

Book Review

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COVID-19 & Travel Impacts, Responses and Outcomes

by Simon Hudson, Goodfellow (<http://www.goodfellowpublishers.com>)

Published 2020

by Goodfellow Publishers, Oxford, 1+180pp (figures, tables, graphs, models, photos, references; author, place, and subject indices)

ISBN: 978-1-911635-72-7

‘Unprecedented’ is a word that seems to have gained unanimity as an appropriate descriptor for the COVID-19 pandemic. This word may be also apt to describe Hudson’s efforts in producing this text in record time, that across six chapters, ten case studies and 180 pages, presents a credible account of the initial shockwaves, immediate fallout and reactions in the travel sector in the wake of the pandemic. It is quite an achievement of forethought and focus to be able to cut through the clutter of information, confusion and uncertainty at the national and perhaps personal level, to plan a book proposal, get it approved, write and submit the completed monograph to the publishers within five months of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Arguably, travel and tourism is no more prone to crises and disasters than any other business or productive sector. Yet, the attendant restrictions on human mobility due to COVID-19 have been particularly devastating for the travel sector. Hudson (2020: vi) states the magnitude of the fallout of COVID-19 on the industry as the *raison d’être* for this text, when he writes in the Preface that “...travel and tourism may be the one industry to see the greatest impact from the COVID-19 crisis, and so it is critical that this event be documented”. There is no attempt in this text to go beyond this stated objective of gathering relevant statistics, and to catalogue industry responses to describe the performance of the various sectors of travel and tourism in the wake of the pandemic. The information has been gleaned from an impressive range of sources such as official travel and tourism organisations, data intelligence and management agencies, media outlets and newsfeeds, social media sites, webinars and podcasts. Hudson also draws on his own personal contacts with industry leaders and influencers to build some of the case studies that are beneficial in contextualising the discussion of each chapter topic. While the text does not provide a rigorous rapid review of the industry’s responses to the COVID-19 emergency, yet it meets some key academic values in an examination of the impacts of the pandemic on travel based on data that seems timely and trustworthy. It is inevitable that some of the data will lose currency in the dynamic environment of the epidemiology of the disease, and as governments adjust their policy measures over time. Nevertheless, as a record of the earliest stages of the pandemic, it is a solid reference point and artefact that is likely to facilitate future research on the outbreak and immediate

aftermath of the pandemic. As such, it is a useful resource particularly for students and industry managers studying and researching risk and crisis management, marketing and also planning and development in the travel industry.

Chapter 1 opens with a case study of Carnival's Diamond Princess cruise ship with a description of the plight of passengers and staff quarantined off the coast of Japan. As the epicentre of the predicament, Hudson argues the cruise sector illustrates the sharp edge of the crisis for travel and tourism. According to Hudson, the basis for recovery is that the cruise sector has had a healthy bank balance heading into the crisis, which is likely to provide some cushioning at least through the lockdown. This first chapter *An Unfolding Crisis* highlights other examples of the shock of the pandemic on the big players such as global airlines, hotel chains, the closure of Disney theme parks and the cancellation of the largest travel show, ITB Berlin and the mega event of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. As the outbreak halted the bright prospects of pre-summer bookings, destinations that were initially substituting the Chinese markets to mitigate their risk, soon realised that the pandemic was global. Hudson argues that if the threats for the major travel corporate are so overwhelming, well it is even more debilitating for smaller tourism enterprises and for developing nations that depend on tourism as the main income earner.

Hudson continues to keep the spotlight in on the activities and actions of the corporate travel and hospitality sectors in Chapter 2 – *Adapting to Lockdown*. He emphasises that leadership is critical to navigate the crisis, and the case study that introduces this chapter is on Richard Branson's efforts to obtain financing from government to augment cash flow for his airline. But whereas the efficacy of Branson's management may be debatable, Hudson records some 'conventional wisdom' that countries with women leaders have for the most part been exemplary in limiting community spread of COVID-19. Other examples of positive leadership cited by Hudson include the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)'s "Healing Solution for Tourism Challenge", the philanthropic activities of hospitality companies such as the Wyndham Group in providing meals to the homeless and AirBnB's Hospitality of Hope that all 'pivoted' their businesses to lend a helping hand.

Chapter 3 – *Crisis Communication* presents examples of varying approaches by travel companies in responding to the crisis. The case of the Micato Safari travel company operating in Africa and India is notable as a company that did not directly reference the crisis in their messaging but instead issued invitations to customers to 'dream'. Other examples of innovative marketing strategies include the virtual reality campaign of the Faroe Islands and Zermatt in Switzerland that projected an image of the Union Jack on the Matterhorn. These examples also reflect the global coverage and diverse range of examples used in the text of various crisis communication strategies. Of all the chapters, this one was the most ambitious in critical analysis, with the integration of relevant crisis communication models to examine the effectiveness of the communication campaigns.

How travellers were affected by the COVID-19 Crisis is the fourth chapter of the text that recorded examples of the disruption of the travel plans of customers across the world. Hudson states that the predominant concerns of travellers of refunds seem not to have been prioritised. The travel trade have been more concerned in sending out just reassuring messages to customers clamouring for practical answers on travel insurance, cancellation policies and guarantees. The problem of messaging seemed to be no less confusing in the instructions on activities allowed during lockdown, social distancing and

safety protocols. Research presented on travel sentiment in the text indicates varying responses, from those in the pandemic fear phase of not booking at all, some willing to test the waters, to a bold minority ready to jump back in travelling. Hudson proposes that future travel will be driven by creative and intensive social media marketing engagement as consumers are relying mainly on these channels for travel information.

Hudson addresses the economic, social and environmental impacts of COVID-19 in Chapter 5 even though he admits that for the most part they are still unknown. The scale of the economic fallout is presented in the statistics of drastic decline in revenues and employment across the travel, tourism and hospitality sectors. He reasserts his maxim that larger corporate companies as well as developed nations are more likely to recover economically and at a faster rate. But there are bleaker prospects for destinations such as Mexico, where some 80 percent of tourism businesses are micro-enterprises that will be unable to remain in business for the full resumption of global travel. For Hudson, some social impacts are residents' anxiety and mental health illness due to lockdown, changes to some cultural norms such as kissing, and more usage of hotels as space to work away from home for parents. He reckons that environmental calls to accelerate the re-set of travel towards sustainable ideals, and words such as over-tourism and under-tourism becoming vogue, as some key changes emerging from the pandemic.

In the final chapter, the future of travel, Hudson introduces the word COVID-adaptability to envision the brave new world that may emerge from the wasteland of COVID-19. It will essentially be a 'low touch economy' that will be configured into the operations and Servicescape of all forms of leisure services. There will be deeper and more intensive collaboration across travel businesses, particularly for destinations and regions who are able to gain competitive advantage through joint marketing and branding strategies as the Experience Mekong initiative. Hudson's projections are mostly optimistic, in that he expects that travel will return to the status quo once there's some grip on the pandemic. Undeniably, there will be changes with the emergence of seamless travel, more technology and some shifts in consumer demand for more safety assurances. Still, the core message in this text is that the pandemic is indeed unprecedented for travel, but it's not revolutionary. Hudson proposes that businesses and destinations that are strong and resilient economically will survive with the right leadership, and the adaptation and application of effective recovery strategies. But the highly tourism dependent destinations and the small, independent industry entrepreneur will need fiscal help and support. The centre of travel and tourism will hold, even if the periphery falls apart.

On reading the text it is apparent that Hudson's use of the word travel in the title covers the full spectrum of tourism, hospitality and events sectors. But other key transportation sectors in the travel industry such as trains, coaches are not covered the text, and there are hardly any references to small-scale, community based tourism enterprises. It may have also been too early in the pandemic for Hudson to consider the fallout on hospitality training and overall leisure education, as well as the prospects for institutions and students.

Overall, the text is a riveting read with a cogent and compelling narrative storytelling style. The chapters are coherently structured with introductory and concluding case studies to reinforce the body of the discussion. Colourful infographics, photographs and extracts from tweets are generously interspersed throughout the text, and serve to reinforce the content and meaning of the discussion, while also communicating a

real-time feel of the occurrences of the pandemic. Of note is Figure 2.6 of a photograph courtesy of Fran Boloni on Unsplash, with the caption of “French tourism was almost at a standstill during the COVID-19 lockdown”. This photograph captures the compelling image of the Eiffel tower in the backdrop, with a tourist in face mask walking away from the attraction site that is almost completely deserted. This photo may well be a signifier for this text, in the unambiguous and succinct portrayal of the shock of the impacts of COVID-19 on travel that perhaps will be the most epic challenge for a generation.