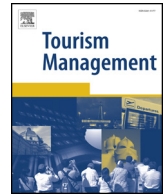




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## Book Review

**The Meaning of Luxury in Tourism, Hospitality and Events, J. Swarbrooke. Goodfellow, Oxford (2018). viii + 272pp., (Pbk.), ISBN 978-1-911396-07-9 £34.99**

Anyone who has the privilege of knowing John Swarbrooke will be aware of his passion for education, and in particular for teaching, amply evident in his many previous texts whether authored solely, or with his wife Susan Horner. This book speaks to a small but growingly significant topic in business and management with specific application to tourism, hospitality and events (thus seeking out the widest possible market in this narrow specialist area).

The technical details of the work are as follows. The book has five narrative parts and a final section containing twenty-one case studies (some 50 pages or nearly 20% of the text) all focused on 'luxury' in tourism, hospitality and events, although the last is less well-represented. Part One, 'Setting the Scene' contains three chapters, an Introduction followed by a history of luxury in tourism and hospitality and a discussion of the evolution of the concept of luxury in those sectors. Part Two, 'The demand side of luxury' has two chapters on, respectively, the luxury market and the luxury consumer. Part Three, 'The supply side of luxury' likewise has two chapters, the first of these sharing the section title and the second focusing on luxury tourist destinations. Part Four of the text is intriguingly entitled 'The big questions in luxury in tourism, hospitality and events' and has five chapters on what are presumably intended as contemporary themes and/or issues, these being: technology and luxury, luxury service; luxury as experience (as opposed to simply being about goods and services); the compatibility of luxury and sustainability; and consideration of whether luxury brands are a contradiction in terms. Part Five of the book contains three chapters covering research agendas for, and the future of, luxury in tourism, hospitality and events and, somewhat peculiarly, a chapter of conclusions inserted between these two.

Any critical assessment of a text must to a large degree be conditioned by an understanding of its intended audience. In his preface, Swarbrooke states that he writes primarily for students and practitioners, not just researchers and academics. At the same time he deplores obfuscatory writing styles that make the simple appear complex (p. vi). There is certainly undoubted clarity – indeed a luxurious simplicity – in the author's writing but sadly, luxury *is* a complex topic and not only deserves, but requires, a great deal more theoretical exploration and reflection than is provided in this book. The introductory and second chapter clearly indicates that Swarbrooke is aware of this. In the former he notes the problematic nature of defining luxury, the relativism attendant on such definitions, and the potential for confusion attendant on equating luxury with product and service branding. In Chapter 2, he captures some of the essence of the history of luxury in his chosen sectors but there is a complete absence of the necessary theorising that would help construct meaningful models of the phenomenon in question. Instead, throughout most of the book, the main intellectual

impetus (unsurprising, perhaps, given the author's expertise) derives from the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour supported by – admittedly often fascinating – publicly available survey data.

A principal consequence of all of the above is to render the book overly descriptive. An undefined and liberal use of the term 'luxury' throughout the rest of the volume invites us to accept as luxury or luxurious things which very obviously might not be embraced by such categories. The decision to eschew a serious consideration of the meaning of luxury is rendered more peculiar because of the prevalence of other, mainly useful, typologies employed throughout the text. At the same time, the discursive nature of the narrative throws up some eccentric observations. Thus on page 53 it is stated that 'There is nothing to be said about gender and luxury travel' (*really?*). On page 97, Swarbrooke says of restaurants that 'Traditionally luxury in this field even had its own term, 'gastronomy'. This was designed to distinguish it from merely eating', an observation that is doubtfully sustainable.

The assertion that there is nothing more practical than a good theory is typically attributed to Kurt Lewin (McCain, 2016) and has relevance here. In the volume's main section 'The big questions in luxury in tourism, hospitality and events' a theoretical framework would have helped us understand the justification for the selection of the five topics discussed therein relative to the main theme. As it is, the issues selected give the appearance of doing little more than playing to the current preoccupations, fads and fashions of tourism research. Thus a short eighth chapter offers a limited insight into some of the relationships between technology and luxury. Chapter 9 offers an equally restricted but nonetheless interesting meditation on the nature of service. Chapter 10 ruminates on an old chestnut – the 'experience economy' – much beloved of numerous tourism scholars, but here considered in relation to luxury. It is perhaps fitting that the nebulous nature of both concepts should be thus conflated. Chapter 11 asks 'Are luxury and sustainability compatible?' a question with a somewhat obvious answer. Chapter 12 poses a much more interesting interrogative, namely, 'Are luxury brands a contradiction in terms?' but the ensuing discussion is woolly inconclusive.

Given the foregoing observations, is there anything more positive that can be said about this book? Its most obvious quality is that it fizzes with ideas and opinions – indeed it is highly opinionated and none the worse for that. The text is therefore stimulating. It realizes the author's aim of writing accessibly for students, and of course, at least as far as this reviewer is aware, it is the first and thus far, only, book of its kind to address luxury in tourism, hospitality and events with the added bonus of numerous well-conceived case studies. As a source of information and ideas it is therefore a useful primer but one that would have been much stronger had it explored the idea and evolution of the concept of luxury within established historical, economic and social frameworks while seeking to make linkages with related themes current both generally and in tourism and hospitality (for example the development of leisure, the nature of taste, the persistence of the phenomenon of 'Veblen goods'). There is absolutely no reason why such narratives should be viewed as dry or inaccessible. Their relevance is critical to an understanding of luxury fuller than that presented here.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2019.01.008>

Still, if a journey of a thousand miles does indeed begin with a single step and this book is treated analogously, the traveller is unlikely to come to much harm.

#### Reference

McCain, K. W. (2016). “Nothing as practical as a good theory” Does Lewin's Maxim still

have salience in the applied social sciences? *Proceedings of the association for information science and technology*. Vol. 52. *Proceedings of the association for information science and technology* (pp. 1–4). 1.

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