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Chapter 4

Taking Off: E-Tourism Opportunities for Developing Countries

The growing number of Internet users that want to obtain tourism-related information and prepare their itineraries, and the growing demand for new travel experiences respectful of environmental preservation and involving cultural, natural and social resources, open up huge opportunities for developing countries.

Consumers are more and more looking for tailormade vacations, exotic destinations and authentic experiences, and expect to obtain related information online. Travelling is increasingly linked to the discovery of cultures and people, such as staying in a longhouse in the forests of Borneo, learning bellydancing in Cairo, relaxing with an Ayurveda treatment in Kerala or learning how to prepare local cuisine in Marrakesh.

[Ecotourism] is one of the fastest-growing tourism segments, and received great attention in 2002 with the United Nations International Year of Ecotourism, which contributed to promoting global recognition of the important role of sustainable tourism within the global framework of sustainable development.

In developing countries, the tourism industry tends to be fragmented and heterogeneous, encompassing a wealth of tourism SMEs (small and medium size enterprises) that could be better organized and promoted.

Tourism producers in developing countries could achieve autonomy and save costs by promoting and selling products directly to consumers provided that they have an effective website.

The Internet also allows consumers to share their travel experience and provides useful peer-to-peer evaluation of tourism providers.

Greater ICT (information and communication technology) availability and awareness of the potentialities of the Internet have led developing countries, including LDCs (least developed countries), to develop e-tourism websites. However, the large majority are still unable to exploit the potential of the Internet to the full, although they have a tremendous opportunity to reach a growing number of consumers who want their tourism products, which are not widely marketed and distributed by overseas operators.

The reorganization of the tourism market together with effective use of ICTs (information and communication technologies) could allow developing countries to build their own brand images, develop new products, promote their tourism resources and expand their customer base to ultimately increase tourism foreign earnings and contribute to local development.

As in other sectors, the effects of globalization have led to the appearance of new forms of tourism directed to sustainable tourism. Such tourism niches could help destinations in developing countries in diversifying their offer. The online promotion of tourism niches by the destinations complements the tourism product offering of online travel distributors from developed countries, which is still rather uniform.