

## THE WORLD OF AGRITOURISTS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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*An ethnographic study conducted in order to investigate agritourist satisfaction in the Mediterranean Island of Cyprus brings to the surface novel information in regards to motivation; the formation of expectations; satisfaction achievement; and behavioural intentions, of agritourists. The findings of the study contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of tourism by divulging further details regarding the relatively unexplored niche market of agritourists. Further to this and perhaps more importantly, the fieldwork findings assist destinations and practitioners alike to achieve guest satisfaction and foster the positive future behavioural intentions of their guests.*

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### INTRODUCING TOURIST SATISFACTION

Parker and Mathews (2001) note that satisfaction is related to other words such as ‘make pleased’ or ‘contented’ while Solomon (2002) suggests that satisfaction or dissatisfaction is determined by the overall feelings a person has about a product after he/she has purchased it. Nonetheless, in specific regards to the tourism field, Pizam, Neumann and Reichel’s (1978) approach to conceptualize the term resulted in defining tourist satisfaction as ‘the result of the interaction between a tourist’s experience in the destination area and the expectations he/ she had about the destination’ (p.315).

Arnould and Price (1993) challenge the abovementioned definition on the grounds that it assumes that expectations play a pivotal role in



determining satisfaction while at the same time commenting that the most satisfactory experiences can be those which are least or not expected. Anton's (1996) approach towards defining customer satisfaction resulted to a more comprehensive and contemporary definition as Choi and Chu (2001) regard it to be, by basically suggesting that it is a state of mind in which the customer's needs, wants and expectations have been met or exceeded, resulting towards repurchase and loyalty. That being established, Parker and Mathews (2001) state clearly that satisfaction means different things to different people thus laying emphasis on the fact that satisfaction is a personal affair. As a matter of fact relevant studies (e.g. Choi and Chu 2000; Poon and Low 2005) conclude that the way people perceive fulfilment, differs.

## **TOURIST SATISFACTION: INVESTIGATION AND KNOWLEDGE GAPS**

Over the last few decades, a number of researchers from many fields (e.g. Hartman 1973; Prakash 1984; Gronroos 1990; Thirumanlai and Sinha 2005) focused their attention on the investigation of customer satisfaction while co-researchers in the hospitality and tourism fields have also followed the same path since this is reflected by a plethora number of relevant studies (e.g. Moutinho 1987; Oh 1999; Su 2004; Bowie and Chang 2005; Truong and Foster 2006; Stradling, Anable and Carreno 2007). That said, there has been relatively little consideration to the investigation of rural tourist satisfaction and this is limited to a few noteworthy studies which have examined aspects of the rural tourist satisfaction process (e.g. Reichel, Lowengart and Milman 2000; Saez, Fuentes and Montes 2007).

Darnell and Johnson 2001; Hansemark and Albinsson 2004; Matzler, Fuchs and Schubert 2004; Martin- Cejas 2006; Yu and Goulden 2006 suggest that satisfaction is associated with positive impacts such as for instance the fact that it positively affects the hotel/organisation or even the destination through repeat purchases and positive word of mouth. Achieving customer satisfaction is seen as the key to business success since empirical studies (e.g. Johnson, Nader and Fornell 1996; Zeithaml 2000; Kanoe 2003; Kengpol and Wangananon 2006) actually confirm the positive correlation between customer satisfaction and profitability. Researchers such as Akama and Kieti (2003) and Su (2004) concur on the fact that providing and maintaining tourist satisfaction is one of the biggest contemporary challenges of the hospitality/tourism industry. Its significance to the relevant sector is widely recognized by others (e.g.

Kozak and Rimmington 2000; Choi and Chu 2001; Arnould, Price and Zinkhan 2004; Yoon and Uysal 2005) to be an extremely important factor leading to the success of the sector. According to Fuchs and Weiermair (2004) satisfaction is considered by destinations to be as one of the most important sources of their competitive advantage. Furthermore it is acknowledged by Deng (2006) and Ueltschy et al. (2002) respectively to be a critical issue in today's competitive global market and a major element needed to create and sustain a competitive business. Yu and Goulden (2006) highlight the importance of tourist satisfaction by commenting that understanding tourist satisfaction is essential to destination managers for them to improve their products and services and to effectively promote these to target markets in search for new and repeat tourists.

Hui, Wan and Ho (2006) stress the fact that higher probability is linked to guest satisfaction when they choose the destination again, and engage in positive word of mouth behaviour. Crosby (1993) and Akama and Kieti (2003) regard the word of mouth as being the cheapest and most effective form of hotel/destination promotion. Likewise, Poon and Low (2005) agree on the fact that customer satisfaction most likely leads to both purchases repetition and favourable word of mouth. As a matter of fact, there is plenty of evidence (e.g. Taylor 1997; Kozak and Rimmington 2000; Gonzalez, Comesana and Brea 2006) to support the contention that satisfaction influences customer/tourist behaviour in a positive manner. Kozak (2001) states that one of the objectives of tourism businesses and destinations should be to offer tourist satisfaction. Even so, worth mentioning is the fact that on the other side of the spectrum, dissatisfied tourists may choose other alternative destinations or decide to continue visitation with no intention for further interaction with the service providers [Reisinger and Turner (2003) ; Arnould, Price and Zinkhan (2004)] . Based on Schlesinger and Heskett (1991) any decision on behalf of the guest to swap over to a different destination obviously creates a negative impact on the abandoned one, given that more efforts to attract new guests are required which incidentally is a more costly procedure than retaining the existing ones. Chon, Christianson and Lee (1995) highlight the fact that dissatisfaction may further lead to unfavourable word of mouth with its associated negative impacts.

However, despite the number of researchers who have attempted to investigate tourist satisfaction it appears evident, that holistic endeavours to examine tourist satisfaction by acknowledging what precedes and what follows tourist dis/satisfaction are restricted to only some isolated studies (e.g. Chen and Tsai 2006). Academics (e.g. Yu and Goulden 2006) stress

the need for understanding tourist satisfaction while Kirkby and Nelson (2003) make reference to additional research regarding the behaviour of customers, prior, during and after the experience, so as to effectively manage the total experience. Nonetheless, the lack of a holistic investigation of the agritourist satisfaction process is indeed evident. That said, while taking into serious consideration both the positive and negative impacts associated with tourist satisfaction and dissatisfaction respectively, any attempt to investigate the tourist satisfaction process would have most likely brought to surface further information of great importance to both the tourism academic community as well as to the stakeholders involved in the rural tourism industry.

## **INTRODUCING ETHNOGRAPHY IN INVESTIGATING TOURIST SATISFACTION**

Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006) approach the subject of ethnography from a rather philosophical point of view by stating that ‘researchers undertake ethnographic studies to see the world in a new way from the point of view of the people under investigation, not just to confirm their preconceptions about a particular issue or group that they are studying’ (p.171). Gummesson (2003) characterizes ethnography to be an in-depth research method while Genzuck (2003) mentions that ethnography has its roots planted in the fields of anthropology and sociology.

Nonetheless, as applied to tourism research, ethnography according to Veal (1997) ‘seeks to see the world through the eyes of those being researched, allowing them to speak for themselves, often through extensive direct quotations in the research report’ (p. 140). Bryman (2004) states that ethnography is not exactly synonymous with observation since this methodological approach refers to more than just the process of observing, given that it also embraces informal plain chats/conversations or even conducting in-depth interviews with individuals. Others (e.g. Palmer 2005; Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes 2006; Henn, Weinstein and Foard 2006) concur on the fact that the abovementioned informal conversations put people at their ease, thus enabling the researcher to obtain information that may indicate the underlying feelings of the respondents. Ryan (1995a) and Kawulich (2005) seem to share similar views by stating that the process of conducting an ethnographic research involves, besides observation, formal interviews and/or informal conversations which enable the researcher to check for verbal and nonverbal expressions of the

participants' feelings. Furthermore it is claimed that the tourism field, direct interaction with respondents by the researcher playing a real part, rather than simply acting as a detached observer, generates rich and significant data (Ryan 1995b). Case to the point, in an attempt to understand in-depth the travel culture of backpackers, Sorensen (2003) gained rich data by using an ethnographic approach whereby he employed semi-formal and informal interviews in the shape of extended conversations at accommodation venues, restaurants, bars and on excursions (safaris, trekking). Bowie and Chang (2005) adopted an ethnographic approach in order to evaluate tour/tourist satisfaction whereby they carried out participant covert observation by combining observation of participant's actions and conversations with tourists being engaged in tour trips, during the meals and their leisure time. Bowen (2001b) with the opportunity to study customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the tourism field decided that the most appropriate method to use was participant observation, backed up by semi-structured tourist interviews. Furthermore, Arnould and Price (1993) in a study of the relationships between tourist expectations and satisfaction in river-rafting trips conclude that participant observation data enrich the interpretation of qualitative results.

In an endeavour to stress the importance and likelihood benefits of ethnographic techniques, Fielding (1993) makes reference to the ethnographic techniques which entail the study of behaviour in natural setting, 'getting the seat of your pants dirty... in the real world, not the library' (p.157). Canniford (2005) postulates that an ethnographic approach allows naturalistic investigation into the host of influences that affect individuals' day-to-day lives. Furthermore, Bates (2005), the researcher shapes an understanding of the experience and world view of people under investigation. In addition, ethnographic techniques and particularly participant observation is referred to by Van Maanen (2006) to be a softer approach than the harder approach presented by questionnaires while the same researchers also stress the fact that it maintains an almost obsessive focus on the empirical. In regards to the questionnaires, researchers such as Saleh and Ryan (1992) and Bowen (2001a) make reference to Customer Satisfaction Questionnaires which unlike an ethnographic approach, return merely glanced over the surface. Palmer (2005) notes that the wealth of data generated and the level of detail from the participant observation could not be created by neither quantitative nor qualitative customer satisfaction questionnaires.

Gale and Beefink (2005) add that most tourist satisfaction models follow a positivistic approach (e.g. Moutinho's 1987 Vacation Tourist

Behaviour model) in which tourists are viewed as rational beings who evaluate their level of satisfaction through a disconfirmation paradigm whereby the tourist's satisfaction is evaluated based on whether their expectations (e.g. regarding the amenities) prior to their trip were met or exceeded. Others (e.g. Decrop 1999; Crossan 2003) argue that this particular approach (positivistic) may not accurately capture the complexity of factors involved in the satisfaction evaluative process of tourists; in a row, they suggest to move beyond the rational decision making principles found in positivistic approaches, towards an interpretivistic approach which incidentally according to Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006), is associated with predominately qualitative methods (e.g. observation studies) that have as a purpose to build an understanding of the motives and intentions that underpin social behaviour.

Probably one of the main reasons behind the usefulness of observations in terms of providing an in-depth tourist satisfaction understanding seems to be the fact that it allows the use of the aforementioned conversations (Kawulich 2005) which unlike a positivistic approach, it allows an interactive and cooperative relationship to be developed between the investigator and the people being researched (Ryan 1995a; Decrop 1999). Actually, Bowen (2001a) underlines the significance of conversations in the tourism field and proceeds by laying emphasis on the fact that their relevance in the research of satisfaction will soon become apparent. Worth noting is also the fact that Bowen adds that participant observation is to be looked 'at far closer as an important technique in the understanding of tourist satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and in any attempt to overcome the limitations of a positivist and quantitative approach' (p.38).

Unlike other approaches which are used to research tourist satisfaction such as for instance the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985), the approach of participant observation based on others (e.g. Swan and Bowers 1998; Bowie and Chang 2005), allows the researcher to interact with those being studied and minimize the distance between the researcher and the participants. The result of this active interaction is a deeper understanding of how consumers experience satisfaction, thus becoming a key method to research particular phenomena such as leisure and tourism elements. A model which is currently used to measure tourist satisfaction is the SERVQUAL model (e.g. Pawitra and Tan 2003) which basically suggests that the gaps between customer expectations and their perceptions of actual performance drives the perception of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985; 1988). The SERVQUAL model (sometimes

with slight variations) has been widely used in the hospitality and tourism field such as for instance in travel agencies (e.g. Bigne et al. 2003) and hotels (e.g. Tsaur and Lin 2004). However, although it is regarded (e.g. Lam and Woo 1997) as a leading tool in measuring service quality, it is criticised by a number of scholars (e.g. Cronin and Taylor 1992; Buttle 1996; Truon and Forster 2006) on the basis that its approach does not holistically address the total holiday experience. Gale and Beefink (2005) challenge the aptness of these models (e.g. SERVQUAL and Moutinho's Vacation Tourist Behavior Model) for the investigation of tourist satisfaction on the basis that they assess the gap being created between expected/predicted and delivered service/reality which may not, after all, influence tourist satisfaction since tourists through 'active involvement' (p.347) play a significant role in deciding and shaping their own experiences towards achieving satisfaction. In more detail, tourist experiences can be regarded as the result of an active endeavour by a person to create a situation in which he/she achieves satisfaction, thus the active involvement of the tourist in the shaping of the performance (e.g. of a tour) and the creation of his/her personal experiences also needs to be acknowledged (Geva and Goldman 1991; Foster 2000; Gale and Beefink 2005).

The abovementioned emerge to reinforce the statement of Palmer (2005) which makes reference to positivistic approaches which are not able to capture the 'complexities involved in trying to understand social phenomena' (p.13). Stewart and Floyd (2004) suggest the use of the afore-discussed interpretivistic approach such as observation which can add value by revealing these complexities which would have otherwise been missed through an evaluation of the gaps between expectations and reality because it enables the researcher to 'directly or completely capture someone's lived experiences and social reality' (p. 4).

Others (e.g. Jafari and Way 1994; Elliott and Elliott 2003; Agafonoff 2006; Mariampolski 2006) stress the fact that ethnography reaches the parts other research approaches can not reach, even compared to other qualitative methods. Bowen (2002) highlights that the advantages of participant observation are favourably contrasted with customer service questionnaires, while the focus of their research was tourist satisfaction, the researcher envisages the employment of participant observation research into other tourist behaviour studies, as well as, express hopes that other researchers will attempt to fully adopt the technique. As a shift from traditional tourism research, Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes (2006) argue that their study, which embraced ethnographic techniques,

offers useful guidance for similar investigations of tourist experiences which seek the emergence of new knowledge in tourism.

## **INVESTIGATING THE AGRITOURIST SATISFACTION PROCESS - FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**

Capitalising on the aforementioned interesting ethnographic cases, the rather exigent ethnographic techniques were employed in order to investigate the agritourist satisfaction process in the Mediterranean Island of Cyprus. In this regard, the study embraced, apart from active participation, observations of the daily routine, several informal interviews and dozens of chats with agritourists who chose to stay in traditional venues in the Island's countryside. Particularly, apart from the several informal interviews which were conducted in traditional venues, dozens of other chats/casual conversations took place with agritourists mainly found at key points of interest or highlights of the countryside (e.g. villages, national parks, ancient sites, thematic parks, museums and monasteries), as well as during festivals and special events held in the countryside throughout one year. The employment of ethnographic techniques revealed some interesting and novel findings. These findings could assist practitioners (e.g. destination managers and official bodies) and other entrepreneurs (e.g. hosts) to foster guest satisfaction achievement and positive behavioural intentions (e.g. positive Word-of-Mouth and revisit intentions).

Broad categories of agritourists that have been identified (e.g. 'activity driven') resemble more or less groups of rural tourists who have been identified/categorized in other studies. Nonetheless, several sub-groups of agritourists have been pin-pointed in this study. The study reveals that rural tourists' needs differ according to the individual, leading to the conclusion that attempts to generalize and categorize satisfaction, either by academics or practitioners, without acknowledging the uniqueness of each tourist may not be wise. Indeed, such attempt to categorize tourists in broad groups seems not to take into consideration the fact that tourists have their individual needs, which they seek to satisfy while at the destination (in this specific case, the countryside). Therefore, even though the researchers proceeded towards the categorization of tourists into niche/small groups based on their similar (shared) needs, it is emphasized that each tourist is unique with his/her own personal requirements. Rural tourism is made up from a heterogeneous market though several differing niche sub-groups of



agritourists have been identified, whilst earlier studies tended to suggest bulky groups of agritourists. Examples of such small groups include amongst others, the 'authenticity seekers', 'nature seekers', 'bird watchers', 'gastronomics' and 'spirituality seekers'. Even so, future researchers may want to examine in more detail/depth these niche groups of agritourists. Be that as it may, it seems that agricultural activities are not a major source of agritourist motivation. In opposition, the natural/artificial environment and the interaction/contact with hosts are found to be basic motivators for agritourists. In fact, the natural environment seems to act as the primary motivator for specific agritourists, such as the 'flora seekers', 'bird watchers' and 'entomologists'.

The fieldwork findings reveal that information derived from various sources (e.g. the venue's website) seems to append towards the formation of agritourists' expectations. However these expectations have been attached to those existing ones being created from previous personal experiences and other sources throughout the agritourist's lifetime (e.g. television and travel books). Notably, guest expectations varied according to the individual while the emphasis given by each agritourist upon particular expectations differed from individual to individual based on his/her primary personal reason/occasion which led him/her to the destination. For instance, those which were motivated to visit the countryside due to reasons associated with the destination's natural environment (e.g. 'flora seekers', 'fauna seekers', 'nature seekers', 'bird watchers' and 'entomologists') expressed and shared similar expectations in regards to the natural environment and related services they were expecting to view and consume whilst at the rural setting. Contrary to the above, expectations in regards to the man-made or artificial environment were mentioned and stressed by (e.g.) the 'archaeology seekers' which were mostly interested in viewing and studying the country's ancient sites, monuments and archaeological parks. Agritourists in the same sub-groups were found to share more or less similar expectations. Even so, expectations were found to differ to some extent even if agritourists were categorized under the same sub-group. The reasoning behind this dissimilarity of agritourists' expectations is the result of differing occasions for countryside visitation as well as the individual differing mode of information and personal past experiences.

Further to the above, the findings of the study reveal that whilst at the rural destination, agritourists emphasize their attention on different factors of their experience. For instance, the natural environment (particularly flora species) and related services are important for those who visit the

countryside mainly in order to examine the indigenous species (e.g. ‘flora seekers’). In opposition, the ‘archaeology seekers’ emphasize their attention on the artificial environment (particularly ancient sites) and related services (e.g. informative signs at monuments/sites). As a result of this outcome, different factors/offering are critical for the success of differing occasions. Therefore, negligence on behalf of the destination to focus on the quality of certain offerings, such as for instance the natural environment, will particularly impact on the satisfaction of those who highly value anything related to the natural environment. Based on the findings of this study, those impacted most in this case, are the ‘flora seekers’, ‘fauna seekers’, ‘bird watchers’ and ‘entomologists’. This is because the destination fails to provide those factors which the guest emphasizes his/her attention on, values the most and expects from the destination. Eventually, this leads towards the dissatisfaction of certain agritourists who visit the countryside for a specific occasion (e.g. to study the endemic flora). Thus, it is suggested that the rural destination takes into serious consideration the fact that agritourists are driven to the countryside because of different reasons/occasions. The acknowledgement of these differing occasions for countryside visitation assists the identification of those factors which are important/critical for the success of the guest’s visit. More specifically, if the destination aims to achieve overall agritourist satisfaction then it must be prepared to address the various needs and expectations of all agritourist differing occasions (e.g. ‘authenticity seekers’, ‘walkers’ and ‘cyclists’). Yet, it should be noted that agritourists seem to take for granted both ‘tangible’ features and ‘intangible’ aspects of their countryside experience and they are not surprised if these are offered by the destination since they take them for granted. As a result of this, the destination is faced with the challenging task of addressing the high needs and expectations of a well informed, sophisticated and demanding market and on top of that, to offer to the guest what is not or least expected. An unexpected and pleasant offering, seems to be ‘hospitableness’. Apparently those traditional values of hospitality in the countryside seem to pleasantly surprise and please guests. The ethnographer’s and agritourists’ experiences support the fact that traditional values of hospitality are particularly evident in (e.g.) remote areas. These seem to add value to the guest’s experience and they foster both guest satisfaction and positive behavioural intentions. Furthermore, the emotional dimensions of the guest-host relationship are being stressed. Indeed, by focusing on the qualities of hospitableness, hosts may encourage positive word of mouth. They may even foster the

guest's revisit intention at the same venue, especially if the guest values such qualities.

Despite that, agritourists invest money, physical effort, risk and time in return to a countryside experience. These personal investments by agritourists for the consumption of the destination offerings should be taken into consideration by the appropriate bodies, tourism managers and other entrepreneurs of the countryside in an attempt to satisfy the monetary and other personal values set out by the agritourists. Nonetheless, there are other external factors which may interfere in the process of achieving guest satisfaction. These are beyond the control of the destination. Severe weather conditions or climatic changes are examples of such external influences which may adversely impact on agritourist satisfaction.

That said, it should be noted that only half of those agritourists who remained satisfied with their experience articulated intentions for a revisit, either in the short or the long term. The rest expressed no such intentions, justifying their decision on various reasons (e.g. alternative global destinations and time/money restrictions). However, this should not lead towards the false conclusion that agritourist satisfaction achievement is not important. On the contrary, this is not the case, since revisit intentions were expressed only by those who had a satisfying, hence positive experience. Additionally, all those who remained satisfied, expressed the intention to spread a positive word-of-mouth about the rural destination and the intention to recommend it to others. In opposition, all those agritourists who remained dissatisfied with their countryside experience, expressed no-revisit intentions. Also, they indicated that they would (upon return to their place of residence) discourage others from paying a visit to the rural destination.

## **CONCLUSION**

A substantial number of researchers in the tourism and hospitality fields alike, stress the importance in achieving tourist satisfaction. This basically emanates from the positive impacts that tourist satisfaction inflicts upon the organization and/or destination. However, despite the extensive attention given by the tourism academic community in the investigation of tourist satisfaction, it is clear that the agritourist satisfaction process has escaped the attention of researchers. Even so, the contemporary findings of an ethnographic methodological approach which attempted to investigate the agritourist satisfaction process while using as a case study the Mediterranean Island of Cyprus, resulted in

findings which may be of great use to tourism academics in terms of enhancing their understanding in tourist psychological issues (e.g. agritourist motivation, formation of expectations and satisfaction). Nonetheless, and perhaps most importantly, the fieldwork findings assist practitioners (e.g. destination managers and hosts), who are active in the field in their endeavors to achieve to satisfy their guests and foster their future positive behavioural intentions.

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