

# Book review

**Edited by Elisa Backer and Brian King**  
**Channel View Publications**

**Bristol**

**2015**

**Review DOI**

**10.1108/JTF-10-2016-0028**

I would like to congratulate the editors and authors who contributed to this much needed book publication for highlighting an underappreciated but vitally important area of tourism research. Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel is not only underestimated but also lies at the heart of why so many people around the world engage in travel: to reconnect with the people they care about and love. The absence of a long and substantial research agenda on VFR travel raises larger questions as to what we research on and teach about in tourism. Reasons provided for this neglect are the consistent underestimation of the size of the VFR market, a widely held belief that VFR travellers inject negligible income into local economies, that increased VFR travel cannot be stimulated or controlled through marketing activities, and the perception of VFR travel as mundane and lacking the glamour of travel to exotic places. Most of the contributors of this edited book are themselves well established researchers in this area, and along with emergent researchers from around the world, doing a fine job in breaking down all those misconceptions about VFR travel.

VFR travel is a global phenomenon that is only going to grow in a world where people are increasingly geographically dispersed through migration for labour or lifestyle reasons but still seek ongoing emotional and physical connections to their loved ones. From a definitional perspective VFR travel can be separated into purpose of trip or the type of accommodation used (commercial or staying with friends and/or relatives); other ways of distinction are trip purpose or VFR as an activity. Then there is the separation of visiting friends (VFs) compared with visiting relatives (VRs), with VRs dominating in numerical terms. Families then are truly at the emotional heart of society and there are connections here to family tourism which is

also perceived as more mundane and not receiving the research attention it deserves. In terms of the size of the VFR travel market, there is research presented by Elisa Backer indicating it represents 48 per cent of Australia's domestic overnight visitor market, or a persistent 25 per cent VFR proportion for the USA in reported travel purpose as discussed by Joseph O'Leary and his co-authors. These are substantial numbers reflecting a major market but do not even reflect its true size as main purpose is probably an underestimation of the large scale of this travel pursuit. The intersections between holiday and business travel with VFR should not be underestimated here. As a migrant myself I travel to conferences in Europe and catch up with my family there and likewise family and friends visit us in New Zealand on their holiday and because we live here. Then there is the intersection of the host hosting the VFR and taking them on domestic trips around the country. Accepting that reasons for travel are becoming increasingly more complex only supports the claim made throughout the book that VFR travel is underestimated and in desperate need of more attention.

The book is structured into 14 chapters with three main parts; part 1 provides understanding into the world's largest travel segment with discussions of VFR travel strategies and destination marketing, disaggregation of VRs and VFs, the VFR and migration nexus in Australia and the size of its domestic component, and focus on the immigrant host experience; part 2 provides VFR travel profiles with case studies from Iran, USA, South Africa, Italy, United Arab Emirates and the diasporic networks of the Pacific Islands; and part 3 discusses VFR travel futures. The scope of the book then is global and it is encouraging to have perspectives from emerging countries presented here. The case study from South Africa highlights that a distinct "Southern" category of VFR traveller exists that is associated with household survival or reproduction through circular migration. Another case study highlights the cross-border relationships and networks of families holding the social fabric of the Pacific

## **VFR Travel Research: International Perspectives**

© Heike A. Schänzel. Published in the *Journal of Tourism Futures*. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

together in that VFR travel is connected here with the emergence of transnational families. It can be anticipated that as migration continues to accelerate and technology permits relationships to be sustained at a distance, the demand for VFR travel and its significance for our communities will also continue to rise. Failure to fully appreciate this phenomenon, as outlined so aptly by Tom Griffin in his chapter on immigrant hosts, may lead to a lack of understanding about what is arguably the greatest force in world travel today and in the future: our personal relationships with those in distant (and not so distant) lands. I would argue here that the VFR phenomenon happens irrespective of philosophies of collectivism or individualism but is fundamental to who we are wherever we live in the world.

Readers of the *Journal of Tourism Futures* will find much value in this edited book because it sheds much needed light on the growing phenomenon of travel to reconnect with friends and relatives along with its economic and social opportunities for destinations. The VFR phenomenon is driven by global migration patterns, temporary and permanent mobilities, and diasporas and is underpinned

by the need to maintain ties with family and friends at a distance which are integral to being, belonging and social identity. The domain of VFR is then a vast and important field of human behaviour worthy of serious examination for its own sake. This points to a need for a second edition book publication which delves deeper into the hospitality dimension of host and guest, potential conflicts and social obligations, the meanings attained from maintaining family ties and kinships at a distance, social capital and global community building, and the enmeshment of VFR travel with other forms of tourism. This edited book is then only the beginning of much needed global research and acknowledgement on tourism-migration relationships and links to globalisation in a world that is increasingly virtually connected but desperately seeking co-presence with their relations and friends living afar.

**Heike A. Schänzel**

*Senior Lecturer at the School of Hospitality and Tourism, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand.*