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Beyond shopping and gambling: re-imagining Australian cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences

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Beyond shopping and gambling: Re-imagining Australian cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences

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Biography



Betty Weiler is a Research Professor in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management at Southern Cross University Australia. Her 30 years of tourism research, education and training and consultancy work have spanned several continents, mainly working with colleagues and in-country managers, tourism operators and trainers in Australia, North America, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Her 150+ publications in international tourism research journals and other scholarly outlets have centred on the tourist experience, particularly the role of the tour guide and heritage/nature interpretation, including several projects on the inbound China market. Much of Betty's work has been in partnership with protected areas and wildlife and heritage attractions, with her most recent work focusing on managing visitors and influencing their on-site and post-visit behaviour. Many outputs from Betty's research include training packages, manuals, and tool kits continue to be used by and/or inform tourism practice, particularly in the areas of interpretation and tour guiding. Finally, Betty is a multi-award winning PhD supervisor, an editorial board member of six international tourism journals, and co-author of the first scholarly monograph on tour guiding.

Abstract

The desire for a quality nature-based experience is a key driver for Chinese to visit Australia. The inbound holiday travel market from China has been dominated by package tourists, whose travel expectations and experiences have been investigated, analysed and reported by numerous academic and government researchers. Typically, their travel occurs within temporally and spatially limited itineraries, constrained by factors including the supply chain, aviation policy and practices, on-ground costs and tour guiding services. The travel patterns of the growing independent travel market from China have been much less researched, although both markets appear to share many of the same constraints, motivations, expectations and perceptions of Australia as a destination. When Chinese select a holiday destination, "world class beauty and natural environment" is consistently ranked in the top five, along with good food, wine and cuisine, and safety.

Understanding what constitutes a beautiful and natural environment provides important clues about new and modified travel experiences that can be developed for the Chinese market. Informed by the perceptions, interests and constraints faced by Chinese travellers, this paper explores city travel experiences, focusing particularly on diversifying and deepening opportunities for nature-based experiences in cities. A number of elements are identified as key to successfully marketing and delivering nature-based experiences in cities, and these are examined in relation to both package tourists and independent tourists. To re-image and re-position Australian cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences, a continuum of nature-based experiences in urban environments that can realistically be developed are presented. Key requirements and potential experiences along the continuum are outlined.

What is a memorable experience?

Generally speaking, a positive or memorable experience can be defined as “an experience [positively] remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim, Ritchie & McCormick, 2010). Western research suggests memorability comes from:

- Positive affect (feelings/emotions) (Bruner, 1991; Wirtz et al, 2003; Larsen & Jenson, 2004; Curtin, 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011);
- Surprise, novelty, and/or local distinctiveness/difference from home (Reder et al, 2002; CTC, 2004; Morgan, 2006 ; Curtin, 2010; Kim et al, 2010);
- Abundant choices, spontaneity, free time / flexibility and/or engagement (CTC, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Curtin, 2010; Kim et al, 2010).

According to Chinese literature culturally appropriate experiences are:

- Aesthetics, harmony (Sun et al, 2014);
- Blend of nature, culture, history/heritage (Cater, 2006; Cheng et al 2011; TA, 2012).

What is a nature-based experience?

The literature has described 3 types of nature-based experiences:

- Experiences in nature (e.g. scenic tour);
- Experiences about nature (e.g. wildlife viewing);
- Experiences for nature (e.g. ecotourism, EE) (Dowling et al, 1981).

But what is “nature” and “nature-based” to the Chinese market, and how important is it to a Chinese visitor? The literature proffers various responses to this question:

- “Nature-based experience is a key driver for Chinese to visit Australia” (TRA, 2014);
- “When selecting a long-haul holiday destination, natural beauty is the most important pulling factor for Chinese visitors” (International market research findings, TRA);
- “Nature-based experience is pursued in outbound travel among most Chinese” (64%) (TA, 2012);
- “One of the main attractions for the Chinese visitor to Australia is having a nature-based experience: 65% hope to have a nature-based experience and 26% a wildlife experience.” (TRA, 2014);
- “Two of the top five factors when Chinese are selecting a holiday destination are related to nature: ‘world class beauty and natural environments’ and ‘spectacular coastal scenery’” (TA, 2014).



What is nature, a natural environment, and a nature-based experience?

What is “world class beauty and natural environments”?

- only 10% associated this with remote coastal environments,
- only 8% with wide-open inland / outback environments,
- only 4% with wilderness/mountain environments (TA 2014).

However, there is a strong desire

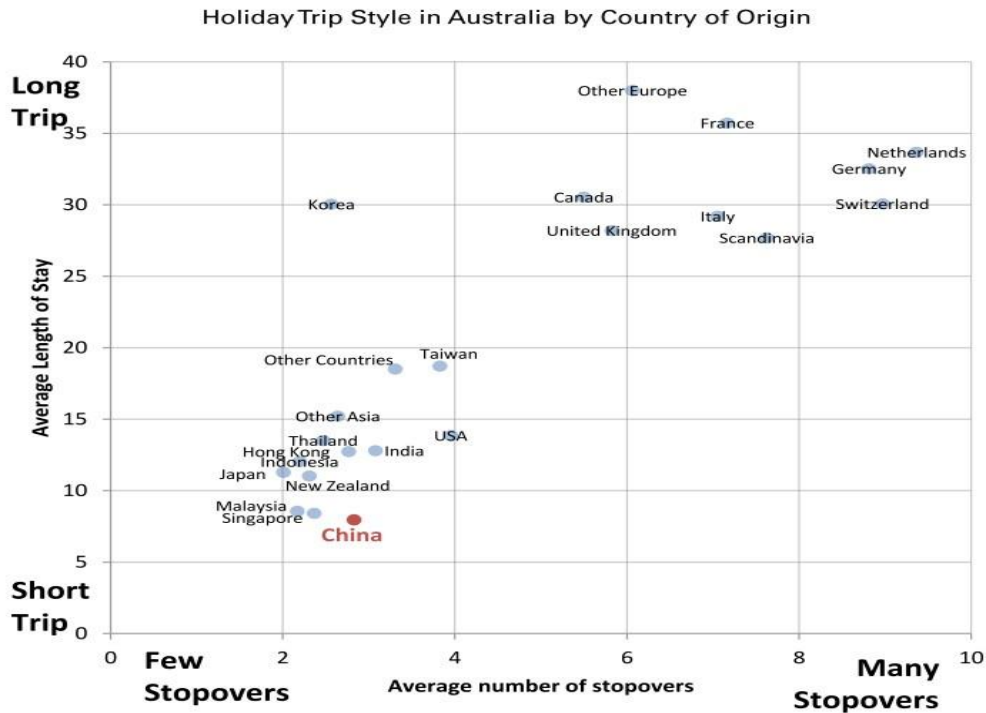
- to experience a natural environment that is different to home,
- to view natural landscapes (beaches, islands, mountains, grassland, countryside),
- to see wildlife (TA, 2011).

But is this what Chinese tourists are getting?

Current Chinese inbound visitors' travel behaviour in Australia

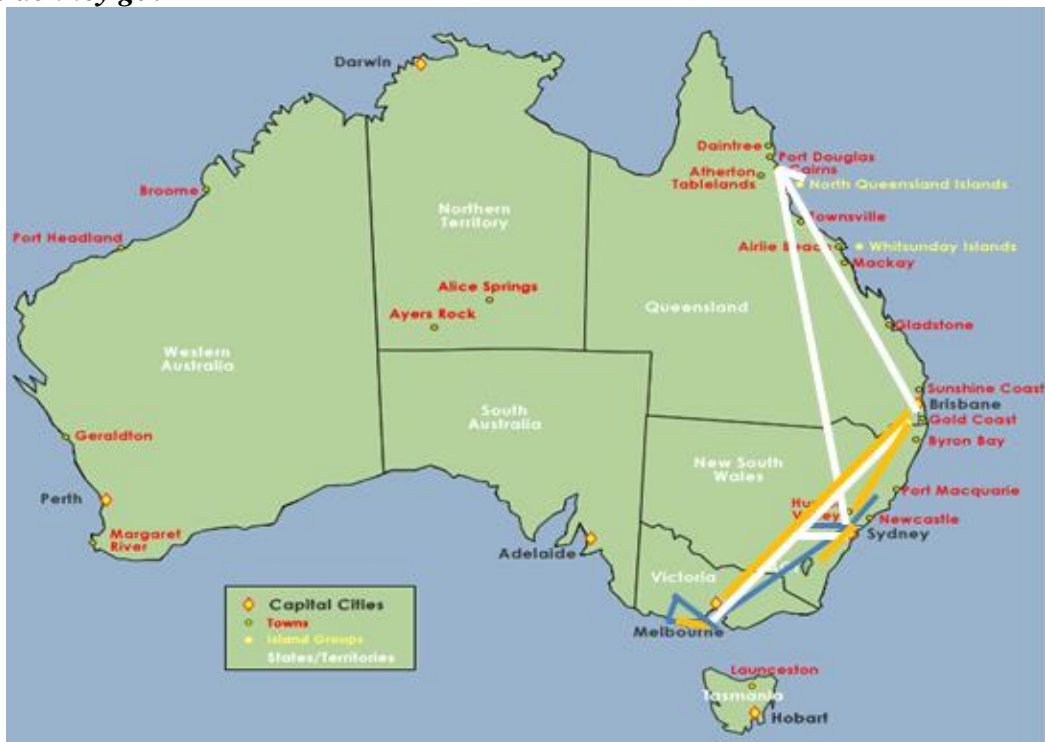
How long do they stay?

The average length of stay of a holiday traveller is about 10 days (TA 2014).



(Source: South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013)

Where do they go?



Sample itineraries:

- Sydney, Nelson Bay, Central Coast, Sydney, Blue Mountains, Melbourne, Phillip Island, Melbourne, Bendigo, Twelve Apostles, Melbourne (7 days);
- Sydney, Blue Mountains, Cairns (Kuranda and Green Island), Brisbane, Gold Coast, Melbourne (9 days);
- Sydney, Wollongong (Jervis Bay), Sydney, Gold Coast, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Melbourne, Ballarat, Melbourne (11 days).

How much nature is experienced in cities?

<p>Sydney:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sydney Opera House (1.5 hours) • Fish Market (30 mins) • Royal Botanic Garden + Sydney Tower + St Mary's Cathedral, • Hyde Park + the Rocks • Bondi Beach (1 hour) 	 <p>Sydney:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sydney Aquarium (30 mins) • Taronga Zoo (30 mins) • Sydney Opera house (30 mins) • Bondi Beach (1 hour) 	<p>Sydney: (2 days)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyde Park (15 mins) • St Mary's Cathedral • Sydney Aquarium • Madame Tussaud's • Taronga Zoo • Sydney Olympic Village (1 hour) • Fish Market (30 – 60 mins)
<p>Melbourne:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St Patrick's Cathedral (20 mins) • Captain Cook's cottage (15 mins) • Brunswick Street (15 mins) • Parliament House • Royal Botanic Garden (20 mins) 	 <p>Melbourne:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parliament house (30 mins) • St Patrick's cathedral (20 mins) • Captain Cook's cottage (20 mins) • Eureka Skydeck (30 mins) • Phillip Island (40 mins) 	

What can we do better?

Offer a continuum of nature-based experiences in cities:

- Experiences in nature (e.g. scenic tour);
- Experiences about nature (e.g. wildlife viewing);
- Experiences for nature (e.g. ecotourism, EE).

Include elements that make experiences memorable and culturally appropriate:

- Positive affect (feelings/emotions);
- Surprise, novelty, and/or local distinctiveness/difference from home;
- Abundant choices, spontaneity, free time / flexibility and/or engagement;
- Aesthetics, harmony;
- Blend of nature, culture, heritage/history.

Key elements of experiences in, about and for nature

- Access to reliable travel information – on-line and in Chinese;
- Infrastructure to facilitate free time activity (easy to access; easy to pay);
- Chinese-language interpretation, preferably face-to-face, via trained guides – for Gen Y, maybe “aps”;
- Culturally-appropriate settings – human and nature co-exist; human-enhanced nature OK;
- Culturally-appropriate interpretation – use of aesthetics, poetry / story-telling, legends, analogies / metaphors.



Key elements of experiences in nature (backdrop)

Quality natural environments:

- air quality (Li, 2011; Zhu and Yao, 2008);
- water quality (Li, 2011; Zhu and Yao, 2008);
- climate/weather (Li, 2011; Zheng and Yan, 2013);
- vegetation density (Li, 2011; Zhu and Yao, 2008; Zheng and Yan, 2013; Di et al., 2010);
- cleanliness/pollution-free (Li, 2011; Zhu and Yao, 2008);
- aesthetic / attractive (Wang et al., 2012).

Quality nature-based experiences:

- breathing fresh air (Shan et al., 2014);
- seeing water (rivers, lakes, beach), blended with (Sun and Gong, 2008; Gao, Zhang and Zhuang, 2009); Di et al., 2010; Hsu et al, 2007);
- viewing heritage buildings and hearing heritage stories (Frost et al., 2014; Li, 2011; Sun and Gong, 2008).

Key elements of experiences about nature (attractions-based)

Nature-based experiences at attractions such as zoos, botanic gardens and city parks (Zhu et al., 2010). Quality natural environments, plus positive affect, novelty/local distinctiveness, free time/choice, engagement. For example:

- Learning/educational experiences (nature and heritage) (Liu, 2004; Ma et al, 2008) via guides (GPTs) and aps/on-site written commentary (independents);
- Low-level physical activities and group-oriented program (Zhang and Yang, 2014) e.g. walking, cycling, golf, water-based activities such as rowing, paddling, surfing, diving, fishing (Tourism Australia 2014);
- Bird-watching and wildlife-based experiences (terrestrial and marine) (Tourism Australia, 2014);
- Incorporate local festivals and events (Tourism Australia, 2014).



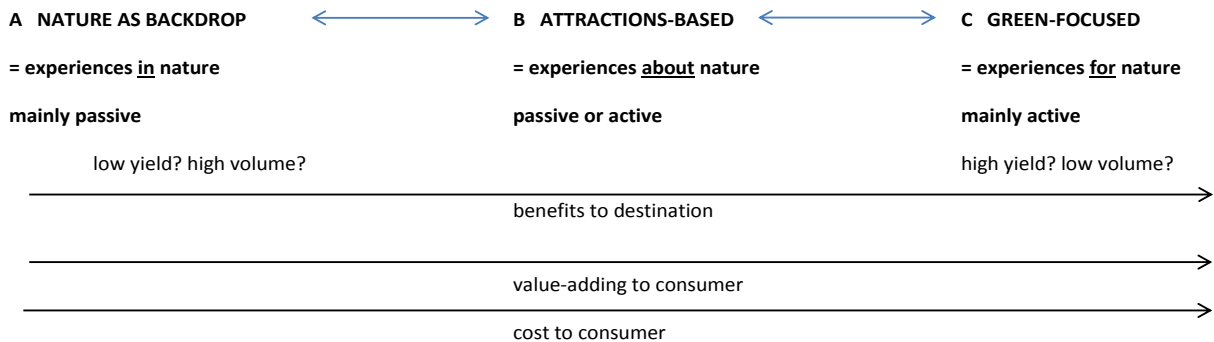
Key elements of Experiences for nature (green-travel)

Environmentally responsible tourism including green-label tours, accommodation, restaurants and attractions (Zhang, 2010).

- Nature-based experiences that engage with local community in a positive way.
- Activities that foster support and protection of heritage.
- Activities that are pro-conservation – toward wildlife, nature and environment.



Continuum of potentially memorable city-based experiences in nature



Where to from here?

Continuum of experiences:

- Experiences in nature;
- Experiences about nature;
- Experiences for nature.



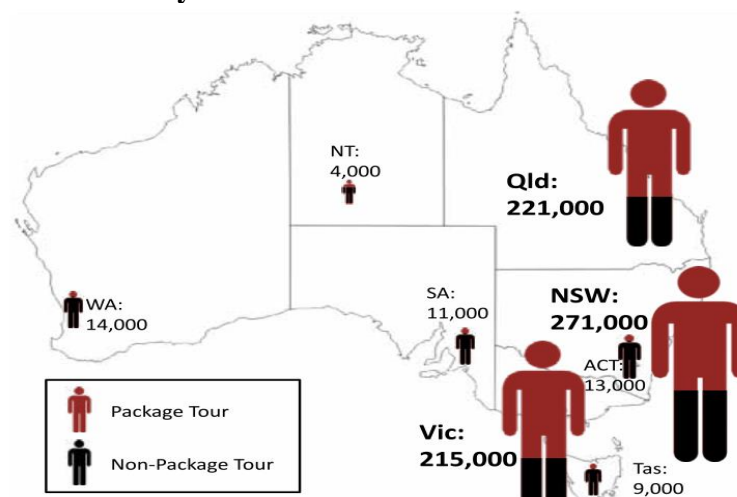
Repositioning strategies:

- Psychological repositioning;
- Competitive repositioning;
- Associative repositioning;
- Real repositioning.



Limitations need to take into account as does the non-holiday market; both groups and independent travellers (e.g. education, business, VFR). Constraints must also be considered (e.g. the supply chain, aviation policy and practices, on-ground costs and quality/service issues). There is also a need for collaboration across countries and sectors (research, industry, government) in order to reposition Australian cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences.

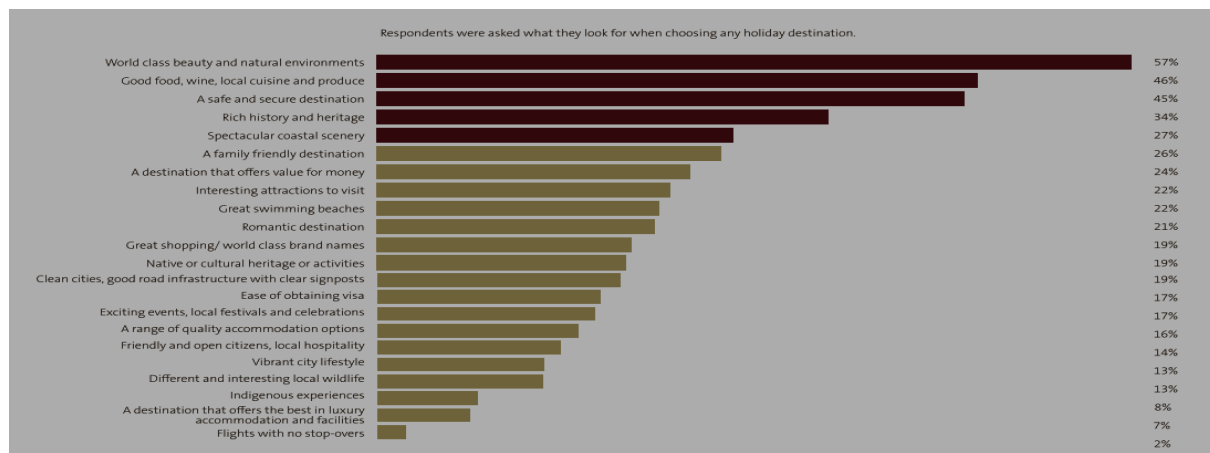
Distribution of inbound holiday travel



Continuum of memorable nature-based experiences in cities

<p>Experiences with nature as backdrop = experiences <u>in</u> nature</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environment that is perceived as high quality by the market, including air, water, climate, vegetation density, cleanliness <p>Experiential components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breathing fresh air AND Viewing water (beaches, lakes, rivers) AND Viewing built heritage Coach-based, cruise-based and or self-drive? Local festival/event? 	<p>Nature-based experiences at attractions such as zoos, botanical gardens and city parks = experiences <u>about</u> nature</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As in A, plus One or more nature-based attractions <p>Experiential components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As in A, plus Learning/educational experiences AND/OR Low-level physical activities and group-oriented experiences AND/OR Wildlife-based experiences 	<p>Environmentally responsible nature-based tourist experiences = experiences <u>for</u> nature</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As in B, plus Green-label accommodation, restaurants and transportation <p>Experiential components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiences that engage with local community in a positive way AND/OR Activities that foster support and protection of heritage AND/OR Activities that are pro-conservation – toward wildlife, nature and environment
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What do you look for when choosing a holiday destination?



What does ‘world class beauty and natural environment’ mean to you?

