Tourism is an activity that is easier to observe than to define. Numerous academics and organizations have attempted, with limited success, accurately to define the term, from Ogilvie (1933) to the United Nations World Tourism Organization today. Although there is still no one universally accepted definition, that which is presented below is an accurate inclusion of all salient concepts. The term is derived from the English word ‘tour’, meaning a circular journey, and has been in use since the late 18th century. From the root word ‘tour’ comes ‘tourism’, which is the activity of touring, the ‘tourist’ being the person undertaking the activity.

Tourism involves a person undertaking a journey for leisure or business where that person leaves his or her home environment for a period of over 24 h but less than 365 days. These times are arbitrary, but are designed to exclude day trippers - who do not overnight away from home - and temporary migrants - who are classed as such when away for a full year or more. If the person undertaking the tour derives any financial remuneration from the destination then that person is not a tourist under international definition. This aspect is now being increasingly challenged, however, by backpackers, who are generally classed as tourists but who frequently supplement their income by casual work in the destination country.

Distance is also a factor in the definition of tourism. To be a tourist a person must not be in his or her home environment. Whilst this is a woolly definition, it excludes people staying in their own town or city for a night after work. The minimum distance that must be travelled varies, but is generally taken to be around 50-160 km from base. There is no maximum distance, as it is possible to circumnavigate the world.

Domestic tourism is where no international border is crossed. By far the highest number of participants are domestic tourists. International tourism involves the crossing of at least one international border during the journey. Countries generally encourage international tourism because of the related income associated with the activity (in effect, an export). Continents with many independent countries (Europe or South America) tend to experience more international tourism than continents with few independent countries (North America or Australia), where longer distances and greater costs are required to become international tourists.

Tourism, and particularly long-haul international tourism, has increased dramatically over the last 50 years thanks to cheaper long-haul air travel, greater holiday entitlements and higher disposable incomes. Western Europe and North America were for many years the world's primary tourism-generating regions, but more recently South-east Asia has become a significant generator and is destined to become the largest tourist-generating region later this century.

Tourism is becoming increasingly associated with descriptors such as nature tourism, eco-tourism, sex tourism, black (or dark) tourism, etc. Nature tourism is tourism undertaken in natural environments; ecotourism involves tourism concerned with the ecology of a tourism destination; sex tourism involves
travel for sex; and black tourism is tourism associated with disasters and catastrophes.

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