CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

AGEING TOURISTS, AGEING DESTINATIONS:
TOURISM AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN JAPAN

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Changing demographics in the developed world as well as in economies such as China are considered one of the major shifts in the world tourism industry (Tretheway and Mak 2006: 21). However, the fact that demographic changes will affect not only the demand side of tourism, but also the supply side, is often neglected. This paper examines the influence of demographic changes on tourism in Japan from these two aspects. On the demand side, demographic changes offer new possibilities for the tourism market, but also new challenges, as destinations and tourism industries have to adapt to the increasingly varied and sophisticated demands of senior travellers as well as to new types of group tours such as special interest trips.

On the supply side, many established tourist destinations go through a stage of decline that is connected not only to ageing facilities, but also to the ageing of the population that provides services for tourists. In this part of the paper, factors of decline but also trends towards rejuvenation and changes in the structure of ownership and services are examined with regard to different destinations.

1. Ageing Tourists

In Japan, the percentage of senior citizens has increased at an extremely fast rate. The country also consistently ranks among the top ten countries regarding tourism spending and number of trips abroad, and possesses a highly developed domestic tourist market. It can be expected to act as a predictor for the dramatic changes in worldwide tourism that will be caused by ageing populations.

1.1. Senior travellers as an attractive target market

The “mature”, “older” or “senior” market (Shoemaker 2000: 11) is of growing interest for service providers as well as scholars. Escalating
numbers of ageing consumers with growing incomes, time flexibility, more independence and better overall health are known to travel more frequently, for longer distances and to stay longer at destinations. Increasing levels of educational attainment will also positively impact on seniors’ quality of life and their travel behaviour (Faranda and Schmidt 1999). Furthermore, a tendency to favour packaged travel has been observed in older tourists, which makes this market segment even more attractive to the tourism industry (Tretheway and Mak 2006: 23).

However, it has been repeatedly pointed out that this large emerging market is not yet well understood.

The first problem is defining age ranges. When considering age structures, the percentage of population over the age of 65 is generally used for international comparisons. However, at the age of 55, major changes like early retirement may have already occurred. On the other hand, those over 75 are normally less mobile and require higher levels of medical treatment. This paper will use retirement as a major indicator for the senior market segment. As this may occur at different ages and as many major Japanese companies have a retirement age of 55, data on those aged 50 and over will be included as far as possible. However, some statistics use the age of 65 as a borderline to separate demographic bands.

Research has shown that the senior market is highly diverse with respect not only to socio-economic characteristics, but also to health, lifestyles, attitudes and other factors (Hornemann et al. 2002: 23). Faranda and Schmidt (1999) offer an overview of studies on the segmentation of the senior market. Most of the major markets have been examined: Germany (Romsa and Blenman 1989), the USA (Anderson and Langmeyer 1982, Shoemaker 1989, Shoemaker 2000), Canada (Zimmer, Brayley and Searle 1995), Australia (Hornemann et al. 2002), Japan (You and O’Leary 2000, Cha, McCleary and Uysal 1995) and, most recently, Taiwan (Jang and Wu 2006). However, one basic question that cannot be answered by these studies is the problem of continuity. As Zimmer, Brayley and Searle point out (1995: 9), the continuity theory suggests that, as individuals age, they tend to sustain consistent patterns of behaviour rather than undergo major shifts in activities and tastes according to their age. Faranda and Schmidt (1999: 16) also emphasize the importance of generation cohort typical behaviour. Replications of previous studies like those by Shoemaker (1989, 2000), which might show differences between generation cohorts, are rare; data on tourist behaviour by age groups taken with a consistent