

ITB/4/e

**ITB Berlin 2007
from 7 to 11 March**

**They are “travellers” not “tourists” – youth
travel is a lucrative business for tour operators
and destinations**

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Travel educates. It may be a truism, but one is never too young to start, and youth travel now represents a sector of the market that can no longer be ignored. School trips, summer camps, accompanied package tours for children and young people, backpacker trips, time spent gaining practical experience abroad and study trips are ideal for improving social skills. Children and young people may have considerable experience of travel but they do not want to be treated like tourists. There is a lot of money involved with young travellers: public subsidies and financial assistance on the one hand, on the other, a high level of expenditure on numerous service providers at the destination, who are specialising in this field in increasing numbers. Once again this year the ideal platform for tour operators organising youth travel is the Youth Travel Centre (YTC), an important feature of the International Tourism Exchange ITB Berlin which is taking place from 7 to 11 March 2007. In addition the ITB Convention Market Trends & Innovations will address the subject of "Youth and Travel". A panel discussion will take place on the ITB Future Day at which Prof. Dr. Klaus Hurrelmann from the University of Bielefeld, Thomas Korbus from RUF Jugendreisen, market leader in travel for children and young people, and David Jones, Director of the organisation WYSE Travel Confederation, will point out current trends and outline future developments. This event will take place on Wednesday, 7 March from 1.15 to 2 p.m. in Hall 7.1a, New York Room.

In a merger that is indicative of the growing importance of this section of the market, the world's leading youth and student travel organisations joined forces in October last year. WYSE Travel Confederation, short for the World Youth Student & Educational Travel Confederation, is based in Amsterdam and unites the Federation of International Youth Travel Organisations (FIYTO) and the International Student Travel Confederation (ISTC). This massive organisation, with more than 500 members on the buyers' and suppliers' side, as well as numerous subsidiary organizations, forms a network of 500 offices in 118 countries and owes its importance above all to the fact that everyone benefits from the knowledge of the others, and from the access to market data and contacts. Members themselves act as sales and distribution partners, and their target groups can also obtain information at these various market places and exchange it amongst themselves.

The work of the WYSE Travel Confederation goes back to an extensive ISTC study conducted in 2003, which produced some noteworthy findings about travellers in the 18 – 30 age group. Relaxation, recreation and taking it easy are less important motivations for young travellers and backpackers, who do not like to be referred to as tourists. Instead they are mainly interested in activities and in getting to know other cultures: almost one in three in this age group wants to travel in order to learn languages. "Young travellers show the local community a great deal of respect", according to David Jones of WYSE Travel Confederation, adding that "they want to form a picture of the locality". This means that

young travellers prefer to get off the regular tourist routes, try out local restaurants, shop in local supermarkets, and visit cinemas and cultural facilities. They want to familiarise themselves in depth with the host country, which is why they tend to be found where the locals meet.

Learning as infotainment

“Learning can again be part of the trip”, is something that Thomas Gehlen, one of the managers of RUF Jugendreisen, has found out too. But whatever the subject matter is, be it a sport or a theatre workshop, it must be “presented in a relaxed way”, to ensure the appeal of the programme to parents and above all to the children. And as Gehlen says: “Such infotainment presents tour operators with a challenge.” In his opinion no one is going to be persuaded to travel on the basis of the accommodation, transport and catering alone, and consequently the catalogues advertising school trips and travel for children and young people are full of adventurous things to do. The German Youth Hostels Association (DJH) is moving with the times too. For example children spending their holidays at the circus youth hostel in Hinsbeck can learn juggling and conjuring. Equipped with helmets, ropes and lamps they can investigate previous unexplored caves in Pottenstein. The Austrian organisation Jugend & Familiengästehäuser, a non-profit association which can already offer accommodation at 30 sites in the most attractive regions in the country, will be opening its first house in Germany in late summer, at Nördlingen in Bavaria. After being converted and modernised the formerly run down two-star properties now successfully offer courses in kayaking and canyoning, rafting and parachuting for schools, families and individual vacationers.

In fact it is almost impossible to obtain an accurate picture of such a wide range of attractions. Young people are way ahead of their parents: “They know just how to find information on the internet – and use it to make their bookings too”, observes Claudia Oberhofer, Marketing Manager for Jugend & Familiengästehäuser. But that is not enough for some parents, who want details such as the training qualifications of the tour guides. That is why, even now, between 70 and 75 per cent of the bookings for organised trips in the youth travel sector are made through a travel agency. For this reason Thomas Gehlen advises travel agency counter staff to “study the catalogues closely”, because, “if the consultation is successful, that is the way to win over the traditional repeat customer.” Gehlen maintains that if young people become accustomed to using travel agencies this can only strengthen the position of these travel agencies when these same young people have grown older.

Using every possible resource

The young people who were questioned in the study conducted by the ISTC in 2003 do not rely solely on the internet. They obtain information from every conceivable source,

question friends, get in touch with travel agencies and read the relevant travel guides such as "Let's Go" and "Lonely Planet". Germany's leading publisher of travel literature has signed a trend-setting licensing agreement with the Australian founder of Lonely Planet. Mayr Dumont will publish these cult travel guides in German and will also give European authors a chance to express themselves, so that even more young travellers are encouraged to follow this insider information, tailored to the requirements of this particular clientele, and to go off exploring the world.

The national forum for youth travel, Bundesforum Kinder- und Jugendreisen, aims to use its Vacation Exchange to provide light in the information jungle for "everyone between six and twenty six". The exchange is a service provided by this non-profit association based in Berlin. And the association itself is a confederation of associations and tour operators who are jointly engaged in calling for and developing quality criteria for travel by children and young people. This vacation exchange has been diligently tending its steadily expanding internet database for the past ten years and currently lists over 100,000 offers in 60 countries, from more than 1,300 commercial and non-commercial tour operators. The Vacation Exchange is the ideal contact centre for anyone looking for details about youth travel, children's vacation camps, sports camps, language courses abroad, international youth encounters, study trips or family travel. It also answers queries about group travel, and about trips by classes and associations. Youth travel to foreign countries is becoming an increasingly important aspect for WYSE Travel Confederation: backpacking, high school, voluntary service, studying abroad, au pair opportunities, work camps and practical experience in Germany and the rest of the world.

And above all young customers should not be placed in pre-ordained categories, because the younger generation does not like to be tied down, preferring to remain flexible. So it is important that travel offers should contain "very many ancillary attractions and diversity", if young customers are not to be "rapidly placed in strict categories". These are the words of someone who is better informed than most about the inclinations and needs of young people: Prof. Dr. Klaus Hurrelmann of the Faculty for Health Studies at the University of Bielefeld, co-author of the 15th Shell youth study "Jugend 2006". Prof. Dr. Hurrelmann draws the attention of tour operators specialising in youth travel to a "not insignificant" development: there is now no clear dividing line between youth and adulthood. Youth is beginning at an increasingly early age, due to the fact that the onset of puberty is taking place earlier too, and it ends later because the start of a career and the establishment of a family together with marriage, traditionally regarded as marking the onset of adulthood, are taking place later in life or not at all. Hurrelmann warns tour operators to "avoid focussing on a fixed age group," because this does not encourage flexibility. Nowadays "in exceptional cases a 14 year old could have the same leisure profile as that of someone of 24 and might not differ greatly from a 34 year old". The youth researcher advises acting "carefully and intuitively with strict definitions in the field of youth travel". His conclusion:

“Tour operators should exercise great care when defining their target group by age, if at all.”

Professor Hurrelmann believes that tour operators are dealing with a variety of different types of young person, in terms of their values and particular interests. The Shell study differentiates between “confident people who like to make things happen” and “pragmatic idealists”. The first group, which is equally strongly represented in both sexes, want to discover new things and have fun, but are also very egocentric, whereas women and girls tend to predominate in the second group. In addition to looking for something new and being not so keen on having fun, the latter are willing to commit themselves with regard to international and social issues, sometimes at the expense of their own interests. Both groups are affluent and enjoy educational success, Prof. Dr. Hurrelmann points out, adding that “they form a very interesting clientele for travel agents.” However, there are two other types that present more difficulties, the: “unobtrusive sceptics and the frustrated materialists.” The Bielefeld-based researcher advises tour operators and travel agents to “approach the representatives of these different outlooks with sensitivity and to endeavour to meet their requirements”.

The trend towards more all-inclusive arrangements

Does this not suggest a very uncertain and possibly difficult business, with constantly changing conditions and rising expectations? The RUF general manager Gehlen and his competitors are relying on the very evident trend towards all-inclusive arrangements, and 80 per cent of the programmes that they are offering now reflect this. Children, and their parents in particular, who are always the second partners in any discussions, as well as being the people with whom the youth tour operators actually conduct business, are looking for arrangements offering as many services as possible. The fixed price should include not only transport, accommodation, accompanying personnel and catering, but also an excursion as well as sporting or creative activities, thus giving a clearer picture of the costs. In any cases savings are being made on the travel by children and young people, whose trips are distinctly shorter in duration. As RUF has found out, parents and children are no longer booking for two, let alone three weeks. And as Gehlen says: “The normal length of a trip today is ten or twelve days”.

In order to keep pace with current developments tour operators specialising in youth travel in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania have launched a campaign to assist with marketing and to achieve qualitative improvements. It focuses on an examination of the basic quality of the 271 suppliers specialising in youth travel in the state, as well as a unique, nationwide, five star classification system. Closer links are being established between the various marketing activities at home and abroad. This would make Mecklenburg-West Pomerania the first of Germany’s federal states in which non-profit, church and private sector providers of travel for children and young people market their

offers jointly. There are plans to launch a website and a brochure this year too. These activities are essential in view of the fact that there has been hardly any increase in the numbers of vacationers under the age of 29 in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania in recent years. Compared with vacationers as a whole their numbers have fallen from 20 per cent in 1999 to 15 per cent in 2003. Tourism professionals are appealing to the state's politicians to realise the importance of the fact that the young tourists of today are also the vacationers of the future. Friedhelm Heibroek, General Manager of the youth association Landesjugendring in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, has put it in terms that every politician can understand: "Such efforts will not only safeguard jobs today but also provide the tax payers of the future."

But according to Susan Goldstein, Director for World Youth and Student Travel Conference (WYSTC), states and local communities are still very hesitant. However, there is a growing awareness of just how important youth travel is for the economy. As Goldstein says: "Although they travel more cheaply, their expenditure at the destination is higher than that of package tourists, for example, whose costs at their destination are lower." It therefore seems that the WYSE Travel Confederation and their network partners still have a lot of work to do to convince the politicians.

Less customers for the youth travel market in the future

The reluctance of children and young people to travel will not only have economic consequences. The Leipzig-based sociologist Dr. Harald Schmidt believes that this will definitely have an impact on the development of young people: "Not only does travel by children and young people form part of their education and play an important part in providing pleasure and recreation, it also affects their social behaviour and encourages their independence." The destination is less important when children are travelling without their parents, when being in the company of others of the same age is the most important factor. "Many years of research have shown us that over 90 per cent of children and young people want to travel with their own age group in order to make contacts and communicate with them", according to Schmidt. In his view these contacts with one another and with others "are even more important than they were when today's parents and grandparents were young". Basically Schmidt believes that such trips help schoolchildren to learn how to live normally again. "Once one can get them away from their world of chat rooms they become soft and romantic and enjoy the same things that we used to."

In eastern Germany 42 per cent of young people between the ages of 12 and 18 went on vacation without their parents last year, a total of 589,000. This was the finding by the Leipzig Institute for Empirical Research LEIF, headed by Dr. Harald Schmidt, which has been continuously engaged in research into the sector of travel by children and young people for

many years. The worst was over by 2004 and now the trend is a positive one again: whereas only 36 per cent of children in this age group travelled in 2004, by 2005 the figure had risen to 38 per cent. Nevertheless the proportion of children and young people travelling without their parents is lower than it was four years ago. In 2002 younger people reached a travel intensity of 53 per cent. "These figures will never be repeated", says Schmidt, listing a number of reasons for this prediction. A drop in the birthrate means that there are simply less potential travellers in this age group. There were around 1.09 million more children and young people living in the five eastern federal states and in Berlin sixteen years compared with today. The second reason for the reduced number of children travelling on vacation without their parents can be found in the economic situation facing many families. The tourism researcher says it is all too obvious: some families simply do not have the money to pay for travel. As Schmidt observes: "Travel for children and young people is not all that cheap." The situation has worsened following the withdrawal of public assistance for travel by children and young people. It has been almost entirely cut in many states, or at least reduced by a substantial amount. According to Schmidt: "For school trips in particular the decline is a serious matter because this is a complicated product." The head of the LEIF has some other criticisms too. "In terms of the price the offers are not sufficiently differentiated, or else many families are simply not aware of the cheaper offers."

Such considerations are a less significant factor for the young people, mainly students, making their own travel arrangements. "Growth is strongest in this sector of tourism", reports David Jones. WYSE Travel Confederation estimates that it accounts for 20 per cent of the overall increase. Young travellers are an economic factor that should not be underestimated by the destinations that they favour, and this is clearly apparent from the success of backpacker hostels all over the world. Not only do they spend a longer time travelling than mainstream tourists do, on average an amazing 63 days, but their expenditure at their destinations is also higher than that of other travellers, amounting to 1,200 US dollars per person. One noticeable and encouraging side effect is that travel appears to be addictive. The ISTC study reveals that those over the age of 26 have already undertaken an average of eight such trips. And they come back. As Susan Goldstein points out: "that is the best thing about the youth sector!" Young people develop a loyalty to the countries they visit, get to know people there, stay with families, and make new friends. On their next visit they bring relatives and friends with them, so that they can get to know the country too. In many cases they continue to return throughout their lives.