

The development of cultural tourism in a marginalized area based on customers' expectations: the case study of Baalbek-Hermel in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

To go further in the execution of tourism projects and ensure their success, the evaluation of supply and demand as well as trends in the tourism market will make it possible to assert or not the existence of a real potential of the destination. This assessment is necessary in order not to make the mistake of creating oversized projects that can harm cultural authenticity and local identity and not satisfying potential customers. Then, our survey asked potential tourists about their wishes and preferences during a possible visit of the region of Baalbek-Hermel in order to propose an adequate offer. Knowing the perceptions and the expectations of potential visitors is one of the issues that makes the work on the attractiveness of the destination more efficient.

Keywords: Tourism, Tourism development, Cultural Tourism, New Demand, Customer Perception

INTRODUCTION

The improvement of tourism sector in Lebanon has been gradual since 2014. Although, the number of tourists has rebounded in 2018, it remains below the level of 2010. The total number of tourist arrivals increased by 3,88% to reach 1,9 million tourists in 2018. International arrivals are expected to continue growing over the next years. That is why the country needs to develop new products, and offer different attractions across the country. In addition, the analysis of tourist arrivals shows a change in the clientele that should certainly not be neglected. The changes in the market manifest by a sharp decrease in tourists from the Gulf due to political boycott. Their number has dropped while the number of visitors from Europe and the US has reached its highest level in eight years in 2018. The share of Arab tourists fell by 5,5% during the third quarter of 2018 and represents 27,8% of total tourist arrivals compared to more than 45% in 2010. On the other hand, the share of European tourists has exceeded that of Arabs since 2013. Europeans account for around 35,7% of total tourists in 2018 (Chbeir & Mikhael, 2018).

Nowadays, tourists are losing interest in traditional holidays. Europeans are mainly attracted by cultural offers. They are looking for authentic and real experiences that allow them to learn and discover secret facets of a culture. Moreover, they are interested in sustainable tourism practices (Karam, 2017). Hence, each development strategy should take into consideration these changes in order to meet the needs and the preferences of their potential customers and satisfy them. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to identify the expectations and the preferences of the French potential tourists when visiting Baalbek-Hermel, a Lebanese rural region. The French market was selected as French tourists represent the biggest share of European arrivals to Lebanon. In fact, the number of tourists coming from France represents around 25,6% of the total number of European arrivals, followed by Germany (14,7%), UK (11,2%) and Italy (5,2%) (Hamza, 2019).

In our questionnaire, we focused on Baalbek-Hermel, a marginalized Lebanese region, that has begun to change its identity almost a decade ago. This region, with a negative image because of illegal cannabis cultivation, turned to tourism as a tool for territorial development. However, this image has a strong influence on the tourism sector activity in the present but also on the tourist behavior and demand (Pulido-Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2014). With its rich natural and cultural heritage resources, we believe that Baalbek-Hermel has a great potential to develop its tourism activity.

METHODOLOGY

In order to identify the perception and the preferences of potential French tourists, we created a questionnaire that was published online from January to June 2018. It was divided into two sections: the main purpose of the first section was to examine the characteristics of the offer that attracts the French tourists and the way they organize their trips. Questions were related to motivation, favorite season, trip duration, time spent to reach the destination, favorite activity and group size. The other part contains the descriptive data of demographic profile of respondents.

FINDINGS

507 responses were collected. 59% of respondents are female and the majority (33%) are young under 34 years old.

The main factors likely to attract visitors are the diversity of landscapes and the beauty of the nature (61,3%) followed by the Lebanese cuisine (26,9%). Discovering the local lifestyle (24,5%), meeting local villagers (15,6%) and getting to know their local traditions and know-how (18,4%) are also identified as some of the main reasons that push French tourists to visit Baalbek-Hermel. Meeting the local community is one of the means that contributes to consolidation of peace and reduction of stereotypes concerning a place or a culture.

Regarding the ideal season to visit the region, 30,4% of respondents have no particular preference. For the rest, 40,3% prefer to visit Baalbek-Hermel in spring and 20,2% in summer. Less than 10% have a preference for autumn (5,9%) and winter (3,2%). Here, particular attention must be given to reduce the effect of seasonality which has a negative impact on inhabitants in terms of tourism receipts and unemployment. The fact that the majority of respondents prefer spring or summer is due to their habits, traditions and culture. We believe that events can fill this gap.

24,5% of respondents prefer to organize the trip by their own. This reflects the French culture and habits that have a significant impact on their decisions and behaviors. The difficulty of organizing this type of trips may be a negative point as the possibility of online reservation is still not widespread in this region. Regarding the duration to reach the destination, 42,5% of respondents are ready to spend more than two hours, 34,4% are ready to spend between one and a half and two hours; the rest of the respondents are not ready to spend more than one and a half hour on their way. Lebanon is a small country and distance is not an obstacle for visiting a region considered far on Lebanese scale.

As for the types of accommodation, 31,4% of respondents prefer guesthouses. This type of accommodation is considered as the most common in rural areas and offers not only interesting prices but also the experience of the local lifestyle and the possibility of exchange with locals. Guesthouses are a new concept that is gradually introduced into Lebanese market through associations and NGOs. Among the other types of accommodations, small hotels were chosen by 26,7% of respondents and 15,2% prefer book via Airbnb. Holiday apartments and youth hostels were chosen with lower percentages.

Concerning the duration of the visit, respondents prefer relatively short stay trips. 34% of respondents would be ready to spend 3 to 7 days in Baalbek-Hermel region, 31%, would go there on a day trip and 20% would choose this destination for a weekend. Only 16% of respondents would spend more than one week. The majority of respondents being young, we assume that they cannot afford to spend a long trip with modest incomes. The length of stay is an essential point in the organization of visits and packages provided by tour operators in the region. The key of success is to diversify the offer in a way to encourage visitors to extend their stay and promote slow tourism practices.

The vast majority (65%) prefer to visit the region in small groups from 2 to 5 person and in groups of 6 to 10 person for 25,7% of respondents. Less than 10% prefer to travel in larger groups. Potential visitors like to go as a couple (24,3%), with friends (20%) and with family (15,6%). Therefore, it is suggested to develop packages for small groups and to plan specific activities for families, especially for children. 84,4% of respondents would like to participate in activities during their stay. Visiting archeological sites comes on the top of the list of preferences (46,6%), followed by hiking (38,9%), discovering towns and villages (38,3%), tasting traditional cuisine (37%) and others.

CONCLUSION

Lebanon is a rich country that has a diversity of socio-cultural values and traditional know-how. However, tour operators tend to sell classic circuits focused on UNESCO World Heritage sites ignoring others such as natural reserves, religious sites, Hermel Pyramid... which are also important. In this sense, the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Culture must attend much more International Trade Shows, participate in major events to sell a new image of Lebanon and better inform the major international tourist agencies but also review and adapt its tourism offer to meet expectations of a new clientele from Europe, Asia and the Americas.

Understanding tourist's motivations and behavior is fundamental to reveal new opportunities, develop tourism sector in a destination and satisfy the needs of the potential tourists. This survey highlighted the holiday and

tourism behavior as well as the expectations of French market concerning Baalbek-Hermel region. The main interests of respondents were found to focus on culinary and cultural aspects of the region. Also, we are able to identify the practices of French tourists in terms of booking habits, the type of preferred accommodation and activities, the average length of stay among other elements. This data will undoubtedly help to design an adequate offer that would meet the diversity of tourists' expectations. These offer must focus mainly on intangible aspects and the authenticity of the experience that have meaningful symbolic values.

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