

CRUISE PASSENGERS' EXPERIENCES IN A MEDITERRANEAN PORT OF CALL: THE CASE OF AGIOS NIKOLAOS

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the various attributes of cruise ship visitors' off-board experiences in Agios Nikolaos (Crete, Greece) and provide a better understanding of the main features of cruise experience and behavior, such as motivation, satisfaction, activities, spending patterns in the town, along with future return and recommend intentions. Findings of this study are useful primarily to destination managers and the tourism authorities of Agios Nikolaos and other Mediterranean ports of call which have the same or similar characteristics with Agios Nikolaos, and secondarily to industry practitioners and academic researchers interested in cruise tourism.

Introduction

The cruise industry has been exhibiting a steady significant growth during the recent years worldwide, turning the sector into the fastest growing sector of the travel industry, with an estimated annual growth rate of 7.5% since 1980. This is almost twice the rate of growth of tourism overall. This growth, as reflected in the number of passengers worldwide, was from half a million passengers in 1970 to an estimated 22.04 million global cruise passengers in 2014¹. The dynamic sector, driven initially by demand from North America, is continuously expanding its offer of products and services and developing new markets². As a matter of fact, although the North American cruise industry is traditionally dominant, the region's relative share of the total market has declined from 70% in 2004 to 55% in 2013³. On the other hand, the European market has grown by 14% over the past three years and by 146% over the last ten, accounted in 2014, for 30% of all itineraries^{1,4}. In fact, Europe is considered as a key market for the global cruise industry.

Because of the rapid expansion, and the remarkable economic implications to the local economies, the cruise sector has been a subject of a considerable research interest over the last two decades. Most of this research has had a narrow geographical perspective, focusing mainly on the Caribbean destinations^{5,6,7,8,9,10,11} however, the Mediterranean ports of calls are attracting much of the researchers' interest recently^{12,13,14,15}. The aim of this paper is to investigate the characteristics of the cruise ship visitors to a small Mediterranean port of call situated in the eastern Crete, Greece, and provide a better understanding of the various aspects of their visit, such as: their motivation, activities, experiences and spending in the town, along with satisfaction with the destination and intentions for revisiting or recommend it as a travel destination to others. This study is the first empirical study realized in the port of Agios Nikolaos, and the motivation to conduct it was the growing importance of cruise tourism for the local economy. Its outcomes are expected to be particularly useful to destination managers and the local government and to contribute to the planning of the area's tourist development and promotion strategies.

The paper is divided into five parts. Following this introduction, section 2, briefly presents the town of Agios Nikolaos as a cruise tourism destination, section 3, introduces the methodology of the research, and section 4 elaborates on the results. Finally, in section 5 the implications of the study and its findings, along with the limitations encountered are discussed.

Port-of- call: Agios Nikolaos, Crete

Agios Nikolaos is a small coastal town of 9,500 residents situated in the Eastern part of Crete. Its tourism development started in the early 1960s and today it is a well established international and cosmopolitan summer resort welcoming thousands of visitors every year. Yet, it has begun to suffer from the disadvantages of mass tourism, i.e. the strong competition from other popular destinations, the seasonality in arrivals, the shrinkage of the tourism season, the dependence on international tour operators, and the all-inclusive system¹⁶. As a reaction, local authorities direct their efforts to differentiate the tourist product and promote special interest and alternative forms of tourism in the region, as is the cruise tourism.

Cruise tourism in Agios Nikolaos can be traced back in 1987, when small Russian cruise ships used to arrive every Saturday carrying passengers from Israel. These weekend visitors were entertained in the local shops and enjoyed themselves at Cretan nights organized in the town. Then, after a break that lasted for about ten years, in year 2000, several medium size cruise ships at the beginning, and larger

vessels recently, started to arrive again on a regular basis to the port. As a matter of fact, during the last fifteen years, the interest of cruise lines has increased, the cruise industry is evolving rapidly, and higher capacity cruise ships are including the port in their itineraries. Specifically, according to the data obtained from the local port authority, annual cruise ship arrivals increased by 230%, from 20 arrivals in 2000 to 66 arrivals in 2014 (with a peak of 102 arrivals in 2011). During the same period, the average number of passengers per cruise ship more than doubled (for annual data see also¹⁷).

Agios Nikolaos is a town of natural beauty. The port is located in the heart of the town, just a few minutes' walk from the town's shops, cafés and restaurants and it does not host any other regular commercial or passenger activity, and thus, it offers visitors a secure and hospitable environment. Besides, the town serves as a hub to the twenty or so small villages and farms that make up that part of Lassithi and it provides easy access to several places of cultural heritage value, as is the historic island of Spinalonga. Consequently, the area offers tourists many attractions and interesting experiential activities to be involved in during their stay.

Methodology

To the authors' best knowledge, this is the first research conducted to cruise ship visitors to the town of Agios Nikolaos, aiming to investigate the aspects of their off-board experience. The tool of this research was a self completed questionnaire consisting of 21 questions. In designing the questionnaire the authors took into account the various concerns of the local authorities, tourism policy makers and shipping agents, that arose in the interviews realized for this purpose by¹⁷, as well as similar research realized for the town of Heraklion, Crete, by¹⁸. The questionnaire was administered only in English, as this was considered sufficient according to the information on the profile of the cruise visitors in Agios Nikolaos provided by the local shipping agents, and it was comprised of four sections. The first section assembles general information on the visitors' geographic origin, the number of persons in travelling party, the main reason for choosing cruise vacation, the number of cruises taken in the last five years, and if this was their first visit to the town. The second section contained questions regarding several aspects of their visit; the time spent off the cruise ship, the activities undertaken, as well as their expenditure behaviour. In the third section, visitors were asked to indicate their satisfaction and level of agreement to a number of statements regarding their visit to the town using 5-point Likert scales. Moreover, their intentions to visit again Agios Nikolaos in the future or recommend it to relatives and friends were investigated. The objective of this section was to examine the degree of satisfaction acquired from the experience they had in the town, as this has been found in the literature to influence the

likelihood of a return visit¹⁹. The last section contained questions about the respondents' profile, utilizing several demographic variables, i.e., age, gender, education, income, employment, etc.

The survey took place in the port of Agios Nikolaos on six different days between July, 1st and October, 31st, 2014. 900 questionnaires were distributed to cruise ship passengers, older than 18 years, and 304 filled questionnaires were collected (33.8% response rate).

The collected data were statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Descriptive statistics were used to investigate passengers' perceptions of the specific destination, whilst, a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted in order to investigate relationships between passengers' attitudes.

Results

135 males (44.4%) and 169 females (55.6%) participated in the research. 4.7% of them were under 45 years of age, 43.5% were between 45 and 64, and 51% were above 65. Accordingly, retired people comprised the largest proportion of the sample (62.8%). 32.3% of the respondents were employed (full time, part time, or seasonally) at the time of the research and more than half of them (54.9%) were higher education graduates. Unfortunately, the respondents were reluctant to reveal their family income, as 45% of them refused to answer the relevant question. Among the rest, 21.6% declared total annual household income less than 25,000 euros, 44.3%, between 25,000 and 54,999 euros, 14.4%, between 55,000 and 74,999 euros, and, 19.8% more than 75,000 euros, a fact that confirms that these days consumers of different economic status chose cruise vacationing. Furthermore, 86.2% of the respondents were married or living common law at the time of the research and were accompanied by their partners on this cruise, whereas, 10.5% were travelling with their families or in parties of three and more, and only 3.6% were travelling alone. In terms of the country of origin (usual place of residence), the vast majority of the respondents (91.4%) originated from the UK, and only 8.6% from other countries and specifically Australia, New Zealand, Cyprus, USA, and Egypt, in descending order of the percentages.

This research confirmed, once more, that cruisers are repeaters, since, for the majority of the respondents, 76.3%, this was not their first cruise ever, and actually, a considerable 24% stated that they take at least one and up to three cruises every year. When the respondents were asked why they chose cruise vacation this particular time, 34.9% characterized themselves as 'cruise repeaters', anyway,

whereas a considerable proportion (38.9%), stated that it offered them 'better value for money', indicating again that today cruises are not considered as a 'luxury product' but are gradually becoming attractive to consumers of different economic status (see also^{1,20}).

For the majority of the respondents (83.2%) this was their first trip to the town of Agios Nikolaos in which they spent 5 hours and 48 minutes on the average, visiting the attractions and the specialty shops, and discovering the traditional cretan cuisine and the quality wines at the restaurants and the lakeside cafes. However, 69.7% of the respondents joined a guided bus excursion as soon as they disembarked and thus spent much less time in the town itself. The most popular excursions, in descending order of preference, were the visit to Spinalonga, the 'Panoramic Crete' tour in the mainland, and the visit to the Palace of Knossos. Concerning the activities undertaken in the town, unfortunately, almost half of the respondents (48.9%) did not answer the relevant question. The remaining, spent their time walking, shopping, dining, and visiting the town's historic attractions on their own or by joining a guided train or walking town tour.

The total spending in the town by all the members of the respondent's travelling party, excluding the amount prepaid to the tour operator for the purchase of the cruise package was also investigated. Taking into account the number of persons included in spending, the average spending per visitor was 31.57 euro, which is well below the average of 62 euros spent by cruise passengers at European ports of visits in 2014¹. Although the number of respondents from countries other than the UK was small to trust, research revealed that visitors from Australia and the USA spent well above the average, 72.60 and 50.00 euro per person respectively.

Evaluation of the visit to Agios Nikolaos

Subsequently, the participants were asked to indicate in a scale of 1 to 5 how they would rate their trip to Agios Nikolaos with regard to six different aspects. Overall, the participants rated high all those aspects. Specifically, 92.1% of the visitors found the 'welcome' provided to them by the municipality as 'good' or 'excellent', 90.1% felt the same for the restaurants' service and quality, 95.6% for the transportation service and quality, and 93.7% for the overall quality of customer service. Table 1 provides also the mean evaluation of the six different aspects. It turned out, that the lowest satisfaction was expressed for the 'prices of goods and services', followed by, the 'variety of things to see and do in the town'.

Table 1: Visitors' evaluation for various aspects of their trip to Agios Nikolaos

	Very Poor (1)	Poor (2)	Average (3)	Good (4)	Excellent (5)	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Welcome provided to cruise ship passengers	0.0	1.0	6.9	41.2	50.9	4.42	0.667
2. Restaurant service and quality	0.0	0.0	9.9	48.4	41.7	4.32	0.645
3. Transportation service and quality	0.0	0.0	4.4	50.0	45.6	4.41	0.576
4. Quality of customer service	0.0	0.4	5.9	49	44.7	4.38	0.615
5. Prices of goods and services	0.4	1.2	24	48.3	26	3.98	0.767
6. Variety of things to see and do	0.8	1.2	21.5	45.4	31.2	4.05	0.801

Last but not least, the participants in the research were asked whether they would recommend Agios Nikolaos as a travel destination to others, and/or revisit the area themselves at some time in the near future. 24.4% of respondents replied that they definitely plan to revisit, and 47.7% that they may revisit. Only 14.2% of the respondents were unlikely to revisit. Additionally, 53.3% of the respondents felt positive about purchasing a package combining the cruise with a week in a luxury resort in the area, if such a deal was actually offered by the cruise line, whereas 39.5% expressed no interest in this option. Finally, 80.2% of the respondents stated that they will recommend the town to their friends and relatives.

Application of ANOVA to investigate the significant effects of the demographic characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, marital status, education, employment status, income and country of residence) on their ratings of the six aspects of the trip to Agios Nikolaos (see Table 1), revealed some statistically significant effects in a couple of cases. Namely, *income* appeared to have some influence ($p=0.036$) on visitors' satisfaction with the 'quality of transportation service' and the *country of origin* on satisfaction with 'the welcome provided to cruise ship passengers' ($p=0.001$), however, the latter is not to be trusted because of the low

representation of different geographic origins in the sample. Finally, the demographic characteristics of the respondents appeared to have no significant influence on their intentions to recommend the town as a travel destination to others.

Conclusions

The average cruise visitor to Agios Nikolaos is a middle income, retired person from the UK who chose cruise vacation as value for money, and had already been on a cruise before. The majority of the visitors joined pre booked guided bus tours that took them out of town and thus, spent little time in the town itself. Consequently, visitors spent very little money as well in the destination. However, almost all the visitors stated that they enjoyed their visit, found the destination attractive and the people friendly and accommodating.

With regard to the likelihood of the respondents to revisit the town in the future, one out of four reported they will definitely do so, and almost one out of two that they may revisit. In addition, more than half of the participants expressed an interest in a combination of cruise-luxury hotel package in the area. Finally, 80% of the visitors will recommend the town as a travel destination to others.

It is in the authors' plans for future research, to further analyse the cruise visitors' intentions to repurchase, revisit, and recommend the destination. Specifically, the effects on these intentions of the several characteristics of this visit, such as the time spent in the port, the number of previous visits, 'being a cruise repeater or not', and especially the effect of the satisfaction expressed by the ratings given to the various aspects of the trip, should be carefully investigated. These findings will be very useful to the local authorities and destination managers who wish to maximize the benefits of cruise development in the area.

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