Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to explain the nature of luxury consumption in the context of ecotourism, particularly its relationships with traditional forms of conspicuous consumption. There is a growing attention towards this form of tourism with a small but lucrative market segment of luxury ecotourists and an eager set of tourism entrepreneurs and large multinationals interested in harvesting its potential. A scrutiny of the available literature reveals that scholars’ positions vary in the understanding of the phenomena. This chapter presents an initial contribution to analyzing different luxury consumption perspectives in ecotourism for the purpose of stimulating more research in this area.

This chapter first introduces and synthesises the literature related to various aspects of luxury consumption in tourism and hospitality. Then, it reviews research focusing on luxury aspects of ecotourism, discussing several aspects, namely: (a) luxury within the frame of soft and hard forms of ecotourism consumption, (b) sustainable and ethical issues in luxury ecotourism, and (c) the role of ecotourists and ecotourism providers. The chapter then discusses luxury ecotourism in light of the recent interest in the tourism literature indicating directions for future research.

Luxury in tourism

Luxury in tourism evokes exclusivity, high social status, personalised experience, and high levels of comfort and convenience (Chen & Peng, 2014; Kurtz, 2004) and tourists looking for luxury when travelling generally seek the most complete spectrum of services and best-quality products (Ikkos, 2003; Yang & Mattila, 2014, 2017). Luxury represents an essential market segment for the tourism industry with luxury tourist expenditures accounting for 25% of the overall international travel market (Park, Reisinger, & Noh, 2010). Luxury tourists have a daily average expenditure eight times higher compared to other tourists (ILTM, 2011). Therefore, the luxury segment represents an interesting subset of the tourism market in which several tourism stakeholders invest in the hope to capture a share of this lucrative business.

Luxury is however subjective and affected by customers’ social context (Nueno & Quelch, 1998), therefore it is not easy to provide a universally recognized definition of luxury, given
that social contexts are intrinsically fluid, dynamic, evolutionary, and very culture sensitive (Mortelmans, 2005; Yeoman, 2011). Moreover, luxury depends on the experience and individual consumers’ needs (Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann, & Behrens, 2015). Nevertheless, some common traits are identifiable among consumers seeking luxury in services, in that luxury consumers are mainly driven by the positive emotions deriving from the consumption of exclusive experiences (Kapferer, 2015). Some of the reasons behind these behaviours have been identified in the willingness to reach self-actualisation, to create a more idealised image of the self (Danziger, 2006) and to impress others (Mason, 1981). Other scholars attempted to link luxury to the concepts of authenticity, customisation, limited editions, acute personalisation (e.g., Yeoman, 2012), with the expected levels of luxury differing across tourists’ income levels (Riley, 1995; Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006). However, given the intangible nature of luxury in tourism, several dimensions have been studied with regards to this construct. For instance, prestige-seeking behaviours and status purposes (Correia & Moital, 2009), tourists’ behavior at the destination (Riley, 1995), or even intimacy and privacy (Park et al., 2010; Correia, Kozak, & Reis, 2016) have been investigated with regards to their relationship with luxury in tourism, while time, wellness, and cultural enrichment have been considered as antecedents of luxury in tourism (Yeoman, 2012).

Luxury in tourism is therefore a social phenomenon enhancing status and prestige, driving tourists towards outrageous consuming behaviours patterns, and a set of value dimensions deriving from luxury consumption has been identified, namely: social acceptance, emotional attachment, and quality assurance (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). According to past research (Berry, 1994; Swanson, 2004; Allsopp, 2005), tourists seek luxury in different service areas or products, such as sustenance (e.g., caviar, champagne), shelter (e.g., accommodation with spa), clothing and appeal (e.g., branded clothes, perfumes, jewelry), and leisure activities (e.g., entertainment and sporting services), luxury holiday accommodation and home furnishings, as well as fine arts or handmade crafts and antiques. In tourism, luxury has evolved over time, moving from the initial idea of traditional luxury “product” (e.g., five-star resorts and hotels) to a more comprehensive service offer, including unique dining, six-star spa resort, and exclusive and custom–designed experiential tours (Yeawich & Russel, 2004; Bakker, 2005; Park et al., 2010). As such, presently the attractiveness of services has overcome goods in the luxury segment of tourism, with the consumption of luxury experiences being superior to luxury products (Tynan, McKechnie, & Chhuon, 2010). Thus, luxury is not simply associated with the consumption of products or services in luxurious spaces and contexts, but it encompasses experiences of time, space, authenticity, community, individuality, and wellbeing (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2018).

Contemporary luxury travelers prefer real, unique, authentic experiences in unspoiled destinations, which stimulate them physically and intellectually, adding novelty to their lives (Yeoman, 2008). The growing need of consumers for luxury and authenticity fostered the development of luxury subsegments in tourism markets not originally targeting on such travelers (e.g., ecotourism). Moreover, new generations of consumers are approaching luxury with different behaviour patterns compared to the previous ones. Baby boomers with high disposable income and available leisure time (Park et al., 2010) represent nowadays the biggest share of luxury tourists and they are experienced, informed, and adventurous travelers (Silverstein, Fiske, & Butman, 2003) seeking unique experiences. In the quest for uniqueness, ecotourism destinations and attractions might play an important role. Luxury travel, fine dining, and pampering services (Kim, 2018) are today among the most desired experiences, thus re-shaping the luxury market habits.
Luxury in hospitality

The luxury segment in hospitality has been growing over the course of the last decade, registering one of the highest occupancy rates (Yang & Mattila, 2017; Yang & Mattila, 2014). Although just 3% of travelers seek luxury in hospitality services, the segment represents itself 20% of the total tourism expenditure (Chen & Peng, 2014). It is therefore a crucial market segment for service providers and, given its growing importance, hospitality scholars have started to focus their attention on the luxury consumption segment. Nevertheless, the concept of luxury with specific reference to the hospitality service consumption received relatively less attention compared to luxury goods consumption (Yang & Mattila, 2017), and still little is known about the differences between luxury experiential purchases and material purchases.

Luxury value in hospitality generally involves the three different subdimensions of experiential, symbolic, and functional value. While functional value refers to products’ core benefits and quality (Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Siebels, 2009), the experiential one evokes fantasies, fun, and feelings essential to the luxury consumption, while symbolic value reflects the owner’s wealth and status (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010). Extant research on luxury consumption has mainly focused on goods rather than on services (Peng, Chen, & Hung, 2020). This is unfortunate since luxury experiences, such as dining or vacations, strongly affect positive emotions in customers compared to material possession of luxury goods (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), and experiences are more closely connected to the self than material possessions (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Indeed, according to the so-called “experience recommendation” phenomenon, consumers prioritise experiences over tangible with hospitality service covering a major component of life experiences (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Yang & Mattila, 2014).

The perception of luxury value at hotels affects tourists’ attitudes and, in turn, their staying behaviours (Chen & Peng, 2014). In this relation, symbolic and experiential values have a significant impact on luxury hotel consumers, directly influencing guests’ staying behaviour (Chen & Peng, 2014), while functional value does not elicit the same effect. Yang and Mattila (2016) investigated four different value dimensions, namely: functional, financial, hedonic, and symbolic and found, partly in contrast with Chen and Peng (2014), that only three value categories (functional, financial, hedonic) positively and directly affect consumers’ purchase intentions. These findings indicate the less predominant role of symbolic value, which is more likely to be sought by consumers in luxury goods rather than in luxury services, which might be due to the intangible and invisible characteristics of services and their reliance on service quality and atmosphere (Yang & Mattila, 2016).

Luxury with regards to restaurant experience has also been explored by several hospitality scholars. Luxury restaurants are mainly identified as those providing full table-service, premium price menu, and high-quality environment (Kim, Lee, & Yoo, 2006; Ryu & Jang, 2007; Hwang & Hyun, 2013; Han & Hyun, 2013; Chen, Peng, & Hung, 2015; Yang & Mattila, 2016). Customers seeking luxury dining experiences have high expectations with regards to both service elements, the tangible ones (e.g., food quality, food taste, and consistency of menu items), and intangibles (e.g., employee competence, servers’ knowledge, restaurant atmosphere, and ambience quality) (Weiss, Feinstein, & Dalbor, 2005; Cullen, 2005; Kwun & Oh, 2007; Njite, Dunn, & Hyunjung Kim, 2008; Kim, Bergman, & Raab, 2010; Wang & Chen, 2012; Yang & Mattila, 2016). The concept of luxury in hospitality has therefore a broader scope since luxury service providers (e.g., hotels and restaurants) do not only sell superior tangible products (e.g., luxury hotel room and amenities, premium menu items, and superb food presentations) but have also to deliver superlative service and highly sophisticated consumption environments (Chen & Hu, 2010; Lee & Hwang, 2011; Dortyol, Varinli, & Kitapci, 2014; Yang & Mattila, 2016).
The luxury dimension in ecotourism

Background

Most of the forms of sustainable travel, including ecotourism, have their origins with the environmental movement of the 1970s, although ecotourism itself became prevalent as a travel concept in the late 1980s (Briney, 2020). Until the end of the '90s, ecotourists were not particularly attracted by the attribute of luxury when choosing accommodation (Pearce & Wilson, 1995) with 56% of them preferring middle-range levels of luxury and only 6% more willing to choose a luxury type of accommodation (Kwan, Eagles, & Gebhardt, 2008). In 1997, Wight surveyed both ecotourists and general consumers in the attempt to cluster these different cohorts according to their accommodation preferences and luxury levels expectations. The author found that ecotourists were basically not interested in luxury accommodations. Wight also pointed out the lower desire of experienced ecotourists seeking luxury compared to general tourists and highlighted the relevance that ecotourists assign to activities at destination as recognized to strongly affect experiences, leaving no relevance to accommodation choices. Indeed, ecotourists are generally more attracted by intimate, adventure-type accommodation and by environmentally sensitive operations. Nevertheless, in the same study the author reported the paradoxical market trend of raising larger, more international and luxury accommodations or resorts in the wilderness, mainly operated by major global chains, thus noting the rise of a small niche but potentially lucrative market for the luxury future ecolodge industry (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2011).

Recent developments: Soft versus hard ecotourism

As predicted by Wight in 1997 in its segmentation of ecotourists according to their different approaches and needs, the luxury ecotourism market niche developed only in the last two decades. Soon after this prediction, Myles (2003) pointed out the paradox of ecotourism derived by different patterns in ecotourists’ behavior, by differentiating those seeking luxury experiences (i.e., people preferring to stay in luxury accommodations surrounded by modern conveniences and spending a very modest budget at destinations due to prepaid packages) and low-impact ecotravellers (i.e., people saving money on accommodation but spending more at the destinations and keeping minimal environmental impacts). Ecolodge participants increased their appreciation for softer and more luxurious ecotourism, leading to the development of the new category of “structured ecotourists” (Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

The developing segment of luxury ecotourism and ecolodge accommodations originate from tourists’ desire to seek luxury experiences as a temporary escape from their everyday realities (Low, 2010) and from the governments’ ability to build and run luxury tourism facilities at cheaper prices in developing countries (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010). New forms of accommodation emerged, such as ecolodges, defined as any “nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy of ecotourism” by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2011). By offering small-scale tourism based around wildlife and pristine natural environments, these new ecotourism accommodations are mainly based in remote areas and some offer luxury experiences (Ryan & Stewart, 2009). Nevertheless, access to such destinations requires more time and higher disposable income, thus representing a viable tourism option for a few categories of travelers, on average wealthier and with few time constraints (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010) thus resulting in very selective. These “soft” ecotourists seek higher levels of services and facilities to mediate encounters between venues...
and potentially large numbers of visitors more casually engaged with the natural environment (Weaver & Lawton, 2007), compared to their “hard” counterparts. As a result, different types of ecotourism accommodations are available, with five-star luxury lodges also being admitted to the list of ecotels (Page & Dowling, 2002). Softer-path ecotourists enjoy staying in more luxurious forms of accommodation (Hunter & Shaw, 2005) with the result of a larger ecological footprint due to their higher resource demands.

Thus, the scope of luxury ecotourism experiences is growing, with more sophisticated offerings (e.g., wildlife observation helicopter rides, luxury cruise lines) yet authors point out the vulnerability of the resources involved in such type of activities and the need for local luxury ecotourism business to import goods not available for the international luxury standards (Fennell, 2015, 2020). Nevertheless, consumers seem to be able to exert a good level of discrimination between alternative types of ecotourism experiences. Indeed, when investigating the relationship between general interest in ecotourism and holiday preferences, Perkins and Grace (2009) found that people seeking ecotourism, wildlife tourism, and volunteer ecotourism tend to negatively relate to luxury resort holidays interest, thus confirming the different views of ecotourism in such market segments. This evidence of understanding of the subtleties offers some perspective into the valence that sustainable and ethical issues still have on the ecotourism market.

**Luxury in ecotourism: Sustainable and ethical issues**

Luxury in the ecotourism realm also involves ethical issues. Most ecotourism destinations are in developing countries where, in the eyes of the local population, travelling for recreational purpose is itself a luxury (Melubo, 2020). Ecotourism is not for everybody and most travellers to ecotourism destinations belong to the mid-upper class of developed countries, with about 60% coming from the United States, 30% from Western Europe, and the remaining 10% from Australia or Asia (Kwan et al., 2008; Smith, 2019). For instance, by focusing on Canadian ecotourists travelling to Costa Rica, Fennell and Smale (1992) found how ecotourists are on average better educated and more affluent than the general Canadian population. For some, this might be perceived as unethical since the luxury activity takes place within developing countries serving upper classes. Nevertheless, there is evidence that tourists with the highest income levels tend to be interested in natural attractions (Bieger & Laesser, 2002). Paradoxically, when choosing a developing country as destination, luxury ecotourists tend to believe that their expenditures will have a positive impact on the country’s ability to prosper, even though this is not always the case (Hanna, 2017). Ecotourists might see going for a luxury trip as a way to distinguish from others expecting also to reduce their negative impacts on the destination, both from a social and environmental viewpoint. Nevertheless, commercial forms of luxury ecotourism are increasingly threatening local and Indigenous communities and leading to the degradation of natural areas while providing few benefits to local communities (Honey, 2008; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Regmi & Walter, 2017; Walter, Regmi, & Khanal, 2018). Many luxury resorts are established adjacent to natural reserve boundaries and promote themselves as ‘eco-lodges’ (Puri, Karanth, & Thapa, 2019), however across many protected areas, most principles of ecotourism are not followed (Banerjee, 2010). This has led to distinguishing between authentic and “pseudo” ecotourism in ecotourism research (Donohoe & Needham, 2008). Despite their claims of authentic ecotourism, such luxury facilities, and the need of infrastructures to welcome luxury ecotourists, have important implications in terms of the ecological footprint on the environment (Gössling, Hansson, Hörstmeier, & Saggel, 2002; Ryan & Stewart, 2009).
Wheeler (2005) points out the need for more attention on luxury ecolodges since, while claiming ecological sensitivity and sustainability, often result in hasty development in the pursuit of quick economic gains, foster elitist consumption by wealthy ecotourists, and might result in ecotourism development characterised by political corruption. Although the foundations of ecotourism lay in sustainability and the environmentally responsible enjoyment of protected areas, the industry is often accused of “greenwashing” and the luxury segment is driving this negative reputation. The current proliferation of new luxury ecotourism resorts claiming themselves as profit-driven companies playing a key role in local community development, disrupts the needs of customer for ethical travel and high-end luxury experience, which involves community participation and development. In the extant literature, community-based ecotourism is generally associated with low-budget travelers and basic accommodation, while new luxury ecolodges aim at blending community-based conservation initiatives with high-end facilities (Duffy, 2008). More research is needed in this direction to examine the extent to which luxury ecotourism holds an ecotourism-oriented value chain in the creation of its tourism experiences.

The role of ecotourists and of ecotourism providers

Ecotourists themselves play a critical role in shaping the process of sustainability in ecotourism. There is evidence of a growing trend of customers seeking highly luxurious and exclusive access to pristine nature in order to enhance their social status. These ecotourists have been defined as “egotourists” (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Other emerging market segments of travelers looking for luxury ecotourism experience and not primarily characterised in the extant ecotourism literature are the corporate visitors travelling for business and the romantic couples seeking luxury and discretion (Ryan & Stewart, 2009). This trend shows the evolution of the market and the existence of new clusters of customers are gradually approaching luxury ecotourism. Furthermore, new generations are approaching ecotourism and the role of millennials consumers and their relationship with luxury consumption in the ecotourism domain is also under recent investigation (Costa, Abreu, Gestão, & Barbosa, 2019). As “mass ecotourism” emerges as phenomenon, it threatens ecotourism integrity and principles, and thus pushes some ecotourists segments towards higher standards and premium prices, leading to a new subsegment of luxury ecotourists who seek the exclusiveness of a true wilderness experience (Myles, 2003).

Given the developing and mutating ecotourism market, reassuring customers on the impacts that luxury services and practices have on the environment is nowadays of paramount importance for ecolodges. Properly adopting and communicating the implementation of solar energy systems, the organic composting, and wastewater treatment systems may significantly contribute to reduce environmental repercussions (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2011). The role of luxury for ecotourism players has been investigated recently by Buckley and Mossaz (2018) in their study on the marketing tools adopted by ecotourism providers in Africa. The authors found that, after wildlife viewing opportunities which remains as the prime feature for marketing communication and strategies, luxury and exclusiveness are the second most relevant attributes conveyed by tourism providers to customers. These findings show that ecotourism operators believe in luxury facilities to boost sales and are exploiting the interest of most of their clients who are motivated by wildlife viewing opportunities and luxury, whereas only a small subset of customers is actually driven by contributing to conservation.
Conclusion

Ryan and Stewart (2009) argue how ecotourism is not inconsistent with luxury and the two concepts can coexist when environmental conservation is served through an organization’s vision that pursues resource regeneration and considers restrictions on visitor penetration of natural spaces. Some claim that having a broader understanding of ecotourism might include the consumption of luxury experiences, Fennell (2015) argues for more care in the understanding of the intrusiveness of some forms of luxury ecotourism consumptions and he still remains open to widening the boundaries of the definition of ecotourism preferably by engaging all the ecotourism constituencies (industry, residents, governments, academia) and aiming at unifying their “vastly different trajectories” (Fennell, 2015, p. 273).

Ecotourism as a form of luxury consumption is an under-researched area; however, there is growing interest in researchers towards the concept and this has been also recently pointed out by Wondirad (2019) in a meta-analysis of ecotourism. Olearnik and Barwicka (2019) included, among the new ecotourism features, luxurious tourist destinations that follow rules of sustainability. Koninx (2019, p. 11) also discusses the centrality of luxury in new ecotourism by defining it as ‘a new haven of luxury and indulgence’ in some ecotourism destinations. These considerations are particularly interesting when compared with Wight’s (1997) findings, as they show how ecotourists’ expectations for luxury have radically evolved over time. However, and in contrast with the general luxury vacation literature, the social value perceived from luxury ecotourism experiences still does not seem to predict purchasing intentions for ecotourism products (Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017), meaning ecotourists, behaviours remain mainly driven by other values. The strength of these values might be a discriminating factor for the definition of luxury ecotourism contributing to providing a better understanding of the “process for a better tourism” in an uncertain post-pandemic landscape.

Future research should include comprehensive and accurate evaluation of this tourism segment in terms of consumers’ behaviour at the destination and tourism providers value chains. The ethical aspects of luxury ecotourism consumption ought to be explored to ascertain the outcomes that this form of tourism produces at tourism community level. At large, the tourism political agenda should be directed towards forms of ecotourism that can encompass the consumption of the more affluent yet in line with the “luxury of values” around which ecotourism is built. Finally, tourism scholars research agenda should also include investigations on the experiential dimension of ecotourism in luxury settings and encourage collaborations with the industry to foster novel forms of educational ecotourism.

References


Serena Volo and David D’Acunto


Ecotourism as form of Luxury Consumption


