

# Natural disasters, tourism crises and marketing challenges : An Indonesian perspective

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The tourism industry is vulnerable to crises of assorted manifestations, not least those related to natural disasters, which adversely affect international arrivals and destination images. Such events highlight the importance of managing crisis situations and marketing is one important tool in their successful resolution.

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Questions of tourism crises have assumed a heightened importance in recent years as their scale and intensity appear to be increasing. Research into the causes and dynamics of such crises is expanding, improving knowledge and understanding and assisting in their management which includes marketing for recovery. This paper is concerned with the impact of an earthquake on the Indonesian island of Java in mid-2006 and responses by destination authorities to the ensuing tourism crisis. It focuses specifically on Yogyakarta, a popular tourist centre and one of the Javanese provinces which bore the brunt of the damage, and the marketing programmes devised in the aftermath of the disaster.

After an introduction to the topic, tourism in Indonesia and Yogyakarta are summarised in order to set the scene. The earthquake and its repercussions on tourism are then discussed and official reactions are analysed with particular reference to marketing strategies. A final conclusion considers broader implications of the experiences recounted and highlights how natural disasters have the capacity to precipitate tourism crises in which destinations confront numerous difficulties. Meeting the challenges requires adhering to certain recommendations and putting aspects of theories of tourism crisis management into practice, but this may prove particularly problematic for some countries because of their general situation. A case study was selected as the most suitable methodology and findings are based on information gathered from secondary sources and material published in print and electronic media, supplemented by fieldwork observations.

## Tourism crises, their management and marketing implications

Crisis are usually agreed to be characterised by a 'triggering event causing significant change or having the potential to

cause significant change' which constitutes a 'threat to the existence of the foundation of the organisation' (Keown-McMullan, 1997, p. 4). These attributes are shared by most tourism crises, although they are not confined to organisations and affect destinations as well as tourists and residents (Aktas and Gunlu, 2005). Faulkner (2001) distinguishes between crisis and disaster, arguing that the former is the result of internal stresses while the latter has external origins, but there is some overlap and a disaster can evolve into a tourism crisis for the stricken place and enterprises doing business there.

Tourism is a human and economic activity which seems prone to crises arising from within and outside the industry (Faulkner and Russell, 1997). Economic, socio-cultural, political, technological and environmental developments may be catalysts and one manifestation of the final type is natural phenomena when forces such as extreme weather lead to physical damage and human injury and death, disrupting life at destinations and the operation of the industry (Huan et al, 2004; Murphy and Bayley, 1989; WTO and WMO, 1998). Illustrations include earthquakes in Taiwan (Huang and Min, 2002), flooding and bushfires in Australia (Cioccio and Michael, 2007; Faulkner and Vikulov, 2001) and Caribbean hurricanes (Durocher, 1994). The twenty first century has already seen a succession of serious natural disasters and the harmful consequences for tourism are demonstrated by the Indian Ocean tsunami at the close of 2004 (EIU, 2005; UNOCHA, 2005).

The topic of tourism crises and strategies for dealing with them is attracting greater attention amongst tourism researchers and practitioners (Beirman, 2003; Evans and Elphick, 2005; Glaesser, 2005; Ritchie, 2004; Santana, 2004; Wilks et al, 2005; WTO, 1996). Tourism scholars have drawn from the literature on risk management (van Waldebeek, 2005) and disaster management (Burling and Hyle, 1997), the latter relevant in the gravest

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An earthquake in Indonesia in 2006 and its consequences for one particular destination are the focus of the paper which reviews the impacts and official responses to the marketing challenges in the initial stages of the ensuing tourism crisis. Reactions are shown to partly correspond to tourism crisis management guidelines, but effective implementation of strategies may be undermined by prevailing conditions in the country. Wider influences are thus a source of tourism crises and also of constraints with regard to their competent handling which includes marketing for recovery.

of situations (Prideaux, 2003). Studies stress the necessity of planning and management which incorporates several phases which can be summarised as reducing risks, getting ready, responding and recovering (PATA, 2005). In view of the likelihood of certain natural disasters, some management stages of associated tourism crises may be regarded as more easily planned and destinations where there is a known risk should be in a constant state of preparedness (NEMO, 1997). Averting a crisis by avoiding the trigger is not, however, an option in instances such as an earthquake when rescue and relief must precede recovery (IBLF, 2005).

There are multiple tasks to be undertaken in crisis management, but communications with a range of audiences is recognised as central to surmounting any crisis and may even merit a separate strategy (Bland, 1998; Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt, 1998; Ray, 1999; ten Berg, 1990). Marketing is a central component of communications and is the fifth operational sphere proposed in the World Tourism Organisation's (WTO) Phuket Action Plan, intended to revive the tourism sectors of nations most severely hit by the 2004 tsunami (WTO, 2005). Place marketing is accepted as essential if a tourist destination is to flourish, especially in the current era of intense global competitiveness, and seeks to raise awareness and create favourable destination images which influence travel behaviour (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Chon, 1990). The pursuit of such aims acquires urgency after natural disasters which can attract extensive adverse publicity and tarnish perceptions of places, precipitating fears about personal safety and commercial risks which could linger if authorities display a lack of competence in how they respond (Pottorff and Neal, 1994).

There is, however, often a significant gap between the rhetoric of tourism crisis management and the actualities of execution. Destinations may struggle to construct and put into operation mechanisms and procedures, even when there is keen appreciation of their ideal composition and desirability, because of various factors acting singly or in combination. The qualities of the crisis, destination conditions and wider domestic and international circumstances all impinge on the progression of a tourism crisis from its onset

through to the return to normality or near normality. These variables may also inhibit the capacity to deal with crises by those responsible, amongst them marketers charged with the formulation and delivery of marketing campaigns.

Indonesia illustrates both the need for tourism crisis management and obstacles to success, having had to contend with a series of events in its modern history which have been harmful to the country and images of it abroad. Some of the latest setbacks are related to a spate of earthquakes such as that of May 2006 in Central Java and Yogyakarta which is the topic of this account. The Phuket Action Plan serves as a framework for the analysis which assesses the extent to which its recommendations regarding marketing communications, representative of good practice, were adhered to. These state that 'clear, detailed and abundant information is key to recovering the confidence of the marketplace. Effective communications is needed on many different levels: government; business; tour operators; travel agents; the media; and the public. Special attention needs to be paid to travel advisories. The use of special events and development of new products is also needed'. Additional references are made to the role of international public and private organisations and benefits of collaboration (WTO, 2005, p. 2). Whether such advice was complied with in the aftermath of the Yogyakarta earthquake and issues surrounding this question are addressed in the latter sections of the paper.

### Tourism in Indonesia

The potential of international tourism in Indonesia has long been acknowledged and investment increased substantially in the 1970s, followed by moves towards the liberalisation of visa regulations in the 1980s. These measures contributed to an average annual growth rate in inbound arrivals of almost 20% from 1986 to 1995 when the figure peaked at five million (EIU, 2006). Visitors and their spending were, however, very unevenly distributed geographically and the island of Bali was dominant.

The Asian financial crisis of 1997 was injurious to Indonesia's overall prospects and accompanied by an intensification of existing

political, social and economic disturbances which depressed tourism (Prideaux et al, 2003). There are also reports of inadequacies in planning which have frustrated sustainable development and the proper conservation of environmental and cultural heritage assets (Wall, 1997). Tourists from overseas fell to 3.8 million in 1998, although there was an upturn to 3.9 million in 1999 and 4.15 million in 2000. Crises with indigenous and exogenous origins again harmed tourism in the opening years of the new century. Major incidents were the terrorist attacks in the USA, an epidemic of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus across parts of East Asia, the Bali terrorist bombings and outbreaks of avian influenza.

The country is also vulnerable to natural disasters (Centre for Hazard and Risk Research, 2008), not least seismic instability. It is sited on the intersection of the Indo-Australian and Eurasian tectonic plates, within the zone of earthquakes and volcanic activity that encircles the Pacific Ocean. The dangers were exposed in 2004 by an underwater earthquake off Sumatra and the resulting Indian Ocean tsunami which had severe repercussions for Indonesian tourism, despite the fact that it did not reach its resorts (EIU, 2005). Many overseas governments had already imposed travel warnings in connection with terrorism, some advising against non-essential visits, and environmental hazards were added to the list of official concerns. These advisories compounded the troubles of Indonesia's tourism industry and inbound tourists have hovered at around the five million mark since the turn of the century (EIU, 2009), although there were signs of a revival in 2008 when officials recorded over six million arrivals (MCT, 2009).

Given Indonesia's size and wealth of tourism resources, such numbers are disappointing and compare unfavourably with the volume of visits to several of its neighbours which are less well endowed. Its performance hints at substantial barriers to development (APEC, 2004), not least negative associations and indistinct or unattractive place images. Some of the problems are reflected in the experiences of Yogyakarta, outlined below, which could be interpreted as symptomatic of a national predisposition to tourism crises.

## Yogyakarta and its tourism

Lying about 275 miles south east of Jakarta on the island of Java, Yogyakarta is one of Indonesia's largest cities with a population of over 1.5 million and its own airport. It is the capital of the special region of the same name which is the only province ruled by a pre-colonial sultanate, formerly Java's most prestigious royal court. Yogyakarta city has an importance as a hub of traditional and contemporary Javanese arts and contains features of historic note. Two ninth century UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the Borubudur temple and the Prambanan temple complex, are located nearby. The surrounding landscape is one of rice fields and mountains, and beaches are found in the south where guests can enjoy the sub-tropical climate. Attractions are therefore cultural and natural and the city also boasts modern MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) and shopping facilities, although these cannot compare with those found in many Asian cities.

Yogyakarta's attributes draw visitors, but the foreign market is relatively small and has failed to grow as a consequence of the drawbacks previously cited. Provincial international and domestic classified hotel guests were calculated officially at 75,500 and 611,800 respectively in 2004, with 14,491 foreigners and 1.7 million Indonesians staying in non-classified hotels that year (BPS, 2006). These totals contrast with other figures which are much lower (Asmarani, 2006), but there is a consensus that the tourism sector is under-performing irrespective of statistical inconsistencies. Nevertheless, Yogyakarta Province is the most visited Indonesian destination after Bali and tourism accounts for about 20% of its income with spending concentrated in and around the city.

The area received global publicity in 2006 because of Mount Merapi, one of Indonesia's two active volcanoes, which is situated 20 miles south of Yogyakarta. It was emitting ash and lava, prompting warnings of an eruption and the evacuation of residents from the environs which were formally declared dangerous. Tourists started to cancel bookings despite endeavours to convince them that the city was safe which indeed it was. Ironically, officials had been planning to mark the

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thousandth anniversary of the devastating 1006 eruption with sporting and cultural celebrations designed to 'make people aware of the historical existence of Merapi and promote Yogyakarta as a major tourist destination to the world again' (Asmarani, 2006).

An imminent emergency was a cause of apprehension for the tourism industry and authorities which were worried about the commercial and socio-economic costs of a sudden drop in visitors fearful of their personal safety and security. There was also a likelihood that undesirable connotations of Yogyakarta could be engendered which would have a more lasting effect. However, it was an unexpected earthquake and not the anticipated volcanic eruption which was to pose the greater crisis.

### The May 2006 earthquake and impacts on tourism

The earthquake, measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale, struck the provinces of Central Java and Yogyakarta at 5.33 am on 27 May 2006. Its epicentre was approximately 20 miles south of Bantul District in Yogyakarta Province and there were several aftershocks, the most intense at 5.2 on the Richter scale (Elnashai et al, 2007). Over 6,000 were killed, between 9,000 and 20,000 injured and 200,000 rendered homeless. Housing, commercial premises, hospitals and schools were all destroyed and water and power supplies disrupted, together with communications (ADB, 2006a). Tourism facilities did not escape as the summary of the damage recounted below and derived from multiple sources (Aglionby, 2006; Anuar, 2006; BBC News, 2006a; Gelling, 2006; JMTCC, 2006a; TTG Daily News, 2006a; TTG Daily News, 2006b) confirms.

Half of Yogyakarta city's hotels reported medium to high damage, mainly cracked walls, and repair work occupied from four to eight weeks and several months in the worst case. Smaller guesthouses and homestay properties also suffered, including those in the two parts of the city most frequented by backpackers, and over 40% of rooms were classed as having experienced moderate to high damage. Restaurants, cafes and bars were largely unaffected physically, yet sales

were generally down by between 5% and 80%. MICE venues were essentially undamaged, although four did not expect to operate normally until August at the earliest, but they had received cancellations and postponements from organisers.

With regard to transport, the airport runway cracked and the domestic terminal roof collapsed. There was a power failure and computers crashed, preventing the airport from functioning. Roads and bridges were fractured and public and private transport came to a halt in some places. The airport reopened for commercial flights on 30 May after the runway was repaired, the international terminal handling all flights until the domestic terminal would be ready at an unspecified future date. The railway station underwent one month of restoration, but was operational throughout as was the bus terminal where two years of restorative work was predicted.

In terms of attractions, a Yogyakarta street known for its souvenir and handicraft shops was reduced to rubble. Certain buildings in the Sultan's Palace had cracked walls and a museum collapsed, leading to the closure of most of the grounds. Prambanan was badly damaged and the public had access only to limited areas for an indefinite time, but Borobudur survived unharmed. Recreation sites such as beach amenities and the zoo sustained structural damage and events at art, dance and theatre puppet studios were suspended. Most shopping malls opened after safety checks and those that were damaged closed for only a few weeks, except one which hoped to re-open by the third quarter.

Bantul town was largely destroyed alongside many of the district's handicraft villages and approximately 3,000 family kilns and stocks of pottery were ruined. Bantul District produces 80% of handicrafts sold in Yogyakarta, Bali and Central Java and a sizeable proportion of exported goods. Most inhabitants rely on the revenue from this trade and the settlements are popular tourist excursion venues, but 'normal activities were paralysed ... manufacturing ceased' and the people were in 'deep trauma'.

Despite such instances, death and devastation was concentrated in certain locations and examples of permanent

damage to tourism infrastructure and services were the exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless, there was a steep fall in visitation and the tourism industry had to respond to perceptions of widespread destruction and continuing danger even if these were incorrect. Hoteliers were anxious about the months ahead and one manager said that 'hopefully, we will see an increase in domestic arrivals in sympathy for the people's plight here, but I expect foreigners to stay away'. An Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association representative speculated that hotels could see combined losses of 13.5 billion rupiah (US\$1.5 million) during the peak season of June to August and there were forecasts that total lost tourism revenue would be in excess of US\$1 billion, the downturn expected to be felt beyond Yogyakarta and Central Java.

Tourism officials were thus faced with an immediate and possibly prolonged crisis and had to contend with a range of dilemmas in the period after the earthquake. The manner in which they did so within the field of marketing communications is now described and assessed. It must also be recalled that the disaster provoked a wider crisis in which tourism was only one arena for formal intervention, priorities and resources being allocated accordingly.

### Official responses to marketing challenges

Indonesia's Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued a statement on 29 May, confirming details of the earthquake and proffering condolences to the afflicted. Reference was made to the damage to hotels, the airport, attractions and public utilities and it was claimed that recovery was underway in a process which would be fully completed by December 2006. The Deputy Tourism Minister commented that a 'communication and promotion strategy to explain to overseas markets that they should not cross the area off their lists' was being devised and the Yogyakarta Director of Tourism was quoted as saying that 'strategies were being developed to use the earthquake and volcano as a way of diversifying tourism' (Asmarani, 2006).

International organisations were acknowledged to have a part to play and the government made known that it was in contact

with appropriate bodies. The WTO sent a 'support mission' to Indonesia and its Risk Assessment and Management Working Group professed solidarity and exhorted tourists not to shun the country (UNWTO, 2006). Such a plea was echoed by Pacific Asia Travel Association which reiterated the imperatives of limiting unnecessary cancellations and promoting a speedy recovery. The association asked its members for updates on what was happening which it would then transmit in a bid to spread awareness and understanding of the situation (PATA, 2006).

The Minister of Culture and Tourism held a press conference in Yogyakarta, giving 'direction for all culture and tourism stakeholders' (MCT, 2006). He endorsed the setting up of the Java Media Tourism Crisis Centre (JMTCC) with a vision to 'assist in the rescue, relief, rehabilitation and recovery' of the tourism sectors of the two provinces. The agency employed the phrase 'Java Tourism Cares' and was launched the day after the earthquake. It was led by senior officials, including the Ministry's Permanent Secretary, and supported by different tiers of government and private enterprise which held meetings to discuss policies (JMTCC, 2006a).

The centre initially focused on relieving distress by helping to distribute supplies and supervising five mobile clinics, comprising of a doctor and 'tourism database officer', whose job was to provide medical assistance and other aid while gathering data about the state of tourism facilities. Volunteers too were engaged in collecting information and donations. Attention then shifted to assessing damage, coordinating public and private relief work and preparing for the future (JMTCC, 2006b). One of the programmes drawn up encompassed marketing and promotion. It was divided by years into rescue (2006), recovery (2007) and normalisation (2008) (JMTCC, 2006b). Conventional advertising, attendance at trade shows abroad, educational visits by interested parties and events were all featured and a key communications vehicle was a website, the mission of which was to 'keep the world informed by regular reports with truthful, accurate and timely information regarding the progress being made to return Yogyakarta and Central Java's tourism status to normal' (JMTCC, 2006a).

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A second programme with a wider remit also covered marketing and yearly plans for rescue (2006) and recovery and normalisation (2007-2008) (JMTCC, 2006c). Repair, renovation and enhancement of tourism amenities existing prior to the earthquake were given priority together with the devising of innovative products on the themes of culture and nature. Overall, the programmes were dedicated to the communication of information, image recovery, product positioning and product revitalisation. They incorporated multiple tools and techniques to reach out to the domestic and most productive overseas markets, targeting those figures with power and influence over tourist opinion and behaviour as well as the tourists themselves.

### Review

Many of the steps embarked upon or proposed thus appear to conform to the central tenets of tourism crisis management with evidence of attempts to follow specific WTO guidelines in addition to other recommendations about marketing communications. These advocate having a dedicated group to assume leadership and the circulation of accurate and up to date information, countering distortions and misconceptions. Those responsible are advised to be open and honest about actual circumstances and any hazards, offering reassurances when it is safe to do so. Destination marketing is highlighted as essential, although the material and its purposes should be adapted as the crisis evolves. Such elements are all present in Yogyakarta's programmes and there is also an appreciation of the argument, again commonly advanced, that crises can yield new opportunities and are a chance for positive change. A willingness to make creative use of the Java earthquake is displayed in promotional ideas founded on the dramatic landforms which owe their origins to Indonesia's distinctive geology. Additional new products and events have been conceptualised to capture attention, stimulate curiosity and boost recovery.

However, the subject of travel advisories is overlooked and might be considered more a matter for diplomatic negotiations; it would be unrealistic to call for their removal, but a

thorough and sympathetic reassessment could be requested at a suitable point in the recovery period. Details are also lacking, or have not been made public, about specific actions and administration. There are likely to be obstacles to overcome in the realisation of objectives, especially resource constraints and bureaucratic hurdles. Marketing is a costly exercise and product differentiation is difficult in a global marketplace where many destinations are seen to be substitutable. Cooperation is required amongst and within layers of government to ensure central backing for provincial and local schemes and consistency in marketing messages. The tourism industries at home and overseas are other key partners to liaise with, as are certain international agencies.

Therefore while intentions and proposals accord with established notions of what is apt, questions can be asked about execution. Progress did not appear to be recorded on the JMTCC website and there was no reply to requests for updates. Overall physical and socio-economic rehabilitation was still underway one year after the earthquake (Forbes, 2007), but a degree of normality seems now to have been restored and recent reports of tourism in Yogyakarta have been more positive and relate to new investment. The extent of the implementation of the tourism strategy and its ultimate efficacy are, however, unclear and monitoring crisis management plans is a key stage in the process. It allows review of advances, prompting intervention when necessary, and encourages reflection and the learning of lessons which can inform and improve subsequent planning.

Problems of managing the crisis would have been exacerbated by its defining characteristics as a natural disaster and because it was one of a sequence of misfortunes to befall Indonesia which is a developing nation with attendant restricted access to economic reserves and technical expertise (ADB, 2006b; The World Bank, 2008). Catastrophes due to nature can inflict immense damage on property and people and coping strategies may be beyond the means and competences of the governments of the Third World countries where such disasters frequently happen. The May 2006 earthquake occurred when Indonesian

tourism was still coming to terms with the unprecedented 2004 tsunami in which almost a quarter of a million lost their lives, the greatest proportion in Indonesia. There was another set of earthquakes and aftershocks in July 2006 and the strongest triggered a tsunami on 17 July. The waves battered the southern shore of Java, including several beach resorts in Central and West Java and Yogyakarta Provinces. Over 500 were killed, amongst them some foreign tourists, and the scenes recalled previous calamities amongst the resident and global communities. There were worldwide media reports of the failure of Indonesian officials to impart alarms received and delays in installing tsunami warning systems which had been promised after the events of 2004 (BBC News, 2006b).

A pattern can thus be discerned in Indonesia of propensity to broader crises out of which tourism crises are inevitably born, conveying a sense of chronic instability and unattractive destination images detrimental to risk-averse tourists and the international tourism industry. Such perceptions have been reinforced in the past by doubts about the capability and integrity of governments and, although the achievements of the current regime have been acknowledged (EIU, 2009), uncertainties persist. Those responsible thus face the formidable task of repairing damage caused by situations of actual and expected crisis. Securing recovery will facilitate growth in the future and assist Indonesia as a whole and centres such as Yogyakarta in realising their full tourism potential.

## Conclusion

Marketing is a core dimension of tourism crisis management for destinations and of relevance to all places, but particular demands are made of it within the context of locations such as Indonesia. The country has shown itself to be susceptible to tourism crises and appreciative of the need for mechanisms to deal with them, yet conditions there hinder management and marketing by destabilising life and commerce and perpetuating unattractive place images. The earthquake of May 2006 and the experiences of Yogyakarta demonstrate these effects and the reactions of the authorities to the challenges and possible barriers to the execution of proposed strategies

have been discussed. It has been argued that the plans are commendable, but some prerequisites for successful enforcement may be missing.

Analysis of the case suggests that tourism cannot be studied in isolation and is partly an outcome of the economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental attributes and trends prevailing in countries of arrival. Effective tourism crisis management encompassing marketing at destination level is made easier when this background is favourable, but the reverse applies and it is important to guard against unrealistic expectations of what marketers can achieve. It should also be remembered that the international tourism industry has obligations when crises occur in less developed countries and can provide vital support for marketing and development initiatives. Finally, the findings reveal the dangers of over-reliance on tourism and the advantages of pursuing diversification to minimise the harmful consequences of a sharp downturn in visitors and revenue during and after times of crisis.

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