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Tourists' perceptions of capital cities: The case study of Zagreb, Croatia

Abstract

Tourism is an expanding industry throughout the world. Croatia has an extended history with tourism. Most tourists come to Croatia in order to visit the coastline with its many islands, blue sea, and ancient towns. The coastline of Croatia is a rare and beautiful destination. There are old towns, clear water, and a stunning contrast of sea and mountains. In addition, a multitude of islands, the native Mediterranean food, and clean sea help to sustain an attraction for travelers. Adding to this, the towns of Dubrovnik, Split, and Hvar are often in the headlines of popular tourist magazines. Yet, the often bypassed capital of Croatia, Zagreb, can be easily visited on the way to the coast. Therefore, it is important for the city of Zagreb to regularly gain information about tourists who visit Zagreb. Also, there is a need for the tourism industry of Croatia to include more than the Adriatic coast, especially the hinterlands as well as the capital city Zagreb. The purpose of this research is to understand English speaking tourist's specific recommendations for Zagreb, relying on qualitative research. Three researchers had 89 interviews with a total of 129 participants. This general qualitative research incorporated interviews as the main source of information. After analyzing the data, the findings indicate Zagreb as friendly, easy to get around, and as an old, quaint town with enjoyable activities. The main suggestion for the city of Zagreb was to find ways to improve the physical structure and provide more information for tourists.

Key Words:

tourism; qualitative research; capital city; Zagreb; Croatia

Introduction Zagreb - a city of contrasts: Tourists' perceptions

Tourism has been compared to a sacred journey, a process resulting in fatality to prejudice, as well as being a modern ritual (Singh, 2004). Tourism can also more practically be defined "as a temporary stay in a certain area by people in pursuit of their recreational, cultural, or other needs" (Bilen, 1998, p. 4). This pursuit is also a growing industry/business throughout the world (Dimanche & Ferry, 2003) and is expanding with interesting markets such as students (Carr & Axelsen, 2005) and older adults (Roberson, 2003). Between the years 1950 and 1996 the overall international growth of tourist industry increased by twenty-four times; hardly any other economic activity has witnessed similar growth (Bilen, 1998). Furthermore, some writers discuss how tourism is now the leading global industry (Dragičević, Čizmar & Poljanec-Borić, 1998)

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and, important for this research, is the increasing positive financial impact of tourism on countries such as Croatia (Tomljenović, Marušić, Weber, Hendija, & Boranić, 2004).

Continuous and updated findings from tourists are an important way for host countries to meet the needs of tourists. Croatia has historically been a tourism destination and possesses high global tourism potential (Dragičević et al., 1998). However, the capital city of Zagreb is often bypassed or overlooked by tourists on the way to the usual destination of the Adriatic coast. Furthermore, in general, very little has been written about the significance of tourism in capital cities (Hall, 2002).

The coastline of Croatia is a remarkably beautiful destination. There are ancient cities, pristine water, and a contrast of mountains with sea. In addition, a multitude of islands (1100), the native Mediterranean food, and clean sea help to sustain a strong lure for travelers. Also old, beautiful towns such as Dubrovnik, Split, and Hvar continue to make headlines of tourist magazines. Zagreb is the capital of Croatia and can be easily visited on the way to the coast. And, with a highway that goes around the city of Zagreb, tourists can quickly continue their trip to the coast. Therefore, it is important for the city of Zagreb to regularly gain information about tourists who do visit Zagreb, especially as it is important to understand that, previously, Croatia's tourism industry during the 1980s was dependent on mass tourism and hardly considered the individual traveler (Jordan, 2000). Also, there is a need for the tourism industry of Croatia to include more than the Adriatic coast, especially the hinterlands as well as the capital city Zagreb (Tomljenović et al., 2004). Against this background, the purpose of this research is to understand English speaking tourist's specific recommendations for Zagreb, relying on qualitative research. By focusing on the English speaking tourists and qualitative approach this study complements the TOMAS Zagreb – a quantitative market research survey of visitors to Zagreb (motives, activities, satisfaction, expenditure) conducted periodically by the Institute for Tourism on behalf of the Tourism Board of Zagreb.

The settings: Croatian tourism overview

Croatia is a diverse country. The eastern Slavonian plains offer large farms, thick forests, and remote swamps. There are old and historical buildings within the capital city of Zagreb. The high mountains of the Velebit Mountains as well as Gorski Kotar contain a variety of walks. The classical and baroque area around Varaždin and Zagorije offer spas, castles, and inspiring churches. And lastly, there is the imposing coastline with pristine waters, eleven hundred islands, stark mountain ranges, and ancient buildings.

Also Croatia has developed a variety of tourism: rural recreational tourism, nature and adventure tourism, nautical tourism, city and cultural tourism, health tourism, as well as traditional sun and sea tourism (Jordan, 2000). The hinterland of Croatia has a variety of unique tourist attractions such as the cultural tourism in various cities, especially Varaždin, Osijek, and Zagreb. Yet these sites are often difficult to access because there is a poor infrastructure that results in visitor dissatisfaction (Tomljenović et al., 2004). Complicating these issues can be solving the problems of trash, litter, dirtiness, and dilapidated buildings (Pearce & Badmin, 2003).

The main reason why tourists come to Croatia is because of the coastline. Most tourists are drawn to the warm Mediterranean areas, rather than the colder continental climate of the rest of Croatia. Even in 1988 at the height of the tourist industry there was an

"intense concentration on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, especially of foreign tourists; in 1988, 97% of all overnight stays took place on the Adriatic coast" (Jordan, 2000, p. 168). Most attempts and noble ideas to encourage tourism in other parts of Croatia have efficiently failed.

The capital city of Croatia is Zagreb. The capital city functions as a center of heritage, culture, government, and business travel. However, Zagreb is usually a one night stopover, if that, on the way to the popular Croatian Adriatic coast. Hall (2002) elaborates on the importance of capital cities. Capital cities are also significant for tourism because of their cultural, heritage, and symbolic roles. They frequently host major national cultural institutions while they also have a significant wider role in the portrayal, preservation and promotion of national heritage and the showcase of national culture. Zagreb is also the main transportation hub for the country of Croatia; national institutions are clustered in a small area as well as the center of the country's government. Therefore research which focuses on learning how to improve tourism in Zagreb is an important concern.

Methodology

This research utilized qualitative approach in order to identify ideas and opinions of tourists visiting Zagreb. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate for the purpose of this research, as the aim was to discover visitors' opinions on their experience of Zagreb. The advantage of the qualitative research, for the purpose of this study, was in its ability to contribute new information, especially from various samples that have been previously overlooked (Mason, 1996). A qualitative perspective also helped to capture the nuances of tourism and travel by welcoming anomalies in the discussion (Kuhn, 1970). In general, qualitative research enables scientists to actively participate in problem finding, to clarify the complexity of difficult situations, and to develop new theory. This is the "goodness" of qualitative research (Peshkin, 1993). This particular style of research was undertaken in order to advance the understanding of Zagreb tourists (Singh, 2004). Reflecting ideas of Wickens (2004) tourists are more than financial objects to be analyzed, there is a need to hear from actual tourists about their ideas and feelings.

Similar to ideas of Middleton (2003) the aim was to understand the visitor's various experiences and to give voice to the ideas and feelings of tourists rather than typical consumer and market driven initiative which characterizes much tourism research (Westwood, 2005). The interview was structured around six main topics involving: a) respondents' perceptions of Zagreb; b) how does Zagreb compare with other cities visited by respondents; c) what have respondents found to be positive about this city; d) what are negative sides of Zagreb; e) what was surprising to respondents about Zagreb and f) what are respondents' suggestions for improving the tourism experience.

This research was conducted in summer (June to August) 2006, by the author and interviewers trained by the author. The population was defined as all English speaking tourists visiting Zagreb. Survey participants were approached while been actually involved in tourism activities in Zagreb and its surroundings. After several rounds of pilot testing, it was found that the best way to identify tourists is to simply approach them on the streets near tourist attractions. Two screening questions were defined – firstly, to ascertain if the approached person is a visitor to the city and, secondly, if the approached person is reasonably fluent in English language. The typical interview lasted thirty minutes. Each interview was written down on paper as accurately as possible. In addition, after each interview, the researcher would read through the material and made

clarifications where required. In total, there were 89 interviews with 129 people participating in the survey.

The demographics of the respondents were as follows. There were 61 male and 68 female participants. Forty-eight were traveling in small groups, 27 were traveling alone, and 26 were as couples. Eight people were on large commercial trips, and five were on business trips. Among those surveyed there were 19 from USA, 18 from Germany, 17 from England, 14 from France, 9 from Italy.

The findings were read through and analyzed based on the six research topics. The results were eventually presented to researchers at the Institute of Tourism. There were questions, comments, and input on this research. These researchers concurred with the findings and felt that this was an important research for the tourism industry of Zagreb. Quotes from participants were incorporated into the findings as well as the frequency of response.

Results

The six questions used in these interviews are followed by the responses of the tourists. Each question also has a table indicating the number of people that mentioned this particular answer. Every attempt was made to include every comment and suggestion by the respondents, and there is an example of some of the most common responses.

THEME 1: PERCEPTION OF ZAGREB

In general, perceptions of Zagreb held by the respondents were mixed. The positive response mainly focused around how much they enjoyed being in the city of Zagreb. The most common response was the word "quaint." Other similar words included "small", "quiet" and "relaxed". Other frequently encountered perceptions were that that Zagreb is "a town with lots of houses, hotels, and cafes" and "a place where you can rest."

Table 1

PERCEPTION OF ZAGREB

Perceptions	Frequency
Quaint	25
Beautiful	17
Very old	16
Variety	15
Nice	14
Modern city	13
Bad shape	7

The next common answer concerned how much they enjoyed walking around and seeing this city. They described the city often with the word "beautiful." Other similar words were "wonderful", "great", "lovely", "terrific" of particular mention was the "beautiful square" (referring to main Ban Jelačić Square.) Next, respondents discussed that there is "so much variety to see" and "There is this variety, for example, in city center, there is an old town, and there is this modern capital with lots of cafes and shops." One person said this is a "city with big contrasts" and another that Zagreb is a "town with history and future".

One group of responses, regarding general perceptions, speaks of Zagreb's historical character - such as Zagreb is "very old." This is reflected with comments such as "You can smell history," and "lot's of historic monuments". A more subdued response was that Zagreb is "nice" as well as a "modern big city". It is this context of a modern big city that is very old indicating that Zagreb is perceived as a city of contrasts. This contrast is seen in the quote that Zagreb is a "fashion town with history."

This open ended question also allowed for the respondents to mention negative aspects of their perception of Zagreb. The most common negative perceptions was that: "Zagreb is in bad shape"; "could do more for itself"; "trams in bad shape"; "It is destroyed from the war" and "dirty suburbs and houses". One quote seems to summarize this section: "Zagreb is a very beautiful old city, but some buildings really need repairing".

THEME 2: HOW DOES ZAGREB COMPARE WITH OTHER CITIES IN EUROPE?

This question indicates what others are thinking about Zagreb in comparison to other places, where responses were extremely consistent. The most frequent answer was that Zagreb is "quieter and smaller" or, similarly, that it "seems smaller, simple", "not so crowded", "much, much smaller". Respondents discussed how much they enjoyed walking around the city of Zagreb, and that it was simple to navigate. The concept of being simple and small was reflected in a positive light.

Table 2
COMPARISON OF ZAGREB WITH OTHER EUROPEAN CITIES

Comparisons	Frequency
Quieter and smaller	33
Different	18
Like Prague	14

Also respondents discussed how Zagreb is different from other cities using expressions such as "lots of variety", "unique", "very interesting" and "can't compare with others". Yet, some respondents would actually name a city such as Prague, Berlin, Graz in comparing Zagreb to another place.

THEME 3: POSITIVE EXPERIENCES AND IMPRESSIONS OF ZAGREB

This question is important because it asks the respondents to state clearly what they feel is positive for them about the city of Zagreb. The overall response is that the most positive aspect of Zagreb is that the people are so friendly, using words like "hospitable", "helpful" and "nice". The tourists felt comfortable and enjoyed being in Zagreb because they had such a positive friendly response from other people.

Table 3
POSITIVE ABOUT ZAGREB

Positive	Frequency
Friendly people	29
Old city	14
Easy to get around	11
Cafes and coffee	10

The next main response was that Zagreb was "beautiful with lovely and diverse old buildings." They also discussed there were "many beautiful squares, churches, streets". Some mentioned how the "old city is nice". It was as if they were really enjoying seeing this old part of town.

The third most prevalent response is that Zagreb is easy to get around, especially with the trams. (Trams are the name used to describe the electric train like car used in the city of Zagreb.) Participants also discussed that the trams are nice and interesting types of transportation. The next positive response concerns coffee and cafes. Some discussed how the coffee is "great, not too expensive, and that cafes are everywhere." A more general response to this question is that Zagreb is interesting and there is a lot to do. Lastly, some respondents stated that Zagreb is clean and green, especially noting that "there are nice parks with fountains."

THEME 4: NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES AND IMPRESSIONS OF ZAGREB

This set of responses will help those who are interested to know specifically what issues or concerns need to be addressed. Also, the answer to this question can help to verify this questionnaire, since several people volunteered a negative answer to question number one.

Table 4

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF ZAGREB

Negative	Frequency
Buildings	46
Nothing	20
Hard to get around	14
Dirty city	5

The most frequent response to this theme concerns the physical structure of the city of Zagreb, specifically the buildings in the city center. The main statement was that these "old buildings need repair" and "some buildings look like nobody cares about them". One respondent said that the buildings were "ugly", while the other see it as "damaged houses, everything is grey". Apart from the visual appearance of the buildings in the city's downtown, respondents also mentioned too much litter and trash. One participant had a negative encounter with a taxi driver that continued to bother him.

However, the second group of responses to this question was very interesting - nothing. One tourist emphasized, "I can't remember a single negative thing." The third main response to what is negative is that respondents stated that it is hard to locate some of the places and just get around. For example, some people stated that there were "not many information for tourists", "n good streets", "restaurants are always full" and "there are no signs how to reach them".

THEME 5: ASPECTS THAT SURPRISED RESPONDENTS IN ZAGREB

Surprise in tourism is an important consideration. It is often surprises that tourists remember while traveling. These respondents stated that the main surprise was the city itself. For example, they described Zagreb in a variety of ways - as "life of history with touch of future", "old but modern", "so much to see and do", "full of people in every time of day", "more developed and western, big", "no cars in center", "cafes are full all

the time", "museums", "trams", "easy to get around", "has exceeded my expectation" and "so many people in a small city." It is clear that they were impressed with Zagreb.

Table 5

SURPRISES ABOUT ZAGREB

Surprises	Frequency
City itself	17
Friendly people	10
English speakers	9

Also confirming the third theme is the second main response that the people are very friendly. Another main consideration was that many people speak English language. Some participants explained that they received help if they needed it, and that mostly everyone communicated or tried to communicate in English.

THEME 6: SUGGESTIONS FOR TOURISM INDUSTRY

The tourism industry has a great deal to learn from visitors. In general, any destination should strive to achieve positive visitor impressions, in order to get the positive word of mouth promotion. Therefore it is an important consideration to understand what suggestions they have for those in charge of tourism development and management.

Table 6

SUGGESTIONS

Suggestions	Frequency
Nothing	20
More information for tourists	15
More events or things to do	12

The main response to this question was "nothing"; "Everything is okay," and "It is superb, don't change a thing." This is an interesting response, considering this was the last question. Could this mean that they did not want to continue the interview? Or, was it truly that there is nothing more for them to do. The second main response to this question is the suggestion for more information for tourists. For example some of them said, "Hard to find this particular place" and "every tram stop should have a map of the city and where the trams are going" and "Put signs to show where something is." Finally, third suggestion is a recommendation for more activities in Zagreb. Some mentioned how "many churches were closed on Saturday." They were frustrated that they could not visit the interior of the churches. Also some mentioned that it "can be too quiet", "something should be always going on", "more activities and festivals in summer with transportation", "open stores on Sunday" and "opera house was closed on Sunday."

Summary and conclusion

A general summary of these findings offers interesting insight to the tourist industry of Zagreb. First, the main perception is that Zagreb is a beautiful old, town which offers a variety of activities. Most participants were surprised in a general and positive way about the city of Zagreb itself and how much they enjoyed walking around the old city. Second, Zagreb in a positive way seems quieter, smaller, and different from other European cities. And, Zagreb is a friendly place where many people can speak their

language. However, the main negative issue is the buildings in the city of Zagreb. Some of them are in very bad shape and are in need of repair. Another recommendation is that the city could provide more information for tourists.

Another interesting aspect from this research is how many people expressed their opinion of Zagreb in contrasts. For example, some of these expressions about Zagreb included the following: old and new, busy and quiet, falling down and brand new, relaxed and crowded, relaxed and noisy, old town and new town, easy to walk around yet traffic is bad. Perhaps this could be a new description of Zagreb, calling it "The city of contrasts."

In many Mediterranean regions, tourism may be the mainstay of the country's economics, and the development of tourism is one way of bringing in needed capital (Dragičević et al., 1998; Tomljenović et al., 2004). Yet few of these countries consider sustainable tourism as well as what today's tourist really want. Complicating these expectations, many countries may be out of touch with today's independent and budget minded traveler. This type of research is important because it will allow these countries to understand more about tourists (Bilen, 1998). Understanding tourists and their ideas is an important element for planning and promotion of various tourist sites. Also this knowledge will be helpful to negate impacts of tourism and maximize the positive side of travel (Wickens, 2004).

The main recommendation for the City of Zagreb from this research is to help motivate the people of Zagreb to repair or clean damaged buildings. Pearce and Badmin's (2003) discussion of sustainable practice in urban tourism has several points that apply to this. For example they discuss how visitors consider the cleanliness of an attraction to be an important factor. Adding to this, Ryan (2002) discussed how stakeholders in tourism should always be seeking to add value to the environment. He adds that the general environment of a tourist site produces the quality of experience and influences the visitor's views. Further complicating this is the discussion of Urry's (1995) theories on how visitors are more responsive to visual elements than when they are in normal situations. This 'tourist gaze' explains why visitors are overly sensitive to visual elements, and perhaps why so many participants mentioned old buildings, trash, and litter. Lastly, there is a need for more qualitative research incorporating interviews to understand the needs and wants of tourists. Although a study of the city of Manchester (Middleton, 2003) incorporated creative method of taking pictures, and the discussion of Rotterdam's (Richard & Wilson, 2004) incorporated of cultural events, this study shows the value of interviewing tourists while they are actually visiting a certain location. Reflecting ideas of Pearce and Badman's (2003) sustainable practice as well as Hall's (2003) tourism in capital cities, these participants emphasized the importance of maintaining the city's traditional buildings.

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