

Global summit hears how China's growing middle class and a common ASEAN visa will present major opportunities

By **LOW SHI PING** in Bangkok
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Is it too much to ask of travel and tourism to help transform our world?"

The question was posed by David Scowsill, president and CEO of the World Travel & Tourism Council, at the beginning of the WTTC 2017 Global Summit.

Held on April 26-27 in the Thai capital, the event saw more than 900 industry leaders and professionals come together at the Bangkok Convention Centre at CentralWorld.

While the answer to Scowsill's question is a resounding "no", it raises more questions: How is it being done? What are the challenges and solutions? And how should the industry move forward?

In a lot of ways, travel and tourism have already helped transform many parts of the world. Last year, countries logged 1.23 billion international tourist arrivals, a 3.9 percent increase from 2015.

Also in 2016, global travel and tourism generated \$7.6 trillion, or 10.2 percent of global GDP. In doing so, the sector has created almost 300 million jobs.

"Tourism should be about national opportunity, not national vanity. It has the power to transform a country," said David Cameron, prime minister of the United Kingdom from 2010-16, the first speaker to take the stage.

And China is a major source of that transformation. The number of outbound Chinese tourists reached 122 million last year.

Cameron said that "this is the biggest opportunity for the industry".

Pansy Ho, managing director of Shun Tak Holdings, a Hong Kong-based conglomerate, said: "By 2030, half of the population of China (or 650 million people) will be middle class. That means they will also start traveling."

"Europe is a region that the Chinese have the biggest interest in, because of the cultural and historical attractions there," said Jane Wu, cofounder and president of LY.com, a leading ticketing website in China.

Africa and South America are other regions that Chinese travelers are showing a growing interest in, said Dong Li, chief branding officer of bank card association UnionPay International.

And where they travel for tourism, many will also be keen to make investments.

Ge Huayong, chairman of China UnionPay, said rapid growth can be expected from the Chinese market in the coming years, both domestically and internationally.



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Tourism transforming the world

"This is driven by high economic growth, progress in the country's economic restructuring — tourism has become a strategic pillar of the Chinese economy — and an abundance of tourism resources, especially infrastructure such as railways," said Ge.

"In China, we have a saying: You must read 10,000 books and travel 10,000 miles to grow your mind. This is something the Internet cannot replace."

But, as with everything, travel and tourism comes with its own set of challenges.

While the concept of travel and tourism is synonymous with breaking down barriers and encouraging seamless transitions, it goes against the current wave of anti-globalization and nationalist sentiment sweeping parts of the world.

"We need to get the big decisions right. It is important for us to understand what lies behind those concerns and correct them," said former UK prime minister Cameron.

"While governments have been successful in eliminating poverty, they have also left some people behind. People are also concerned about the pace of change.

"The thought I want to leave you with is that the tourism industry needs to work together with governments and the private sector."

Scowsill from the WTTC firmly believes that travel is not just for the privileged. "Closed borders lead to closed minds," he said.

One point of reference for the seamless crossing of borders is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The group is working toward a common visa for its 10 member countries to spur tourism and "ease of travel".

"We have a committee set up to look into a single visa," said Kobkarn Wattanavrakul, minister of tourism and sports in Thailand. "We have a vision of 'tourism for all', that everyone has the right to travel. It can help to heal and seal the world."

Another challenge for the industry is security. With terrorism on the rise, governments are getting increasingly nervous and, naturally, would turn to the implementation of stricter visas to erect barriers.

But this directly contradicts the principles of tourism and travel, which aspire toward a borderless world.

"On one hand, we want people to come to our countries to visit and invest. On the other, we feel that those people pose threats to our jobs, values and security," pointed out Said Athman, Kenya's secretary for tourism.

"There is a gap between those two, but there is an opportunity for the private sector to work closely with the government to calm those fears."

But perhaps the biggest challenge of them all is climate change. Keith Tuffley, managing partner and CEO of The B Team, advocates that businesses should take the lead in this. "It is a global challenge and opportunity."

The B Team is a group of global business leaders who aim to drive better ways of doing business for the well-being of people and the planet. "We don't have Planet B, so we must have a Business B that will inspire us to a better world," said Tuffley.

One framework that businesses can follow is the set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals laid out by the UN which it hopes to achieve by 2030. Another is for companies to consciously measure the environmental cost of everything they do.

Climate change aside, on a more

micro scale, cities and communities also encounter the challenges of tourism and travel, raising doubts over whether the industry is indeed a boon.

The world will have 1.8 billion international tourists by 2030 and it is imperative that a way be found to protect the planet.

In the unfortunate event that a disaster strikes a country, whether natural or man-made, the tourism industry is usually the first to take a direct hit.

So how should the effects be mitigated? Robert Jensen, CEO of disaster management company Kenyon International Emergency Services, strongly advises companies to respond to disaster in a controlled and managed manner.

"The message you should be sending is, 'I'm here to help guide you'. React quickly, recognize the consequences of what you do," said Jensen.

On a more positive note, amid all that was debated and discussed, Taleb Rifai, outgoing secretary-general of the United Nations World Tourism Organization, said it best: "We are about enjoying the world, but it is also much more than that."