

# CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM AS PARTS OF GREEK TOURISM PRODUCT

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## **Abstract**

*Tourism has been changing during last decades mainly because the traditional mass tourism product is no longer as attractive as it was. As a result Special Interest Tourism grows rapidly in order to satisfy multi-motivational tourists. Cultural and religious tourism are special forms which represent a considerable proportion of tourism demand and play a significant role in modern tourism industry. Initially, this paper defines and presents basic characteristics of cultural and religious tourism. Next, it examines specific features of Greek tourism product and how culture and religion have been utilized by the Greek tourism industry. Several suggestions are discussed for enhancing tourism product and increasing its attractiveness.*

## **Introduction**

It is a fact that contemporary tourism experiences are based on a combination of activities with the aim of being attractive to potential tourists. This is because a growing number of visitors are interested in Special Interest Tourism experiences and in activities based on various motives and needs. According to this trend, destinations around the world enhance their tourist product by offering either separate tourist products or complementary activities to classic mass tourism product. Apparently, these activities are developed due to the characteristics and competitive advantages of its destination. In this context, cultural and religious tourism are analysed further down, together with their potential for development as parts of Greek tourism product.

## **Cultural Tourism & Cultural Tourist**

Cultural tourism is a type of tourism that it is difficult to define. It has been argued that “One of the few areas of certainty in cultural tourism is the difficulty of defining it.”<sup>1</sup> This is because it is difficult to define culture in general and there is no consensus in relative literature about the accurate features and limits of culture and

cultural tourism. Concerning the latter, there are different definitions that are based on different approaches. "Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research"<sup>2</sup> has defined cultural tourism as:

1. "The movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs".
2. "All movements of persons to specific cultural attractions, such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama outside their normal place of residence."

Regarding the demand of cultural tourism it has been stated that there are various types of cultural tourists. Specifically, McKercher & Du Cros<sup>3</sup> have stated that there are five types of cultural tourists:

- The purposeful cultural tourist that has usually a deep cultural experience and the motive of meeting a different culture is strong.
- The sightseeing cultural tourist, which has a strong cultural motive but the experience is shallower compared to the purposeful cultural tourist.
- The serendipitous cultural tourist. In this case the cultural motive is not strong. However, the tourist for various reasons participates in a deep cultural experience.
- The casual cultural tourist which has weak cultural motive and as a result a shallow cultural experience.
- The incidental cultural tourist which has no cultural motive but ends up with a shallow cultural experience. This type of tourist does not travel due to cultural motives but nonetheless participates in some activities and has shallow experiences.

The limits between the categories are not distinct. Nevertheless, these typologies show that the existence of strong cultural motive is not necessary for participation in a cultural experience, even in a deep one. Additionally, cultural tourism is characterised by some important features regarding its demand. It does not have a specific "high season" period. However, according to its complementarity to other forms (e.g. mass tourism) it adapts to other seasonality patterns<sup>4</sup>. In general, cultural tourism can contribute to the reduction of seasonality, especially to destinations that offer the necessary resources all year long (e.g. urban environments). Also, it is important to mention some common characteristics among cultural tourists such as<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> : high educational level, high levels of tourist spending, upper/middle class and middle aged / elderly individuals (the latter tends to change as more young people is interested in culture), seeking quality services in the accommodation, seeking of novelty.

## Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism. Religion always was a basic motive for travelling especially to sacred places. In many destinations, pilgrimages generated tourism flows. Religious tourism is about travelling to pilgrimages but also about trails and visits to religious sites with basic motive the connection, study and knowledge of religious tradition and heritage<sup>9</sup>. There is a close connection with culture as religion is a part of it.

It has to be highlighted that – as in the case of cultural tourism – there are different levels of religious motive. Also, there are cases of travelers that they are not directly interested in religion. As a result, part of religious tourism is based on other elements of the experience such as culture, architecture etc. In all cases the travelers need to use basic tourism infrastructure and services (e.g. accommodation, transport etc.). The sites that attract the interest of religious tourists can be divided to various categories such as: sites that retain their religious operation or not, sites that very important because of their natural environment, exhibitions of religious objects (e.g. books etc.), religious trails (e.g. the trail of Santiago de Compostella) and religious celebrations.

Travelling in religious tourism is characterized by some important features such as<sup>10,11</sup>: low seasonality, small length of stay (depending on the religious activities), close connection with cultural activities and recreation (offered activities in the travel packages). Additionally, it has been stated that religious tourists are usually elderly people, included in all types of social classes and as a result there is no certain type of travel and spending pattern.

## The Greek Tourism Product

In order to clarify the importance of integrating the importance of integrating culture and religion to the offered tourism experiences, it is essential to record several features of Greek tourism product. Table 1<sup>12</sup> includes data related to basic demand trends for the period 2008-2014. It is obvious that the Recession did not affect numbers of incoming tourists. Actually, arrivals and tourism receipts during 2014 surpassed the relative numbers of 2008. The economic crisis, although, affected the demand of domestic tourism. The numbers of arrivals to hotels and similar accommodation establishments decreased rapidly due to the decrease of disposable income of Greeks. This is a difficult situation especially for regional destinations that don't attract incoming tourists.

Concerning tourism receipts from incoming tourists it is argued that they didn't come after the large increase in arrivals due to fluctuation of other rates. Specifically, there was a great decrease in average expenditure per trip (from 730 Euros in 2008 to 551,8 in 2014). Moreover, during the same period, the average length of stay of incoming tourists decreased 1,9 days. Additionally, the average expenditure per night – after several fluctuations - reached 71,6 Euros in 2014 – 4,7 Euros lower that the relative numbers of 2008.

**Table 2:** Data related to Greek Tourism Demand 2008 -2014

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Arrivals of incoming tourists (in thousands)	15.938,8	14.914,5	15.007,5	16.427,3	15.517,6	17.919,6	22.033,5
Tourism Receipts (in millions) (by incoming tourists) (in euros)	11.635,9	10.400,3	9.611,3	10.504,7	10.442,5	12.152,2	13.393,0
Average Length of Stay (days)(incoming tourists)	9,6	9,5	9,3	9,2	8,4	8,1	7,7
Average expenditure per night of incoming tourists (in euros)	76,3	73,5	68,6	69,6	73,3	74,6	71,6
Average expenditure per trip of incoming tourists (in euros)	730	697,3	640,4	639,5	616,2	604,2	551,8
Arrivals of inbound tourists to hotels	7.127.227	7.523.582	7.044.471	6.479.144	5.394.560	5.664.756	5.661.731

The origin countries of the vast majority of incoming tourists are located in North and Central Europe (Germany, UK, France etc.) Additionally, there are some emerging incoming markets such as Russia, Turkey and China that showed great increase in arrivals to date. Russia is now considered as the 3rd incoming market in terms of arrivals (in 2014 ranked 4th after France)<sup>13</sup>. These markets are also important because they are considered to be “big spenders” – especially Russians and Chinese tourists. Moreover, they show a slightly different seasonality patterns compared to other traditional markets (e.g. German, UK) and a great interest in cultural and religious experiences (Russians are also Christian Orthodox). According to these facts the necessity of focusing on these particular markets is obvious.

Regarding hotel establishments in Greece, according to National Statistics Authority in 2013, 2 – star hotels represented the 29% of total offered beds, 4 –star hotels the

relative 25% and 3-star hotels the 24%. 5-star hotels represented the 15% of total offered beds and they are located to traditional destination of incoming tourists (Dodecanese, Crete etc.). Hotels with 1 star represented the remaining 7% of total offered beds<sup>14</sup>.

Moreover, Greece has to overcome the major problem of seasonality. It is estimated that more than the half of total arrivals are taking place during these months (56% of total arrivals in 2014). As a result there are several problems to destinations and hotels. For example, Greek hotels have to overcome the problem of low occupancy rates in off-seasons. Low occupancy rates are major problem in a national level. More specific in 2014 the highest occupancy rate was recorded during August (74,5%) and the lowest was recorded during January (17,1%). It has to be mentioned that in 2008 the relative rates were 81,5% in August and 25,4% in January<sup>15</sup>.

## Discussion

Taking into account the above, several recommendations adapted to specific weaknesses of Greek tourism product are suggested. As mentioned before, enhancement of the offered travel experience is a necessity at a global level. Following this trend the Greek national tourism product should be rearranged. Classic "3S" product should be altered in order to satisfy a wider range of needs and motives. It is a fact that Greece owes to compete in price with aim of staying competitive in the mass tourism market. Additionally, such an option has many difficulties taking into consideration the basic competitors such as Turkey, Portugal, Croatia, etc. As a result the focus should be on other features of travel experience that can contribute to the increase of attractiveness. Quality of the experience (in terms of activities), uniqueness and appropriateness (in terms of specific niche market) are some examples. Cultural and religious tourism are special forms that can play a significant role to the success of the latter strategy.

Culture is partly utilized today as a part of the tourism product. There are cases that show the potential which exists for attracting either incoming or domestic tourists. Acropolis Museum, for example, is one that shows the importance of effective management and promotion. Appropriate management, promotion and exploitation of archaeological sites and existing museums and especially of those which are located in cities and entry points (e.g. international airports) can increase tourist flows to certain areas. Archaeological sites are not fully exploited according to their potential. For example, visitors to Acropolis represent only the 7.1% of the total arrivals of incoming tourists in national level and Delphi only the 1,3% of total arrivals<sup>16</sup>. Additionally, it should be taken into account that the percentage of visitors

to the archaeological site includes domestic tourists so the percentage of incoming tourists is decreasing furthermore. This is the situation at the rest archaeological sites. Apparently, further strategies and policies should be implemented to improve the attractiveness of these sites.

In cases of destinations where seasonality is difficult to avoid (e.g. islands) and the mass tourism product is dominating the market, culture should play a role of enhancing the offered experience. Certainly, this enhancement should be adjusted to the framework of mass tourism market. Offered travel packages should be based on the traditional tourism product of these destinations and at the same time promote culture as competitive advantage – especially where significance of attractions is undeniable. Attractiveness of these destinations – even in the mass tourism market – will be increased by offering complex tourism experiences.

Except from traditional destinations of Greek market, cities have the potential to benefit more from exploitation of archaeological sites and museums. Cities can focus on other types of travelling, besides mass tourism. Many of the archaeological sites are located in cities or near them and they can be accessed easily because of the relative infrastructure (e.g. airports, easy access by road etc.). As a result the focus should be on promoting and developing culture as part of city tourism in such destinations. Necessary infrastructure in cities is available all year long and it should be exploited for the reduction of seasonality to those destinations. Moreover, other activities such as shopping and entertainment (easily organized in city environment) can be combined with the primary motive of culture. In such a case, there will be multiple benefits for various sectors of local economy (e.g. shops, events, festivals etc.)

One of the factors that can play significant role to the development of cultural tourism in Greece is further promotion and utilization of World Heritage sites included to the relative list of UNESCO. According to relative data<sup>17</sup>, 1,4 monuments per 10.000 kilm2 are located in Greece which is the average number of the relative number in Europe (1,4). Moreover, this is a high rate for Greece, especially compared to some competitors such as Turkey (0,3) , Spain (1,1) or France(0,7). This figure shows one of the competitive advantages of the country as it can offer experiences with great significance in close distance. Additionally, efforts should be made with the aim of other sites to enter the list of World Heritage sites. This strategy can improve the image of those areas/sites and increase the interest at a global level.

In order to benefit the most from cultural tourism, efforts should be made to attract specific markets during low –season periods. Russia, for example, is considered to be an important emerging market for Europe. Specifically, Russia after 2012 reached

France to the 3rd place of incoming countries in terms of arrivals. Although, Russians are being attracted mainly by the traditional mass tourism product, they can be attracted during low-season months such as May, October, November. Also, they are partly interested in Greek culture (with an emphasis to gastronomy). Another interesting case regarding specific incoming markets is China. Specifically, it has become a significant outbound market for Europe. Chinese tourists are used to travel at many countries per trip and all year long, to visit well – known monuments and sites, to further know the European culture and to buy luxury goods<sup>18</sup>. These types of trips can be satisfied by city tourism packages which included the mentioned activities. At the moment, China is an emerging market for Greece. The average annual increase in arrivals during the period 2008 – 2014 was 41.4% and Chinese tourists are considered to be “big – spenders” – especially in spending per night. Additionally, focusing on cultural tourism can increase the supply of cultural products in general. It has been stated that tourism is a catalyst for the promotion cultural products<sup>19</sup>.

Regarding religious tourism the major advantage of Greece is the spatial dispersion of the religious sites to various regions. As a result this form of tourism can play a significant role to economic development of “disadvantaged” areas of the country. Furthermore, it has been argued that religious tourism can rejuvenate several neglected sectors of local economies (e.g. handicraft, agriculture, woodworking etc.)<sup>20</sup>.

Domestic tourism, as previously mentioned, decreased a lot because of the economic crisis. Religious tourism can contribute to the increase of this market – especially by focusing on elderly people. Elderly people are interested in such travel packages and at the same time are available for travelling in low-season periods. Regarding focusing on specific markets it has to be stated that the majority of religious tourists in Greece are domestic tourists. Consequently, targeting to specific markets of same religion (Christian Orthodox) such as Russians or Serbians should be implemented.

The successful development of Religious tourism needs an integrated record and promotion of the total religious sites of the country – especially the most important ones. This record is the main goal of the signed memorandum between Greek Ministry of Tourism and Greek Orthodox Church. According to the memorandum the main goals are: “the protection, raise of awareness, promotion and increase of visitation of the sacred monuments, places, areas, pilgrimages, surrounded areas and of the religious life in general...”<sup>21</sup>

Taking into account that the majority of the religious sites of the country are open to visitors, there is a need of appropriate planning and management either to protect

and preserve them or to promote their specific cultural features. The latter means that cultural aspects of these monuments should be promoted to tourists that are not attracted by a religious motive. For example, Nea Moni located in Chios Island is a religious site with great cultural importance as it is recognized as a World Heritage site by UNESCO. Furthermore, Religious tourism should also be implemented to areas with low levels of tourism infrastructure of the hotel sector because Religious tourists – especially in Greece - usually choose to stay in hotels of medium and low categories according to their services.

Several common strategies for both culture and religious tourism should be implemented, despite the separate ones mentioned above. Specifically, thematic trails can contribute to further increase of the attractiveness and extroversion of the offered experiences. Examples of such practice are the “Pausania’ s Trail” and the “Steps of Apostle Paul” which are being promoted as tours that combine culture, nature and religion. Actually, religion can be approached as part of the culture and vice versa. As a result, it is argued that tourism development in nexus<sup>22</sup> can be a very effective strategy. In this type of tourism development various motives can be combined based on a common axis – e.g. culture as the core motive in the previous example. The above statement can be easily understood by taking into account that several religious sites are considered to be important sites because of their architectural and cultural interest. This type of development can lead to the development of a compound tourism product at a regional or local level.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural and religious tourism have the potential to contribute to the enhancement and rejuvenation of the Greek tourism product. However, it should be highlighted that better results can be achieved only through the extroversion of the efforts and especially through the promotion of culture and religion as parts of the national tourism product.

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