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International Tourism and COVID-19: Recovery Strategies for Tourism Organisations

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Abstract: The coronavirus pandemic will deeply affect the tourism and travel sector. It is already clear now that its economic impact would be more severe that in the case of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002-2003.
Although not as deadly as SARS, coronavirus infection has a longer incubation period and leaves about 85% of the infected without any (or with just mild) symptoms which makes it more difficult to track and to contain. Moreover, it appears to be much more contagious than its predecessor.
The goods news is that most people recover from the disease and develop antibodies that can protect them from getting infected again (natural vaccination). Those cured might become the key element for the post-virus recovery strategies of tourism organisations. People with the acquired immunity to the virus would be capable of travelling freely without spreading the disease. Airlines, hotels and gastronomy should aim at this group offering them discounts and special offers. However, the problem is how to effectively ensure that everyone who claims to be cured from COVID-19 is telling the truth. Health tracking bracelets, apps, and other advanced technological solutions should be put in place. Recent best practices from Hong Kong, mainland China, or India might be applied.

Keywords: international tourism; coronavirus; COVID-19; post-viral tourism; recovery strategies

1. Introduction

Human history is riddled with infectious diseases that left thousands of millions of people dead. The Great Plague, "sleeping sickness" (known as "*encefalitis letargica*"), or the Spanish Flu are some well-known examples.

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is not the first one in the 21st century. The first one was the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that started in 2002 and infected 8000 people causing 774 deaths in 26 countries (Wilder-Smith, 2006).

In general, viral diseases prove to be more dangerous and unpredictable than those caused by the bacteria. Typically, viruses are inert and harmless in isolation but when put in action they react and multiply quickly. There five thousand types of viruses that are known to science: from flu and cold to smallpox, Ebola, polio and HIV/AIDS. They prove to be very dangerous human killers: smallpox alone killed 300 million people on Earth in the 20th century. The worst epidemic in history was the "Great Swine Flu" or the "Spanish flu": while WWI killed 21 million people in 4 years, the Spanish flu did the same in 4 months (Oxford et al., 2002).

The good news is that thanks to the science and progress we have better healthcare and understanding of how to prevent and cure infectious diseases. Several weeks after the outbreak of the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus that cases COVID-19 scientists could identify the virus and sequence its genome (Sah et al., 2020). In spite of that, causalities will rise: according to the World Health Organization, the data so far indicate that the crude mortality ratio (the number of reported deaths divided by the reported cases) is between 3 and 4% (see WHO, 2020).

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Nevertheless, it is not difficult to predict that that impact of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry is going to be devastating similar (but with much higher magnitude) to what happened in the case of SARS (see e.g. Pine and McKercher, 2004). According to some preliminary estimates, global airlines might lose around $113 billion in sales (Riley, 2020). Tourism organisations (private, public, and NGO) worldwide will suffer. Sharing economy in tourism will also suffer a great deal. Airbnb and Uber are already reporting the decline in their activities.

However, everything is not as grim as it appears. The numbers of people who recovered from the COVID-19 infection are going to rise quickly and these people would constitute the first travellers and clients of tourism and hospitality industries in the post-viral world.

2. COVID-19 pandemic in numbers

The coronavirus COVID-19 means bad news for international travel and tourism. About 85% of infected people have mild or no symptoms of the infection and the incubation period might take about two weeks. This makes COVID-19 more dangerous than the regular flu because younger people or healthy individuals without symptoms can transmit the coronavirus infection to the elderly and weakened people for whom the coronavirus might turn out to be deadly. Chart 1 below shows the numbers of COVID-19 new cases and recoveries for the past month.

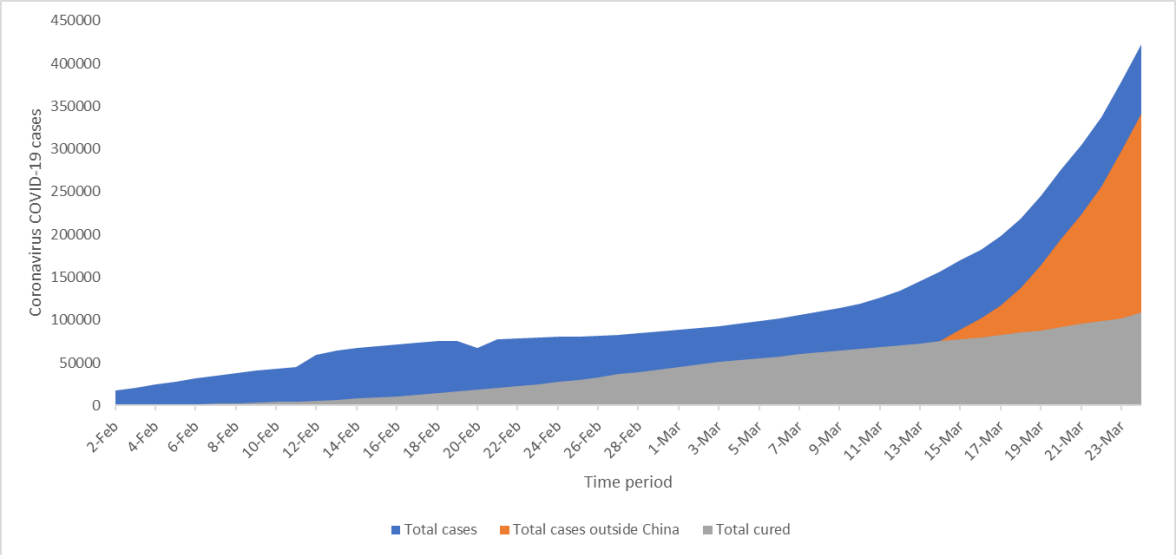

Chart 1. COVID-19 new cases and recoveries
Source: Worldometers (2020)

After the COVID-19 outburst in China in December 2019, the epicentre of the pandemic has moved to Europe having a devastating impact on such popular tourist destination as Italy, Spain, and France. The spiking numbers of the infected from the United States also look worrying. And this is not to mention India or the African countries where the COVID-19 has not penetrated so deeply yet. Without any reliable 100% cure, the COVID-19 is treated with antimalarial drugs and even the medicine designed to fight the Ebola virus. There is a need for the vaccine, but it is not expected to appear on the market before the end of 2020, or even later.

However, the numbers of newly recovered people are also growing. These people have the immunity against the coronavirus and are unlikely to contract it again (Bacon, 2020), even though there are single reports of people contracting COVID-19 for the second time in a row (see e.g. Leussink and Swift, 2020). Moreover, many scientists believe that blood serum might be made from the cured individuals to help the infected ones (see Rogers, 2020) which supports the theory of getting immunity to COVID-19 after surviving the infection.

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3. Smart quarantine and tracing

One of the effective recovery strategies for tourism organisations in the post-viral world might be allowing the people with antibodies against the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus to travel freely. Airlines, hotels, and spas should be the first to offer them various discounts and packages. It might be that a small percentage of the cured individuals would require rehabilitation meaning that there might be some special offers for those groups of travellers.

However, one important issue would remain: how to tell the cured ones from those posing as having contracted COVID-19 and being immune? Some criminals or opportunists would surely attempt to cheat in order to be included in this first cohort of post-viral coronavirus-free tourists. Here, the technology might help like it is already helping with fighting the coronavirus. In Prague, one of the first patients infected with COVID-19 in the beginning of March 2020 were two Uber drivers, both in very difficult condition. However, thanks to the Uber app, all their recent rides could be discovered, and all their passengers could be traced and tested for coronavirus.

Smart quarantine and tracing are already used in many countries to contain the spread of COVID-19. Figure 1 that follows shows Hong Kong's quarantine tracking bracelet that is being administered to all new arriving travellers. Paired with a smartphone app, it monitors the quarantined person's whereabouts and reports the violations to authorities.

Figure 1. Hong Kong's quarantine tracking bracelet
Source: Leung (2020)

In China, the tracing technology was inserted into the popular payment apps Alipay and WeChat Pay. Figure 2 that follows shows how colour coding is used in Alipay app to determine the person's health status. The code can be either green (meaning that the person is risk-free), yellow (meaning that there might be a danger of mild exposure and risk sometimes requiring a one-week self-quarantine), or red (manifesting immediate exposure and leading to the immediate two-week quarantine).

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Figure 2. China's QR health code system based on Alipay
Source: Ye (2020)

In some countries where the novel technological solutions might prove to be too costly or administratively difficult, cheaper health tracing options might be used. Figure 3 shows India's quarantine indelible ink hand stamp that bears an "expiry date".

Figure 3. India's quarantine indelible ink hand stamps
Source: Dixit (2020)

All in all, smart quarantine tools might be used to mark healthy and risk-free travellers. These technological solutions would help to reduce the risk of spreading the coronavirus COVID-19 before the effective vaccine is discovered without compromising international tourism and travel.

4. Concluding remarks

The world will recover from the COVID-19 pandemic like it always did after every major disaster. This is the first time we see the global pandemic of such unprecedented scale broadcasted in real time. The numbers of the infected and deceased are reported to us every minute making us endangered and vulnerable.

However, one should not forget that the COVID-19 is not the Black Death Plague. Most people would never contract the coronavirus at all and of those who would, the majority would feel fine and recover from it quickly. These people would become the first virus-free travellers that would help to breath the new life into the tourism and service industries once that the dust settles.

Borders closures and lockdowns do not represent the viable solution of fighting the pandemic in the long run. The economic downfall might be much worse than all adverse effects of the coronavirus infection. Globalisation and technological revolution provided us with many tools that should now be effectively used to pave the road to the post-viral tourism.

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