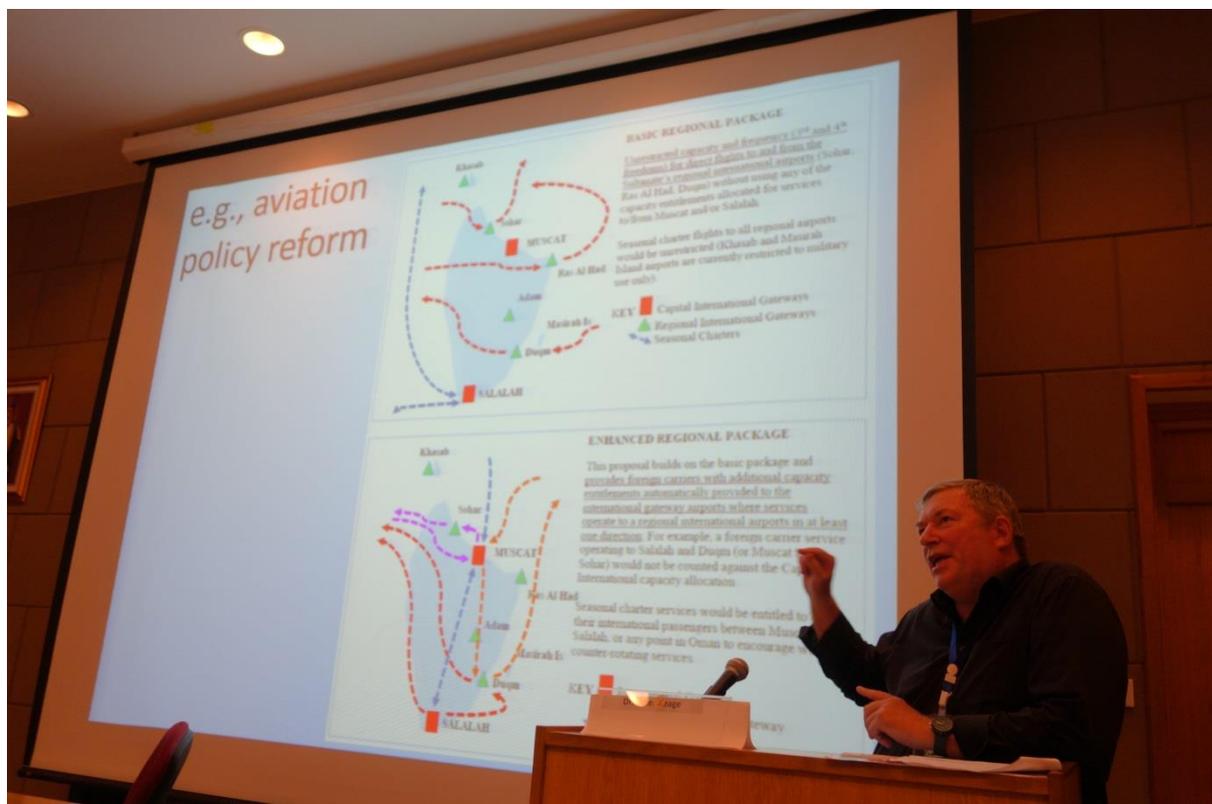


Plate 2. Peter Keage, PLKAdvisory.com.

Qian Chen (Plymouth University) presented a paper based on research into the role of food in tourists’ experience within the context of China. It has been widely acknowledged that food plays an important role in tourism; however, she argued that many studies overestimated the importance of food in tourism, and few studies have actually thoroughly examined the role of food from the tourist perspective. Qian made up for this with her large sample of 1,702 respondents from cities across China.

Eddy Tukamushaba (Stenden University Qatar) presented a paper on destination branding, arguing that it enables the creation of positive images and can, therefore, be used as a strategic marketing tool. Uganda's tourism product components were analysed using structural equation modelling, based on a sample size of 501 respondents, leaving Entebbe International Airport. Results showed that both the measurement and structural models exhibited better model fit indexes. Overall, tourists' perceptions of the retained four dimensions of tourism product (Attractions, ancillary services, amenities and accommodation) had a positive effect on memorable travel experience ($\beta=.21$, S.E =.186, $t=3.141$, $p < .01$). Additionally, the independent T-test for gender and tourists' perceptions of Uganda's tourism product showed that on average, females had a positive evaluation of Uganda tourism product compared to their male counterparts.



Plate 2. Dr Paulo Almeida (IPL) and Dr Galal Afifi (SQU), co-organisers

On the second day, three more keynote speakers addressed the conference. Wael Al Lawati, chief executive officer at Omran (the Oman Tourism Development Corporation) detailed what his organisation is doing in terms of enhancing tourism product and diversifying into new markets. Sensibly, in this reviewer's opinion, Oman does not seem to be going down the route adopted in Dubai of sensational construction developments; Oman is much more about the cultural and natural environment offer.

Professor Adele Ladkin (UK) spoke to "Sustainable tourism destinations: A human resource perspective", drawing on many years of research experience. She was followed by Professor Metin Kozak (Turkey) who addressed "The Future of Tourism Marketing & Management: Moving from Current Issues to Future Trends". Metin is the chief editor of respected tourism journal *Anatolia* (Taylor & Francis-published) as well as having published more than seventy papers; he has been ranked among the top twenty-five prolific tourism researchers and, having heard him speak several times, the address was as interesting as anticipated.

It is clear that Oman is working to develop its tourism product, particularly important given that the oil and gas production will not last for many decades. This reviewer appreciated the chance to hear what is being done; many thanks to Professor Galal Afifi, Head of the Department of Tourism at Sultan Qaboos University and all the welcoming staff from IPL, Portugal, joint organisers of the conference... and, finally, VIII International Tourism Congress will be held 25-27 November 2015 at Peniche, Portugal.



Plates 3 and 4. The Grand Mosque, Muscat, Oman