

ICONIC CITY DESTINATIONS:  
I SEE, THEREFORE I AM

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*“Start spreading the news. I’m leaving today. I want to be a part of it...!”*

Composed in 1977, and made famous by Frank Sinatra, little could ‘Old Blue Eyes’ have known that these legendary lyrics in honour of one of the world’s most iconic cities could in fact one day become an anthem for tourists across the globe. Especially today’s new travellers, wanting to shout out to the world that even while still in transit, they have ‘arrived’!

Where are their itineraries taking them? New York – London – Paris – Los Angeles – Rome - Singapore - Sydney – Bangkok, all of the iconic cities that, for years, have filled their imaginations with images of places that they are so familiar with from television, computer and mobile screens. And now the places they have a chance to see, touch, taste, fully take in, and take masses of pictures of.

These iconic cities are not just holiday destinations, they are status symbol destinations.

These are the destinations that, regardless of new travel trends and new to-be-discovered territories, continue to dominate the Top 10 lists of International Arrivals, not to mention the Top 10 of lists of ‘Trips of a Lifetime’, ‘Places To See Before You Die’ and ‘Places To Be Seen’.

Still, the appeal of traditional iconic cities can often leave experienced travellers questioning what all of the fuss is about. Why are these cities still so special?

Why indeed.

### **SATISFACTION GUARANTEED**

Iconic cities offer so much more than simply a chance to see famous sights. For many travellers they offer what few other destinations can - a guarantee of return on investment. That investment goes far beyond the money spent on travel. It is about:

- the investment of the time set aside for travel,
- the investment of effort made to travel, and, critically,
- the investment of the dream to travel.

Especially for first-time travellers.

With the global tourism industry growing at a steady 4% per annum, the world’s movement of outbound travellers is feeling the force of growth from the east. More specifically, first-time China and India travellers.

With 57 million and 12.5 million international outbound travellers respectively in 2010, China and India are estimated to rise to a staggering 100 million and 50 million by 2020 (Source: UNWTO). Their contribution to global travel revenues? Strong, with Chinese per travellers spend in-market almost double that of other nationalities. In 2012 alone, China saw 83 million outbound travellers, generating US\$ 102 billion in receipts. High volumes, high yields, high excitement.

Still, the impressive statistics should never eclipse the individual experience of each traveller, that one in a million (or 100 million) fulfilling his or her own dream. For each and every one, to book the trip, buy the ticket and board the plane is a big deal, a very big deal. Cameras at the ready, each moment of the journey, from airport boarding gate at the beginning of the trip to the return home is captured, and proudly shared.

And with over one in two Chinese travellers wishing to spend their personal finances on travel, one in three in the case of Indians, the sector has become a personal priority for hundreds of millions of people determined to see the world, because they can.

Whether travelling in groups, or independently, first time / new travellers pack in their suitcases a sense of adventure, and deep feeling of awe, that should never be underestimated, or underappreciated.

So with the whole world there for the taking, why do iconic cities continue to be the top of the list? Where do they want to go first? Iconic cities, regionally and internationally.

For those on the front line of the travel industry – the agents - the reasons are as clear as the New York skyline on a sunny summer's day. As stated by Lyndill Cilliers, Travel Expert at Flight Centre (Pty) Ltd,:

*“Travellers go to iconic destinations because it is almost a guaranteed experience - you know when you go to New York will see the Statue of Liberty, you will be able to go to Central Park. And these destinations are tourist friendly, travelling there is convenient. First time travellers in particular want to experience what every other traveller before them has experienced, and this is possible in iconic cities.”*

Reto Wittwer, President and Chief Executive Officer of Kempinski Hotels and Resorts concurs.

*“First-time travellers head to these iconic cities because they are seeking new experiences, which they associate with these cities and their landmarks. Cities like New York, London and Paris are home to landmarks that are part of international culture; the Statue of Liberty, the Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower all have the power to capture people’s imaginations. They are part of the identity of these cities.”*

So what does the list of top travelled-to cities look like?

According to Mastercard’s 2012 Global Destination Index Survey by International Visitors, the Top 20 destinations in 2012 were as follows:

1. London (16.9 million visitors)
2. Paris (16 million)
3. Bangkok (12.2 million)
4. Singapore (11.8 million)
5. Istanbul (11.6 million)
6. Hong Kong (11.1 million)
7. Madrid (9.7 million)
8. Dubai (8.8 million)
9. Frankfurt (8.1 million)
10. Kuala Lumpur (8.1 million)
11. Seoul (8 million)
12. Rome (7.8 million)
13. New York (7.6 million)
14. Shanghai (7.5 million)
15. Barcelona (7.3 million)

Equally important is where visitors are spending their money. Mastercard’s survey put London on top in 2012 at US\$ 21.1 billion (+10.3% vs 2011), followed by New York at US\$ 19.4 billion (+6.8%), Bangkok US\$ 19.3 billion (+16.6%). Paris US\$ 17.8 billion (+1.5%) and Singapore at US\$ 12.7 billion (+12.7%) as the top 5.

### A NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

While its numbers may not place it in the top position for visitation or spend, whenever reference is made to ‘iconic’ cities, New York is top of mind. From Times Square to Tribeca, The Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty to SOHO, Central Park, and Saks Fifth Avenue, from Grand Central Station to the Ground Zero Memorial, MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) to the Meat Packing District, from A to Z, NYC has a rich array of photo-moment iconic landmarks to fill a visit with huge amounts of brag-ability.

This enduring appeal has proven to be critical to the advancement of the city, as the tourism sector now takes centre stage as one of the critical economic and social sectors for the city.

As expressed by NYC&CO in their 2013 Model for Success,:

*“While tourism has always been an important industry for New York City, over the recent years it has dramatically grown into a cornerstone of our economy generating a record \$55.3 billion in economic impact, welcoming an all-time high of 52 million visitors and employing more than 363,000 New Yorkers across all five boroughs. Our visitors are not only part of the backbone of our City’s economy, they also add to the excitement, energy and diversity of NYC.”*

Importantly, keeping a close eye on the metrics,:

*“Since 2006, NYC & Company has grown the City’s market share of inbound overseas travel to the United States from 28% to 33%. Each share point increase has generated an additional \$750 million in direct spending and more than \$1 billion in economic impact annually. In total, over the last seven years, the economic impact of tourism has grown 42%. Additionally, visitors to the City currently spend \$36.9 billion annually—also up 41%—across an array of restaurants, hotels, retail stores, museums, theaters and cultural institutions and much more.”*

Iconic city status has the potential to provide an invaluable business model for a city/region.

Being iconic does not, however, mean being static. The challenge, and opportunity, is to remain fresh, relevant, inviting and ‘now’, while at the same time being timeless. Innovation is essential, at both product and service level. Whether Mandarin speaking sales representatives on Fifth Avenue, or creating events marking cultural occasions of foreign nations, invitation remains the magnet for any destination.

NYC&CO’s Chairman, George Fertitta, is resolute.

*“As we prepare to reach our 2015 goals, we will explore new and innovative ways to promote the five boroughs and reach new audiences. Our industry, with a citywide workforce of 363,000 and growing, will be looking for continued support as they strive to welcome more visitors and provide them with a one-of-a-kind experience that will stay with them forever.”*

### SHIFTING FROM ICONIC ATTRACTIONS TO ICONIC EXPERIENCES

Status symbol travel has become a niche of its own in the global tourism industry. As we move forward, however, the definition of ‘iconic’ is changing. Kempinski’s Wittwer already sees the shifts taking place.

*“Iconic cities will always attract travellers, be it for business or for leisure travel, that’s for sure. But I think in the future, travellers will focus less on the actual destinations altogether, and will focus more on ideas and concepts that are important to them and their travel experience. Some travellers interested in sustainability and the environment might search*

*for destinations that are investing in eco-tourism, or for one specific eco-resort, for instance. This can be somewhere in Africa or it can be somewhere in South America. What drives the traveller is the thirst for the experience. This doesn't mean that iconic cities will be abandoned, but it does mean that new destinations will be sought after based on what they have on offer. “*

Wherever the icons are found, be it Baku or Buenos Aires, old destinations or new, the “*been there, done that, got the Facebook posting*” value of travel will only grow in importance. Why? Because for millions of travellers across the globe, iconic moments are personal check-lists of achievement.

It's all about finding one's place in the universe, the points on a map that point a person towards who they are most excited to be. In a way, travel is a personal challenge, and shaping chisel, of true self.

Because as the song goes, “*If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere. It's up to me...*”

**- ENDS -**