



## Robot referees, au pairs of the year – and the future of Christmas

Ian Yeoman, futurologist

No matter what he does, it's always the sex with robots that gets the headlines. Not because it's his thing, particularly. But because it will happen.

Ian Yeoman is, you see, the world's only future-predictor focused on tourism. From a small office in Victoria University's Rutherford House, he devises fantastic scenarios on the future of travel: a 2051 Rugby World Cup in which the referees are all robots and the players all cyborgs; luxury tourism that revolves around eating experiences, because only the rich can afford real food; and, of course, an Amsterdam sex industry staffed almost entirely by robot prostitutes.

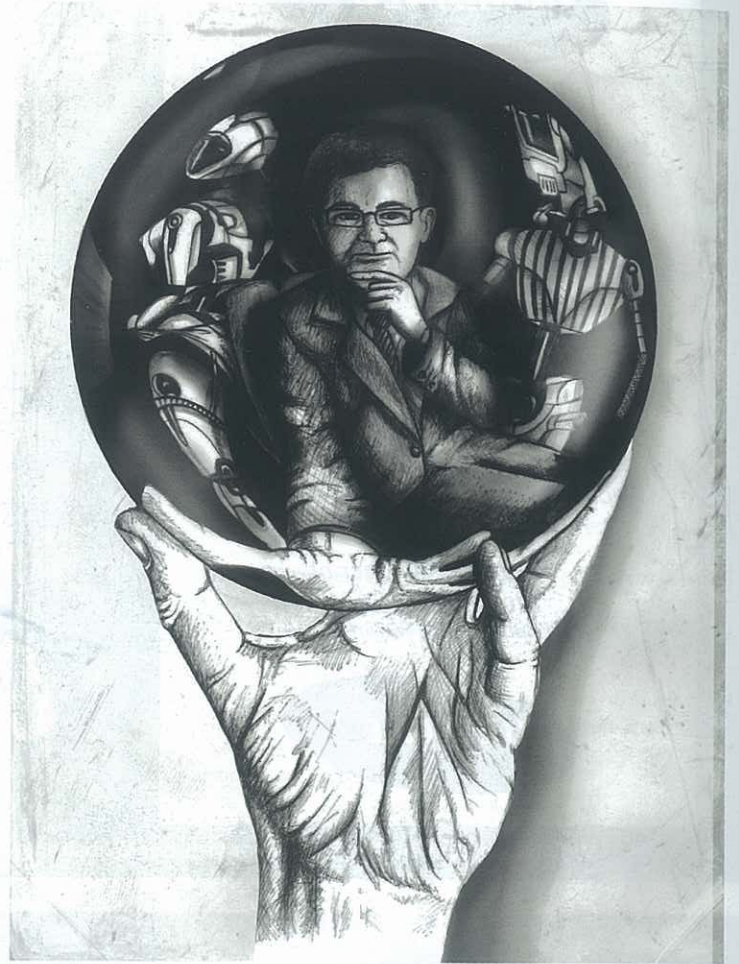
This crystal ball-gazing is not, you understand, a simple exercise. He doesn't just extrapolate figures forward as if the future will be like the past, only more so. This is complex stuff. In our post-modern world, it's all about overlapping, multivariate scenarios, not single point-in-time snapshots. Yeoman has to factor in world GDP growth, nanotechnology, climate change, demographics, youth culture, transport, urban planning... anything that could change the face of tourism.

Still, we met, prosaically enough, at the Thistle Inn over lunch. He was very nice, and curly-haired, and simultaneously intense and slightly wry, as you need to be when you're explaining how your job involves quite extraordinary things, like researching the future of Christmas for the Lapland tourism industry.

Having grown up in Sunderland in the UK, he initially worked in hospitality, then as a scenario planner for VisitScotland for seven years. After that he needed a holiday – ironically enough – and plumped for New Zealand because, well, “I only speak English and New Zealand's easy to get into, relatively.”

It wasn't, perhaps, the adventure of which legends are made. But at least he travelled light: a bicycle, 14 boxes and a cat, which subsequently died. Then he got married earlier this year, “and since then I have dramatically increased the number of boxes”.

His red-haired wife is, incidentally, the dedicatee of his latest book, *Tomorrow's Tourism*, which bears the inscription “to Vikki, the best raspberry top in the world”. (His previous book, *Tomorrow's Tourist*, was dedicated to “Mam and Dad”.)



Much of the most recent book is about the way technology will change how we travel, which often boils down to people having internet-enabled contact lenses that allow them to book hotel rooms in the blink of an eye (so to speak). It is a faintly unnerving vision, as if the Lonely Planet guidebooks have been suddenly taken over by the director of *Blade Runner*, but undeniably a plausible one.

When he isn't writing books, Yeoman says, he is being invited to speak at events like the World Au Pair Association's annual conference. Which was fun, apparently. “And au pairs are a very important tourist market.”

He's also devised some scenarios for New Zealand's tourism industry in 2050, which vary from the good ones, in which tourists still want eco-friendly, well-being-enhancing experiences, to the bad ones, in which the global economy has gone to hell in a hand basket and no one has any money to spend on flying to the back end of the world.

In general, Yeoman thinks our tourist offerings are doing OK, but need to “up the ante in terms of quality and quality assurance”, which sounds like a polite way of saying that there are a lot of cowboys out there. (Which indeed there are, as my foreign visitors never tire of pointing out.)

Although his writing is funny, and quirky, there is always a serious point behind it, he insists. The robot prostitutes piece, for instance, was written partly to make people ponder the role of STIs in tourism (which won't be so much a problem with, ahem, ‘fully flushable’ sex robots), and the very real scandal of human trafficking. As Yeoman puts it, “If we just replace sex workers with robots, all the problems disappear.”

Again, it is a plausible point. So will it actually happen? “There's a long way to go,” he says, diplomatically. But then, he'd know, wouldn't he?