

It's virtually a woman's world on the World Wide Web

By Ian Jarrett

WHEN my wife used the Internet to book a weekend break for us in Melbourne, Australia, she was joining a worldwide trend.

Latest research shows that women are catching up with men when it comes to booking travel on the web and spending up big when they reach their chosen destination.

So while I was doing one of those blokey things — checking out the racing cars entered for the Melbourne Formula One Grand Prix — my wife was busy shopping for new clothes in the city's upmarket Toorak area.

Probably without realising it, my wife was part of another emerging trend: women travellers are the Asia/Pacific region's new spending powerhouses, according to a MasterCard International survey.

"It is time to focus on women travellers," says Mastercard spokeswoman, Georgette Tan. "They are the fastest growing segment for the travel industry."

The MasterCard report showed that the ratio of male to female travellers in Asia/Pacific has dramatically shifted from 90:10 (males to females) 30 years ago to 60:40 (males to females) today.

Retailers rejoice. These figures imply that about 56 million of the 139 million travellers in the region are women.

What's more, by 2011 women travellers will match the number of male travellers.

Clearly, the march of the Internet-savvy, high-spending, adventurous female traveller is gathering pace.

"The average adventure traveller is not a 28-year old male, but a 47-year-old female. And she wears a size 12 dress," says Marybeth Bond, a US travel consultant. Bond believes that in the US, 80 per cent of travel decisions are made by women — "regardless of whom they travel with, who pays for the trip or where they go".

Consider this — and I wish I had before my wife went shopping in Melbourne: Assuming conservatively that women travellers spend twice as much as men, and that the ratio between men and women travellers will be 50:50 by 2011, MasterCard estimates that US\$13.4 billion per year will be spent by women travellers in four shopping destinations in Asia — Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore and Bangkok.

Another interesting pattern identified in the MasterCard report is the trend towards mother-daughter and mother-daughter-granddaughter travel in Asia/Pacific.

"High disposable incomes of one generation combined with travel-savvy planning skills of another generation are sending these intergenerational family teams all over Asia/Pacific to shop, pamper themselves at spas and visit luxury resorts," the report noted.

Robin Sutherland, director of retail,

Expedia.co.uk says that the growth of dynamic packaging — the means by which travellers can book and pay for their flights, transfers, hotels, car hire and tours on a single website — has been a significant factor in attracting more women to the web.

"There has always been a high proportion of women researching travel on-line," he says, "but it is in the last 12 months that we have seen significant growth in the proportion who have started purchasing.

"This is partly reflective of the growth of family holidays being booked on-line which has taken off as consumers feel more comfortable booking more complex holidays through the Internet. Women are more likely to be the key decision-makers in the family holiday purchase and our dynamic packaging product has been embraced by them as a valuable tool to create a perfect family holiday."

According to research in Europe by Nielsen/NetRatings women logging onto travel sites now account for 44 per cent of visitors compared with 36 per cent 12 months ago.

Gabrielle Prior, European Internet analyst for Nielsen/Net Ratings, said the ability to research destinations and prices, check availability and book travel online has revolutionised the travel agency business.

Prior said women valued the speed and convenience of online shopping and booking travel was no exception.

"We would expect this trend to continue, as we have seen in the United States, where 49 per cent of users in this category (travel) are female."

The most popular travel sites for the fairer sex, according to NetRatings, are ebookers.com, where more than half the users (51 per cent) are women and lastminute.com (50.6 per cent).



When NetRatings looked at the number of European women visiting travel websites it discovered a 23 per cent increase in the 12 months to February 2005.

Italian women are leading the charge with their numbers growing 50 percent over 12 months. At the other end of the scale, the rate of growth for female travel site visitors in the United Kingdom and Sweden is just three per cent, admittedly from a higher base.

Jo O'Brien, general manager of online travel provider, Zuji Australia, says the trend of women booking travel on the Internet is not quite so pronounced in the Asia/Pacific.

"We have generally found the split between male and female online travel consumers to be small: both are represented in relatively even percentages across the Asia Pacific region."

In its travel trends report carried out in fourth quarter 2004, Zuji found that men still rule the roost when it comes to making travel purchases online as 54 per cent of bookings on Zuji were made by men compared to 46 per cent by women.

"This represents an increase of two per cent when compared with the findings of Zuji's report for travel trends during first quarter 2004 when women made 44 per cent of bookings," said O'Brien.

"In addition, in Q4 2004 Zuji found that compared with other markets, Australian women are using the Internet more than their counterparts in Hong Kong and Singapore — 43 per cent of women booked online with Zuji in Hong Kong and 42 per cent in Singapore."

Interestingly, Zuji also noted that the preferred title for women who made travel purchases online in Australia was more often than not "Mrs" — "perhaps indicating that more married women are booking on Zuji", said O'Brien.

Hong Kong-based Marcel Holman runs the hospitality website 4hoteliers.com. He believes that more women are booking online "possibly because they have more time on their hands by not working, or working part time, as well as their increasing computer savviness".

"Also, there are a lot of working women in positions where they book for their executive bosses. So they know where to look and book for their private trips."

The NetRatings survey of major European websites found there is little difference between the percentages of men and women who visit them.

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There is strong evidence, too, that both women and men prefer to book on a hotel's own website rather than through a third party. A recent study by Keynote Systems, a California-based company

which tracks e-business performance, revealed steady growth in the number of consumers stating they use the Internet to book lodging accommodations as compared to those using other methods, such as calling hotel reservation lines or calling a travel agent.

More than two-thirds (67 per cent) of consumers participating in the Keynote study reported that they were likely to book on a hotel web site as compared to just 57 per cent who were open to using a phone reservation system. Just 16 per cent reported a willingness to use a travel agent.

"We've seen a continual increase in consumer comfort and use of the Internet for booking travel arrangements, but this is the first time we have seen all the online options for booking beating the offline options," said Dr Bonny Brown, director of research and public services for Keynote.

"We have come to a point where consumers with Internet access are now more likely to book online as compared to using the phone."