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Visitor and non-visitor destination images: The influence of political instability in South-Eastern Europe

Abstract

Against the lingering legacy of war and political instability, the destination image is one of the most important issues for destination policy makers, as it has a decisive role to play in the destination choice process. The aim of the study reported here was to determine the images of countries of ex-Yugoslavia as tourism destinations. In contrast to image studies that have usually adopted structured (questionnaire) approaches and have mostly identified images of those who had visited a place, in this study qualitative approach was adopted. Data-collection was by way of semi-structured interviews with people who had and with people who had not visited any one of these countries. The research was carried out, on convenience grounds, in Manchester. The interview was structured around the image of these countries in general, atmosphere expected and the listing of distinctive tourism attractions. The issues raised were further refined to ask about 'general' image and also image as a holiday destination as well as to determine what factors might inhibit and what factors might facilitate a visit. Both, visitors and non-visitors commonly referred to culture, people and natural attributes of the countries when describing images held. There was a degree of discernment of differences between countries and also of differences in the key area of 'security'. Images as holiday destinations held by all were positive but especially so for visitors. Non-visitors were generally amenable to the idea of visiting ex-Yugoslavia for a holiday and were aware that the conflict had been more intense in some parts of the region than in others though the image was sometimes applied to all.

Key words: war; destination choice; destination image; qualitative research; ex-Yugoslavia

Introduction

Among the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) Yugoslavia was one of the 'success stories' with respect to tourism. (The term Yugoslavia used throughout this paper refers to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia before its break-up into five/six states from 1991 onwards). There was significant growth in incoming international tourist numbers and expenditure until interrupted by the break-up of the country amid fierce fighting between 1991 and 1995. The outcome of this turmoil was the creation of several countries - Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia - in place of the former Yugoslavia. All ex-commu-

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nist CEE countries have, since the early 1990s faced the challenge of adjusting to new markets now available to them and to the loss of other markets. The five (now six, with the independence of Montenegro in 2006) countries of ex-Yugoslavia have, in addition, had to confront issues arising from warfare in their territories and from the lingering legacy of that warfare.

Whatever the policies adopted to address these matters, the issue of image among potential visitors is a key one. It is recognised that destination image has a decisive role to play in the destination-choice process. The aim of the study reported in this paper was to determine the images of countries of ex-Yugoslavia as tourist destinations. Of particular interest was the determination of the possible influence on image of the warfare that has occurred.

The research problem was basically that image of a destination may well be influenced by political instability. It was acknowledged that image was not the sole, or necessarily the most significant, determinant of destination choice but nonetheless that it forms an important part of destination evaluation. If political instability was recognised and also was considered to have an inhibitor effect, then the implication would be that tourism flow would be affected. As in many other image studies however, only image was determined in this study and the influence of any emergent image on the decision to visit was not identified. It was also acknowledged that recent instability in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia has not been universal and the study sought to determine how far interviewees saw the area as one or were more discriminating with respect to this possible aspect of image.

Further, this particular geographical area provided a context for adopting an approach to determining image that was to be different from that in most other studies. Material was to be gathered through face-to-face interviews (rather than questionnaire surveys), views of people who had visited and of those who had not were to be sought and the information (from visitors) was to be gathered after, rather than during, the visit.

Destination image

The success of the ex-Yugoslavia countries in attracting tourists will depend, in part, on destination image. Destination choice is the outcome of numerous complex factors though many models, explicitly or otherwise, confer a significant role on image in the process (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). These models have often been formulated as multi-stage, sequential models utilising choice sets (Goodall, 1988; Stabler, 1988; Um & Crompton, 1990; Um & Crompton, 1992; Pearce, 2005). Image will influence whether or not a destination features in a potential tourist's awareness set or evoked set. Tourism is a high-risk, experience product and its sale depends upon the generation of positive attitudes and expectations through information available to the potential tourist. Image will be the basis for destination evaluation and will need to be such that a destination has the potential to satisfy holiday motivations. An incongruent image will result in a place being in a consumer's inept set rather than evoked set. The success of destination positioning depends on projecting a view of that destination that matches the needs of the targeted market segment (Reilly, 1990; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999b; Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002). Whilst image is widely considered to have a significant place in the destination choice process, there is little to suggest that its role is decisive. Choice will be the outcome of the interaction of image (internal influence) and motives as well as time, cost and the like (external influences) which are more evidently influential in the evoked set (Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002).

Image is often regarded as part of the 'information-search' stage of destination choice (Mansfeld, 1992). That information is received by the tourist from many different sources which may be categorised as 'organic' and 'induced' (Gunn, 1997). Organic is acquired (often unconsciously or passively) from newspapers, television, films, books, word-of-mouth whereas induced image is the outcome of an overt process designed to attract tourists - such as advertisements by destination marketing organisations. Others have modified these terms such that, for instance, in Gartner (1993) 'organic' had the narrower meaning of image arising from experience of a previous visit and 'autonomous' refers to image derived from newspapers and films etc. Fakeye and Crompton (1991) envisaged the image generation process as a sequential one with an initial organic image becoming induced as potential tourists search for information about a destination; a 'complex' image was the outcome of a visit.

The role of image has not always been expressed explicitly, however. There are numerous papers that propose a positive relationship between image and consumer choice (Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Selby & Morgan, 1996; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Gallarza, Saura & Garcia, 2002; Bigne, Sanchez & Sanchez, 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007) but few studies have established unequivocally a relationship between image and visit (Clotey & Lennon, 2003). Several studies have identified an influence of image on those who have been to a place; the influence has been expressed as intent to re-visit or to recommend to others rather than actual performance (Milman & Pizam, 1995; Bigne et al., 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007). Similarly, few have established an actual behavioural relationship for first-time, potential visitors other than as a predisposition to visit (Leisen, 2001; Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002).

Although image studies have been particularly numerous, most focus on establishing the nature of image and its measurement and with establishing the image of particular places than with determining its consequences or a causal association with choice (Pike, 2002). Destination image is rather a nebulous concept, having been defined in a number of ways and is often referred to using terms such as impressions, attitudes, beliefs and emotional thoughts about a place (White, 2004). Given the confusion about the term, at least one researcher has suggested that 'perhaps understanding an individual's perceptions, emotions or attitudes.....are sufficient (White, 2005, p. 192). Nonetheless, studies of image have a long history in tourism and continue to be undertaken (Jenkins, 1999; Pike, 2002). Echtner and Ritchie (1991), among the first to attempt to establish its nature and operationalise it, suggested that it was not simply a matter of views about particular attributes of the place but was also a more holistic impression.

A variety of techniques for determining image has usually been adopted but invariably has focused on questionnaire surveys. Some of these have been criticised as dealing primarily with individual attributes of a destination rather than with a more holistic view of a place (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000). A less-structured approach may be more revealing of such a view and of images that are freely-generated without the element of pre-determination that is characteristic of questionnaires (Selby & Morgan, 1996; Dann, 1995, 1996; Ryan & Cave, 2005).

Whatever the technique adopted, studies have usually identified images held by those who have been to a destination. Images held by those who have not been may contribute to an explanation of 'non-choice' of a destination and be useful in developing marketing strategies (Selby & Morgan, 1996; Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002). A comparison of images held by such non-visitors with images held by visitors to a destination may also have significance. In studies where this has occurred, visitors' images were usually

more favourable than were non-visitors' (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999b).

About equal numbers of studies have focused on tourists during their visit and on tourists who have returned home and whose trip is therefore complete (Pike; 2002). In both cases image has not been determined pre-visit and therefore the studies have not contributed to determining the significance of image in the decision process itself other than via post-hoc rationalisation.

Political instability and tourism

It is likely that political instability will contribute towards the generation of an image that is not conducive to tourist flow. 'Researchers unanimously agree in principle that political violence in any form is detrimental to destination image and, as a result, to tourist flows' (Sonmez, 1998, p. 443). In the case of the ex-Yugoslavia countries, the extra dimension of conflict is likely to have entered image. Different people obviously have different images of a particular place - not only in the bipolar sense of positive and negative but also as a range of views of a place that could satisfy different motivations. Political instability may well in some circumstances overlie this diversity of views to create a more universal negative one - however misplaced this image of instability might be with respect to the country or region as a whole or to particular parts. It is not suggested that any image (negative or otherwise) evident for ex-Yugoslavia countries would only be a result of political instability as there are potentially many contributory factors.

There are though few destination image studies of the former Yugoslavia. Konecnik's (2002) study of Slovenia's tourist image was based on images held by travel professionals. The views of those who had visited the country or who had some contact with Slovenians were more positive than were those who had not. Typically, the people and natural attractions were the most highly rated attributes and, for those who had visited, factors such as accommodation, infrastructure, cleanliness and safety were rated more highly than by those who had not. Perceptions of Croatia were briefly reported in Meler and Ruzic (1999); three studies were referred to though it was not clear how the conclusions of each were derived. They suggested that Croatia was viewed as being low-cost, having strengths in scenery, climate and hospitality but having less satisfactory ratings than competitor countries on issues such as restaurants, shopping, food and entertainment.

All holiday destination decisions are characterised by risk which is influential in the avoidance of places (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998, Lawson & Thyne, 2001). Of the potential risks, 'tourists in the 21st century overwhelmingly express safety-related concerns, especially in the context of overseas travel' (Dolničar, 2005, p. 205); this relates to terrorism in particular but also to war. Pizam and Mansfeld (2006) proposed a typology of tourism security which was a matrix of the nature to the incident, its impact and reactions to it. It is not unreasonable to assume that conflict in the former Yugoslavia has had an effect on tourism both directly and indirectly in an influence on destination image and assessment of risk. Pizam and Smith (2000), though, concluded that effects of conflict on tourism (specifically terrorism in their world-wide study) were short-lived. The spill-over effects of war on tourism (effects on neighbouring countries) have also been short-lived with respect to the on-going Middle East conflict (Mansfeld, 1995).

Tourism in the area

Tourist flows from Western Europe and USA to CEE countries during the Cold War were limited and travel to CEE from the west 'was akin to an obstacle race' (Medlik, 1990, p. 95). Yugoslavia was an exception and it 'developed as a major destination for western tourists in the early 1960s' (Sallnow, 1985, p. 113). Most foreign tourists to Yugoslavia visited Croatia (and its Dalmatian coast); the industry was largely dependent on western European tour operators who brought in a family market attracted by the low-cost (Allcock, 1991). Most of the rest of Yugoslavia was not identified with tourism.

The declarations of independence by Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia in 1991-92 led to bitter and bloody conflict which was terminated formally in 1995 though skirmishes on a lesser scale continued. The desire of Kosovo to be independent led to further conflict in 1998. The warfare and resultant media attention had an adverse effect on tourist flows (Beirman, 2003; Hall, 1998a). In Croatia, for instance, international tourist arrivals fell from 7.0 million in 1990 to 1.3 million in 1991 (Mihalić, 1995). Development of tourism was inhibited, upgrading and new facilities were put on hold and marketing suspended. There was also some damage to tourism attractions and facilities though Croatian coastal resorts (with the exception of Dubrovnik) actually suffered little damage. The period of the 1990s coincided with a desire from tourists for enhanced quality of product including accommodation and service. The conflict obviously inhibited the ability of the Yugoslavian countries to maintain standards let alone improve them. In the meantime, the growth of consumer demand had become more apparent for niche tourism of various forms with a lesser emphasis on mass coastal tourism (Hall, 1998b).

There has been a tourism recovery since 1995 but growth in international tourism arrivals to Croatia, for instance, (which still dominates tourism in ex-Yugoslavia) was considerably less between 1990 and 2000 than in countries such as Spain and Greece, Italy and Turkey (Bunja, 2003; Radnić & Ivandić, 1999). Much of the recovery in Croatia and Slovenia has been inflow from proximate markets including Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria and Italy; the more distant markets of UK, France and the Netherlands have not recovered. Tourists to both Croatia and Slovenia have been more typically independent travelers than before 1991 and there is a growing number of low-spend central European tourists. They may also have lower quality expectations and the consequence may be to 'generate complacency in Croatia's industry' (Jordan, 2000, p. 538). Croatia continues to dominate tourism in the former Yugoslavian countries (see table 1) and also to dominate CEE countries with respect to international tourism receipts. The number of arrivals in Croatia (in 2004) was 7.9m (behind Poland and Hungary at 14.2m and 12.2m respectively) and ahead of Czech Republic at 6.0m; international tourism receipts for Croatia (at \$7,074m) exceeded those of any other CEE country, with the next largest being Poland at \$5,828m (WTO, 2005).

There continue to be mixed messages in the media about these countries. Favourable publicity has included press articles extolling the virtues of buying holiday homes in Croatia. Belgrade (Serbia) and Montenegro were identified in one UK national newspaper as two of the 30 tourist hot spots for 2004 and Ljubljana was the subject of a press article that labelled it 'the most laid-back city in Europe'. Belgrade was reported in another national newspaper travel supplement as being the 'next eastern European hotspot'.

Table 1
**INTERNATIONAL TOURIST ARRIVALS
 AT SELECTED CEE COUNTRIES 2001-04**

Country	International tourist arrivals
Poland*	14.2 m
Hungary*	12.2 m
Croatia*	7.9 m
Slovenia**	1.3 m
Serbia and Montenegro***	351,000
Bosnia and Herzegovina***	90,000

* 2004 (WTO, 2005)

** 2003 (Mintel, 2005)

*** 2001 (WTO, 2003)

There are, however, continuing media reports of issues relating to the conflicts. Trials of war criminals at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague have kept the conflict in the public eye. There is continuing publicity about the desire to bring others to trial which is often accompanied by comment on an apparent reluctance of the Serbian government, in particular, to co-operate in this.

Study methodology

The aim of this present study was to determine, for the countries of the former Yugoslavia, the images that were held by individuals for tourism in those countries.

As noted above, image studies have usually adopted structured (questionnaire) approaches and have mostly identified images of those who had visited a place and often during the visit. As justified earlier, this study adopted a different approach.

Data-collection in this study was by way of semi-structured interviews with people who had and with people who had not visited any one of these countries. The research was carried out, on convenience grounds, in Manchester, a large city in the north-west of England. It is not suggested that UK visitors to ex-Yugoslavia countries are particularly important; even in Croatia, the market share is only just over 1% compared with German visitors at nearly 23% (WTO, 2001). It is also the case that these countries are not the most popular holiday destinations for UK residents. UK residents' visits (all categories) to Croatia, for instance, are less than 2% of the number of their holiday visits to Spain (MSTTD, Croatia, 2005). The study was carried out in UK for convenience reasons though this market is being targeted by, for instance, the Croatian National Tourist Board and UK tour operators offer holidays (to Croatia and Slovenia in particular) in their programmes.

The sample used in the study was a non-probability one. This arose from the desire to undertake a 'qualitative' study through face-to-face interviews (unlike many other destination image studies). As a consequence the sample was small in number. The target population for the study was two-fold - people who had been to one of the ex-Yugoslavia countries and people who had not been. The size and characteristics of these two sub-populations were unknown and, as a consequence, this along with small sample size, meant it would not have been meaningful to adopt probability or random sampling.

The non-probability sampling approach adopted may be characterised in three ways: purposive, quota and snowball. It was 'purposive' in that both visitors and non-visitors were sought; accessing interviewees at 'home' rather than on holiday allowed for capturing of views of both. It was 'quota' in that a balance of age, sex and occupation was sought to approximate a cross-section of the adult population in both cases. It was 'snowball' in that some interviewees were interviewed as a result of recommendation by initial informants; the first few interviewees were acquaintances of one of the researchers but others were gained on a snowball basis. The results from such non-probability sampling cannot be claimed to be representative of a wider population. Indeed, the purpose of the study was not to achieve representativeness but to gain deeper insight into people's views.

A total of 31 interviews were carried out during 2004 and were held either at the interviewees' place of work or home. Most interviews (19) were with people who had not been to any country of Yugoslavia and the rest (12) with those who had.

The research instrument consisted of a number of topics to be introduced to the interviewee - these dealt with holistic views rather than particular attributes. The form and content of the interviews was based, in part, on qualitative elements of other predominantly quantitative studies. For instance, open-ended questions requiring interviewees to describe image that came to mind, atmosphere expected and the listing of distinctive tourist attractions were derived from Echtner and Ritchie (1993); they were also used in Grosspietsch (2006). They were also asked to list three words that best described the location; the source for this was Reilly (1990) and Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001). The issues raised in the interviews were further refined to ask about 'general' image and also image as a holiday destination as well as to determine what factors might inhibit and what factors might facilitate a visit; facilitators and inhibitors were concepts introduced in destination choice by Um and Crompton (1990).

Interviewees were shown a list of the six countries and capital cities of these six at the start of the interview; this was so that the researchers could confirm that all interviewees were referring to the same locations.

The analysis of data followed conventional qualitative techniques which may be summarised as 'theming' (Smith, 1995). Such qualitative approaches are becoming more common in tourism research (Riley & Love, 2000; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). The rationale is widely recognised and lies in the ability to gain insight into behaviour in a way that is difficult through more quantitative approaches (Seale, 1998; Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Results

Throughout, interviewees who had never visited a former Yugoslavia country are referred to as 'non-visitors' and those who had, as 'visitors'. Of the 19 non-visitors, most (14) had never considered visiting any of these places for a holiday. Of the 12 interviewees who had visited the former Yugoslavia, all had been for a holiday and two had also visited friends and relatives. Of those who indicated where they had been, Croatia was the most popular destination (visited by ten interviewees) though Slovenia, Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia had also been visited. Half had travelled independently and half had arranged their holidays through a tour operator.

GENERAL IMAGES

Most non-visitors felt there were differences between the countries - in culture, language, food, 'ethnicity', 'religious differences' and 'architectural styles'. Most however, usually expressed differences in terms of conflict: 'Bosnia and Kosovo, I have very negative connotations about just in terms of conflict'. Others such as Serbia and Croatia were also identified in this way so that one non-visitor 'would want to look into these a bit more if I was going on holiday to any of these places'. There was some recognition that not all (especially Montenegro) were affected by the conflict in the same way.

Visitors were less likely to identify countries with war compared with the non-visitors though there was an acknowledgement expressed by one visitor that 'there have always been problems in the Balkans'. Religion, language, currency and geography were more likely to be mentioned as differentiators. Croatia was identified with 'beaches and the holidays' and also as being 'quite historical because you've got places like Dubrovnik'. Bosnia was associated by one visitor with 'the Sarajevo Ottoman empire type architecture' and by another with 'a big underground music scene'. One visitor said 'I imagine there's a lot more poverty in certain parts especially the southern part'. Another referred to Slovenia in terms of 'lakes, mountains, that kind of thing whereas Croatia is much more the seaside and the beach'; Macedonia was considered by yet another visitor to have Greek influences whereas Slovenia would be more Austrian.

When asked what atmosphere or mood came to mind when thinking about these countries, both non-visitors and visitors were up-beat and optimistic. One non-visitor considered that television images had shown that 'the people seem pretty happy and pretty inviting to be honest'; the conflict was once more regarded as an influential factor though this time, as expressed by another non-visitor, as a reason for people being 'extra friendly and pleased to see people visiting the country'. Croatia had a few more positive comments than other places; they included a comment that it is 'quite calm now and ... quite sort of warm and welcoming' and another that it 'looks really nice'. The few downbeat observations commonly referred to the conflict and media images. One non-visitor felt that 'everyone's depressed aren't they because they've got no money' whereas another's image was of 'ladies with scarves, like not happy people'. As a consequence, a further non-visitor felt that 'I just don't think it's a holiday place'.

A visitor described the atmosphere as 'calm, just incredibly calm and relaxing and there was no hustle or bustle at all'. There was common reference to local populations in terms such as being 'very happy and they do enjoy life more than English people do', 'peaceful and pleasant and helpful people' and 'we were extremely well looked after and everybody was very friendly'. Recent visitors remarked on how things appear to be changing: one said that 'people are forgetting the war; the youngest kids who are growing up don't remember it' and another felt that people 'wanted to move on and it was all about looking to the future'. Some who visited some time ago commented that it was 'well sort of going back in time' and another remarked that 'rather remote and wild isn't perhaps exactly the word but not as urbanised and developed on the whole as western Europe'.

HOLIDAY DESTINATION IMAGE

Other interview topics focused on tourism issues. Images of these countries as possible holiday destinations held by non-visitors were predominantly associated with natural attributes. One non-visitor was 'aware of the politics of those countries but also I'm aware that it is a beautiful part of the world'. Another had gained an impression from

television programmes that Slovenia 'looks quite nice, sort of forestry (sic), quite like log cabins sort of thing'. The coastline was also referred to favourably by several non-visitors with terms such as 'really beautiful' and 'quite like Italy ...; pretty seaside resorts'. Fewer mentioned culture or heritage as part of the holiday image. Architecture was mentioned and one non-visitor assumed 'there's Byzantine there and obviously an Arabic influence as well with mosques'.

Almost all visitors had positive images of these countries as holiday destinations and these were also mostly associated with the natural attributes of the region. One visitor commented that 'the sea is really clean around Croatia and Montenegro'; another referred to 'long strips of very narrow beaches; beautiful clear blue sea'. Croatia was described by a visitor as 'interesting as well as beautiful and cheap' and Slovenia by another as a place where 'the food's great, everybody's incredibly friendly ... and it's cheap; It's just absolutely beautiful'. Dubrovnik was described by a visitor as 'stunning; I thought it was the best place in the world; I just thought it was beautiful'. Other visitors recalled 'an absolutely fabulous Roman villa that's washed by the sea and you can dive in' and another considered that 'there's a lot of good music but that's not so much Croatia, more Bosnia'. There were comments too about people who were 'interesting', 'friendly' and 'very warm and welcoming'. Some referred to ways of life that were 'traditional'; one visitor referred to 'little old ladies in black dresses, black head scarves' and another to being 'given lifts on the horse-drawn cart and things like that'. A further image was of 'peasant women in the fields, picking all the produce'. There was a general view that the countries were un-commercialised expressed by one visitor as 'unspoilt by modern flash and trash that's the appeal'.

Negative images were expressed by non-visitors only and these were usually conflict-related. One had an image of 'decrepit buildings and bridges that had been blown up and stuff like that; what I've seen on the telly' whilst another thought that the region resembled 'a building site obviously from when they had the war'. Many did recognise, however, that there were moves afoot to redevelop: 'there's a lot of women's magazines promoting places like Croatia and I think Serbia maybe; countries which I suppose are trying to build themselves back up from a war'. Further negative images referred to poverty, 'bleakness' and low standards. In all, there were mixed views about these countries as holiday destinations.

TYPE OF HOLIDAY AND HOLIDAYMAKER

The most frequently mentioned type of holiday envisaged by both non-visitors and visitors was a 'cultural' one in the sense of heritage and sight-seeing. Beach holidays were identified by relatively few non-visitors. The countries were regarded by a non-visitor as places for 'not just lying on the beach, more going around touring, visiting places and seeing things'. Another expected to 'see some of the countryside, see some of the architecture, see how the people live, see some of its history'. Heritage was considered by visitors to be an important tourism asset: 'there's obviously so much history and things of cultural interest, I don't think the war would have literally obliterated those'. One visitor wished to visit Sarajevo as 'I think it would be quite interesting to see what actually happened, but that's kind of recent history'. Views varied to include adventure and activity holidays but the single most common (though not majority) view for visitors was of beach holidays, in some cases combined with culture and sight-seeing. There was some doubt, however, for one visitor about 'whether, you know, you would go for a two-week beach holiday; Most people would go to Greece or the Canaries'; another expressed the view that 'for most people the perception would be Yugoslavia is a place that has so much to offer in terms of the cultural places to go and experience'.

The typical holidaymaker was seen by both sets of interviewee as being 'interested in history, visiting cities, a bit older maybe 30s and upward' (non-visitor). The older tourist was commonly referred to and the region was not really regarded as a destination for family holidays. The appeal to the older tourist was considered to arise because of the nature of its attractions and because 'it's not commercial and maybe not as crowded; peaceful'. In addition one non-visitor believed that older persons would be attracted because 'they know more about what's happened over there'. One or two non-visitors felt though that there was a shift by these countries to attract a younger clientele and one believed that 'there's quite a lot of young people go there; there's a few resorts that are supposed to be the places to go'. One person had visited 'slightly out-of season [and] it's mostly mature people'. This according to another visitor was because 'the older generation they're not bothered about sitting on a beach for two weeks; they are looking for culture and the history and tradition of these places'. It was explained by another as 'I don't think of it as the sort of place to jolly and drink'.

There was also some suggestion that the more adventurous holidaymaker could be attracted - people 'who aren't so bothered about having a nice hotel, who don't mind roughing it a bit and want to experience what it's like' (non-visitor). A few visitors also thought that the more adventurous holidaymaker might be attracted; one saw this in the sense of it being a place people might have reservations about visiting but another regarded the region as one that might appeal to young people as it was 'new' and different. Similarly, another visitor considered that 'loads of backpackers go there don't they, but the educated ones'. Slovenia was considered by one visitor to be 'fabulous' because of the walking and climbing opportunities. Associated with this there was also a view expressed by one non-visitor that the region would appeal to 'people that want a bargain; we could get more for our money over there' and to 'people who want a cheap, good holiday'. This view was shared by some visitors one of whom also believed that those who wanted to get away from the usual Spanish type of holiday' would be attracted; this widespread view was reflected in the observation that holidaymakers would be 'certainly not the sort of lager louts; just people who are interested in travelling and having a nice quiet holiday'.

The coastal region, in particular, was considered by visitors to appeal to families: one visitor said 'I think people with young families could go there and young people; the beaches are supposed to be absolutely lovely but there's lots of other things to see as well, you know, natural wonders'.

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

There was a distinct inability on the part of visitors to name any specific tourist attractions in these countries; only four did. In each case a city was named: three named Belgrade and one Dubrovnik. The former city was described as having a 'famous bridge' and as a 'sort of beautiful place' as well having 'a lot of world war stuff'. The non-visitor who mentioned Dubrovnik thought of it as being 'pretty devastated'.

Nearly all visitors were able to name some attraction. Dubrovnik was commonly mentioned in this context, being variously described as 'my favourite', 'beautiful' and 'the star area'. Caves in Slovenia were also mentioned by several visitors as were that country's lakes. Other attractions mentioned included the pharmacy at Olimje, the Pula amphitheatre, Lipizzaner horses and a 'war-destroyed bridge'. Zagreb, Opatija and Belgrade were also identified, with the latter being described by one as 'very interesting, very old-world'.

FACILITATORS AND INHIBITORS

Further elements of the interview asked about what would encourage (facilitators) or discourage (inhibitors) an interviewee holidaying in the study area. The most important factor that non-visitors felt would encourage visits was 'information'. This related not only to obvious matters such as facilities and attractions but also to security matters as reflected in one comment about 'knowing that it's a reasonably safe place to go'. There was optimism in as much as several had noticed increased publicity in magazines and, for instance, 'more [television] travel programmes doing things on Croatia'. There was a general feeling expressed by one non-visitor that visits were more likely 'if it was advertised a bit more; you see everywhere else advertised'.

Convenience was considered to be another important facilitator especially in terms of flights: 'if you can get there from your local airport, that makes it a lot easier'. Cost was also mentioned; one non-visitor felt that 'if it was cheap I would go' whereas another believed that already 'everything is quite cheap isn't it'? Personal recommendation was mentioned by a few; one non-visitor comment was that 'I like to know somebody else that has been and that can recommend it to me'.

Visitors also referred to cost and convenience as facilitators. Flights were considered to be expensive; one visitor commented that 'they just don't do real bargain flights' and another believed that this was, in part, due to the fact that 'they're not part of Europe so they can't take the small budget airlines; [and] the Croatian government, they haven't been so willing to let in the competition'. An increase in flight frequency was also considered to be an important factor. Some felt that it was a low cost region and one said 'I would think of going because it's not exactly the most expensive place on earth to go'. There was some agreement that some enhanced marketing might be necessary to remove perceptions of conflict; one visitor remarked that 'I still think there's an awful lot to be done to convince people that it's not only a safe place to go but it's a beautiful place to go and it's not untouched by war but has completely recovered'.

With respect to inhibitors, it was perhaps not surprising that security was the issue most frequently mentioned by non-visitors and visitors alike. This related to the prospect of continuing conflict expressed by a non-visitor as: 'I think probably a lot of people think with it having a civil war.....that would be in the back of their mind'. This threat was expressed by another non-visitor as 'terrorism' though who also had the 'impression that there is more fighting between these little countries; you see it on the news'. In addition, there was the matter of a legacy of damage and another non-visitor stated that 'you obviously wouldn't go to somewhere that was, you know, particularly ravaged by war type of thing'. One visitor said 'I don't think that Serbian aggression in the area has gone away by any means'. Security doubts continued to be fed by the media as reflected in the visitor comment that 'the BBC war correspondent showed very graphic images of the damage that was done in Bosnia in particular which I saw only two or three weeks ago; in some ways these images override the images I had 18 years ago on my actual holiday'. Another visitor considered the main problem was 'racism' which was 'endemic in parts of the region; I wouldn't want to be supporting a regime that I thought was racist'.

The prospect of a poor tourism experience also concerned some non-visitors. This related not only to the general atmosphere - 'it's not really a holiday mode type of place' - but also to perceptions of low accommodation, food and service standards.

DESCRIPTORS

Finally, interviewees were asked to choose three words they felt best described the countries of ex-Yugoslavia as a place for a holiday. The most common descriptors (18 out of 55 words) used by non-visitors related to geographical features such as 'beaches', 'urbanised' or the weather ('hot', 'cold') and adjectives including 'scenic' and 'attractive'. Nearly all of these can be interpreted in a positive light as can terms referring to culture and heritage: ten words in total including 'cultural', 'historic' and 'great architecture'. There was also a significant number of references to terms used positively such as 'new experience', 'friendly people', 'cheap' (five mentions), 'sedate', 'jolly' and 'varied'. Negative terms were fewer (nine words) and were not confined to conflict though this was referred to three times; other words included 'undeveloped', 'bleak' and 'not a lot there'.

There was a similar pattern in the words (28 in all) used by visitors. Most words had positive connotations and were adjectives such as 'interesting', 'different', 'undiscovered' and 'unspoilt'; 'beautiful' was the most commonly used word (five mentions). In contrast to non-visitors though there were relatively few words (three only) that referred to geographical features and there were no references to culture or heritage. There were few words (five only) that had negative connotations; one directly referred to conflict and the others, such as 'fractured' and 'uncomfortable', were more oblique.

Conclusions

There are obvious reservations associated with the representative nature of any such small-scale qualitative study. There are no claims that this study demonstrates views that are representative of the British public or of any other set.

Notwithstanding this a number of conclusions may be drawn. There are obvious problems in analysing and interpreting material from semi-structured interviews and, inevitably, the outcome is more complex than that from a more structured questionnaire approach. The study does, though, add to work such as that of Dann (1995, 1996) and Ryan and Cave (2005) who adopted unstructured approaches to data collection (though their analytical approaches differed) as well as that of other researchers (including Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 1993) who combined unstructured with structured approaches. Views were unprompted and were expressed in interviewees' own words. There was the advantage too that interviewees who had visited the former Yugoslavia were interviewed post-visit and their holiday experience was therefore complete.

This study also looked at non-visitors (as opposed to the usual focus on visitors) as suggested, for instance, by Selby and Morgan (1996). Most of the non-visitors had not considered taking a holiday anywhere in ex-Yugoslavia and there were no reasons expressed why such a holiday had not been taken; ex-Yugoslavia had not been in the evoked set. For the few non-visitors that had considered the destination, conflict or instability been a dissuasive factor.

Further, the study compared images held by non-visitors with those held by visitors. Images of and views on atmosphere in these countries were generally up-beat for both non-visitors and visitors; both did refer to conflict though this was more evident in the responses of non-visitors. Both sets of interviewee also commonly referred to culture, people and natural attributes of the countries when describing images held; natural attributes dominated images, more so than any other feature. There was a degree of discernment of differences between countries and also of differences in the key area of 'security'.

Images as holiday destinations held by all were positive but especially so for visitors; as with general image, most people associated holidays in these countries with their natural attributes especially scenery. The non-positive images held by a few non-visitors were conflict-related. There was consistency too between non-visitors and visitors in the view of type of holiday they associated with ex-Yugoslavia; they saw the region as one that would be a place for cultural and adventure holidays. 'Cultural' was used less in the sense of visiting museums, art galleries, historic buildings or theatres and more in the sense of experiencing 'difference' - of way -of-life and scenery. Beach holidays were not often mentioned. Type of holidaymaker was linked to this; the older cultural holidaymaker was commonly referred to by both non-visitors and visitors. Specific knowledge of what tourist attractions there would be in ex-Yugoslavia countries was, not surprisingly, greater among visitors than among non-visitors. As in quantitative studies (such as Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Konecnik, 2002) visitors were more likely to have positive views than were non-visitors.

Non-visitors were generally amenable to the idea of visiting ex-Yugoslavia for a holiday: six non-visitors (out of 19) felt that ex-Yugoslavia would have no appeal as a holiday destination. Both non-visitors and visitors considered that more information, especially about security, would encourage visits as would more convenient and cheaper flights. There was also agreement between the two groups that conflict could act as a constraint upon visits.

With respect to words used to describe ex-Yugoslavia as a place for a holiday, most used by both non-visitors and visitors were positive. Non-visitors referred more specifically to natural features and to culture than did visitors whose descriptions were more generalised.

It is evident that most interviewees were convinced of the 'attractions' of ex-Yugoslavia as a holiday destination - the conflict issue seems to be 'the problem'. There is a lingering doubt in most non-visitors' minds about these countries as holiday destinations but there did appear to be a potential demand that could become reality if some of the more negative perceptions could be removed. There was an appreciation among non-visitors that the conflict had been more intense in some parts of the region than in others though the image was sometimes applied to all.

In all, this study confirms the view (such as in Sonmez, 1998; Pizam & Smith, 2000) that political instability (in this case, war) can influence destination image.

Implications

There are a number of 'practical' implications of this study for image-generators and marketers of ex-Yugoslavia countries. These include improving knowledge and awareness of the countries and their tourism product as knowledge is very much confined to Croatia. Images of conflict - either war damage, or continuing or future instability will need to be dispelled. There are strong positive images of these countries as holiday destinations, images which reinforce some of the strategies of tourist boards - to attract the higher-spend niche markets rather than the mass market sea-and-sun market. In this respect this study confirms what the tourist boards have been seeking to achieve. It is interesting, however, that these images relate less strongly to the reality which is the dominance of the beach holiday product in ex-Yugoslavia - however, it may be that ex-Yugoslavia is, as yet, less readily regarded in that light by UK residents and more as a destination for the cultural and adventure holidaymaker.

With respect to the research process itself, the initial objectives of obtaining views of non-visitors, of visitors who had completed their visit and of comparing the views of both sets were achieved and judged to have been justifiable. Similarly the data-collection and analysis methods (semi-structured interviews and 'theming') were also considered to have yielded meaningful outcomes. The approach meant that a more holistic view of these countries was gained and images and views, which were unprompted, were expressed in interviewees' own language. It enabled a range of views to emerge that may not have been so evident under the constraining influence of a questionnaire. The weakness in this was the inevitable difficulty in providing a 'tidy' set of results that fitted neatly into (pre-determined) categories; it does, however, confirm just how complex a concept image is and how difficult it is to analyse it meaningfully.

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