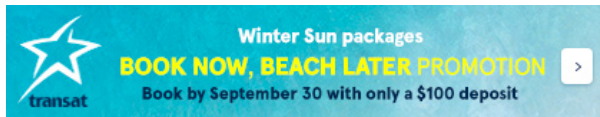




# Travel Industry TODAY



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# FLIGHTSEEING. SIGHTSEEING. HEIGHTSEEING

Steve Gillick

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21 JUN 2013: The movie The Jolson Story, was released in 1946, but I probably saw it for the first time in the mid 1960's. One of the featured songs "I'm Sitting on Top of the World", was for me, not so much a love song as it was an homage to the

idea of actually sitting on top of the world and looking at all the cultures and countries. Sort of a window into what makes the world tick. I still include this song on my list of travel tunes that I play to introduce some of my destination talks.



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I wrote about the niche market of ‘heights’ in Tokyo on [Hai Alert](#) but there is so much more to this rapidly growing travel niche. Spurred on by the recent release of the movie Man of Steel (Superman), egged on by the space adventures and photographs of astronaut Chris Hadfield, and certainly imagineered through the exploits of Luke Skywalker in the original Star Wars trilogy, the niche market of ‘flightseeing’ has taken wings.

Originally, ‘**flightseeing**’ was a term coined to celebrate sightseeing - from the air. And while airplanes and helicopters were the original inspiration for sky-high activities, the niche now includes any type of travel or tourism that takes place off the ground - a kind of ‘heightseeing’ if you will.

Heights don't normally bother me except for one incident in the early 1980's when I crawled to the barrier-free edge of Ontario's Ouimet Canyon, looked down 100 meters and felt a bit queasy. I dismissed the incident as an anomaly and to prove my point, when I ventured to Nepal, I signed up for the 'Mount Everest View' flight. As we ascended to 25,000 feet, the pilot asked if anyone wanted to take photos from the cockpit. Without hesitation I volunteered and spent quite a bit of time snapping photos of Mt. Everest, whose summit stood only 4000 feet higher than we were flying.

And this is only one of the top flightseeing experiences around the world. Others include Peru's Nazca Lines, Australia's Great Barrier Reef, Alaska's Mt. McKinley, the Grand Canyon, Canada's Kluane National Park and many more.

For more 'down-to-earth' heightseeing, the popularity of hot air balloon rides is on the rise. The top balloon rides hover over such places as

- Bagan, Myanmar
- Cappadocia, Turkey
- Gstaad, Switzerland
- Massai Mara, Kenya
- Napa Valley, USA
- Queenstown, New Zealand
- Serengeti National Park, Tanzania
- Siem Reap, Cambodia
- The Loire Valley, France
- The North Pole
- The Red Centre, Australia

And then there are the **Para-philes**. They are not paranoid (which comes from the Greek "beyond the mind"), but in fact comprise a niche market of

those who love to go against the norm, which in this case is 'gravity'.


Parachute, for instance, comes from the French 'para' meaning 'defense' or 'against' and the word 'chute', meaning 'fall'. So a parachute prevents falling, and the gravitational attraction of the activity has branched into parasailing (parachuting with a sail), parakiting (✦with a kite) and paragliding (just jump off the nearest mountain and enjoy the ride).

Cable car rides are a type of heightseeing, as you ascend the ski lift in winter or summer or simply travel up the mountain for a view of the city or landscape. The idea is that you get a birds-eye view of your surroundings. And there are a dizzying array of activities that travellers may request to quench their lofty aspirations: rock climbing (going up) abseiling (climbing down), canopy walking, zip-lining, wing walking (as in, airplane wings), bungee jumping and, what has been dubbed the world's most dangerous hike, the Changkong Zhandao which is a ledge crawl, 13 feet long on a one foot-wide plank where hikers grasp a chain to ease themselves along, as they head toward the 2160 meter South Peak of Mt. Huashan in China.

For those yearning for even more height, Virgin Galactic's sub-space flights are scheduled to begin in late 2013. And for those yearning to be a tad closer to the ground, there is the traveller's "Sky" series of activities: Sky Eyes, Sky Falls, Sky Rides, Sky Flyers, Sky Walks, Sky Diving and Sky Dining.

**Sky Eyes** are the huge Ferris Wheels that have cropped up in major cities from the Cosmo Clock 21 in Yokohama, Japan to the Tblisi Ferris Wheel in

Georgia (the country) and from the Grande Roue de Paris and the London Eye, to the Harbin Ferris Wheel in northern China. In Northern Ireland, we chose to ride the Belfast Wheel as our final farewell to the city. As we were the only passengers, the operator decided to treat us to a rather extended ride as he was obliviously plugged into his ipod, and a good 20 minutes later we were finally 'released' to wobble off the wheel.

**SkyFalls** (not the movie), also called Drop Towers, raise thrill seekers to a height of around 100 feet and then quickly drop them at 50 mph or more. This too is part of travel and tourism and affords a view  albeit for only a few seconds.

**Sky Rides** tend to refer to roller coasters of various heights, twists and turns. The Extreme Skyflyer is an amusement ride at Canada's Wonderland, just north of Toronto. To quote from the website, "Xtreme Skyflyer riders control their own ride experience by pulling the rip cord and initiating a 170-foot power flight that takes them through a breathtaking pendulum swing, soaring a mere six feet above the ground! Drawing its inspiration from skydiving, riders will experience weightlessness and speeds of more than 100km/hr".

**Skywalks** are relatively new. Toronto's CN Tower EdgeWalk allows visitors to buckle into a harness and hang out over 116 stories above the ground. The Grand Canyon's Skywalk affords visitors the opportunity to gaze over the breathtaking scenery and into the 240 meter vertical drop below them.

Perhaps one of the more creative activities is Sky Dining. Now available in 40 countries ([www.dinnerinthesky.com](http://www.dinnerinthesky.com)), you and 21 guests can

enjoy dinner (or a wedding or a card game) group as your table is hoisted 50+ meters in the air by a crane. As you dangle over the city (e.g. Jaffa, Las Vegas, Bogota, Brussels) the sky chefs dangle delicacies to tantalize your taste buds. Talk about raising culinary standards!

And I would be remiss in not mentioning Google Earth which not only allows armchair cyber travellers to visit any location on our planet and beyond, but also to appreciate the sky-view of their city, or a chosen destination. And we all thought that the futuristic ideas in the movie Total Recall, where mind plug-ins provided virtual holidays, were just Hollywood hyperbole.

Flightseeing/Sightseeing/Heightseeing is a niche market on the cusp of elevation as travellers strive to explore and experience the 'what else' of travel. What can they do that's different, unique, provides them with bragging rights and entices their friends to want to 'go one better'. It's an exciting new version of travel one-up-manship. It's not necessarily how many places your clients have visited, but the quality of the visit and how they maximized the experiential, and exceeded their own expectations; all through the good advice and counsel of their travel advisor, of course. When your clients lay bare their adventurous aspirations, fly with the idea, soar with their thoughts, and raise their vacation to new heights. The sky's not the limit anymore. It's all about the imagination.

Sitting on top of the world may have been a fantastical idea at one point in time. Today it is quite realistic♦ and yet, still not quite half-way to the stars.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

[Read more from Steve Gillick](#)