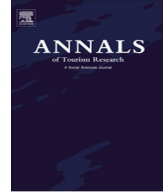




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Research Notes & Reports

Exploring memorable surfing trips

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Surf tourism is travelling for the primary purpose of surfing that entails at least one overnight stay (Buckley, 2002). Concomitant with the growth of the surf tourism industry over the past four decades, the literature on this topic has mainly focused on community impacts, urbanization threats, and entrepreneurial complexities in surf tourism destinations (Martin & Assenov, 2012). More recently attention has shifted to surf tourists, examining their social space (Ponting & McDonald, 2013), and surf travel behavior and preferences (Barbieri & Sotomayor, 2013). More in-depth examination of the factors influencing surf tourism, however, is needed given its capacity to stimulate local economies especially in developing countries (Barbieri & Sotomayor, 2013; Ponting, 2009).

This research note, a component of a larger study examining surf tourism behavior, explores the meanings of memorable surfing trips that can assist capturing surf travelers and encouraging repeat visitation. Data were collected in 2010–2011 using an online survey available in English and Spanish. Snowball sampling, initiated with a convenience sample of 52 adult surfers residing in various countries, was used to recruit study participants. This note is based on the open-ended questions asking whether respondents had experienced a memorable surfing trip, and if so, what made the trip memorable.

A total of 136 responses were gathered from surfers mostly residing in the Pacific South America (48%) and continental U.S. (26%). Most respondents were male (87%), had at least a bachelors' degree (62%), and lived with some financial comfort (72%). Participants averaged 35-years old. Most respondents (61%) had been surfing for at least 10 years and 24% for five-to-ten years. On average they surfed 3.6 days per-week. Most had taken a surfing trip in the past (91%), were considering a surfing trip in the near future (94%), or had embarked on more than five surfing trips during the past five years (55%). Most of the surf tourists (67%) reported having a memorable surfing trip, predominantly abroad.

Two researchers initially open coded statements associated with memorable trips through constant peer-debriefing. These codes were axial coded into categories. The third researcher reviewed the coded material to ensure consistency in data interpretation (Ahuvia, 2001). Three themes regarding what constitutes a memorable surfing trip emerged: *Living Surfing*, *Having Indelible Experiences*, and *Discovering An-other*. Shared references to the destination attributes (e.g., family-friendly atmo-

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sphere, secluded surroundings) were not analyzed as they were pertinent to a variety of tourism destinations and did not add to an understanding of memorable surfing trips.

Living Surfing, the most common theme, denoted the maximization of the surfing experience, usually referring to relentless surfing (e.g., “2 months of consistent unforgettable swell” and “Great surf all over for a week straight”) or describing conditions making surfing or the waves peculiar (e.g., “South swell in the mix producing perfect waves” and “Because of the waves that were full glass with tubular sections, good points to hit the lip and fly out. . .”). A 59-year-old surfer described his trip during the 1980’s as:

The surf was the best I have ever seen it there. We had 4 days of excellent surf in the 4 to 6ft range, then it dropped to 3-4ft fun surf and then it picked up to maxed out conditions of long hollow, did I say long, waves of 8 feet at least. . .

Such surfing preponderance confirmed the socially constructed notion of the perfect wave in surf tourist spaces (Ponting, 2009) and the realization of surfers’ ceaseless quests and dreams (Butts, 2001; Ponting & McDonald, 2013).

Having Indelible Experiences referred to experiences so strong that they were impossible to forget. These memories often referred to an initial experience such as a first flight or tropical surf, which were consistent with the role of novelty in creating memorable tourism experiences (Kim, 2014). Some respondents related their memorable experience to personal satisfactions associated with attending major surfing events as spectators (e.g., “I watched all my favorite surfers and I was in the most important surf championship. . .”) or participants (e.g., “Because representing my country in a surf world championship is an honor; hold up the flag of my beautiful Guatemala”), findings that confirm the role of events in creating memorable tourism experiences (Kim, 2014). Others recalled a memorable trip because of a thrilling or distressing event. A 60-year-old female surfer described losing her front teeth as memorable, as did a 61-year-old male who had to be rescued because of losing his surfboard while offshore alone. A surfer summarized his indelible experience:

Hurricane Belle, I went when I was 16 years old. It was the size of a complete single story house rolling in with perfect form and glassy. The surf was too advanced for me. But I surfed it a little and got scared. Then the hurricane hit about 24 hours later. . .

Those recollections reflected how the emotionality of an event in the form of thrill or stress, crafted unforgettable experiences (Zimmerman & Kelley, 2010).

Discovering An-other by connecting, bonding, or sharing with others was an important element in participants’ memorable trips. Examples included “Because of what I shared with my family” and “Trip included family and friends. . .was able to enjoy some great waves along with my son.” Discovering *an-other* also offered opportunities to develop or strengthen relationships with fellow surfers. One surfer wrote, “I went with good friends and that added to the experience. We are still good friends after all these years, perhaps in part of this shared surfing experiences.” Connecting with local people and culture was a recollection narrative that also related to *an-other*. A 30-year-old surfer described:

It [the surfing trip] helped me to discover the value of traveling and connecting with other cultures, people, food, other languages and waves. The most important thing is to be able to experience something outside your own country. It was marvelous!

These findings endorsed the value of local culture in constructing overall memorable tourism experiences (Kim, 2014).

Although these themes were commonly embedded in the responses, they seldom appeared as the only aspect that contributed to a memorable trip. Usually the trips were remembered with a combination of elements such as: “Because of the quality of the waves, low prices, their culture, friendly people, variety of breaks, natural landscapes” and “A lot of nature, very beautiful, lots of fauna, incredible waves, an unparalleled place. . .” A 33-year-old surfer wrote:

Good waves, few people, close proximity between beaches, walking paths disconnected from the world, good food and price, the natural beauty of the place, excellent weather and good company of surf friends, among many other good things I can’t remember. . .

Hence, it was the combination of the four elements of the *Nirvanic* (idyllic) surfing tourist space—perfect waves, uncrowded conditions, soft adventure, and exotic natural environment (Ponting, 2009)—that made a surfing trip memorable.

Study findings add the *Other*, defined by surfing fellows and local people, to the *Nirvanic* notion of the surfing tourist space (Ponting, 2009; Ponting and McDonald, 2013). In doing so, this study offers guidance for managers and planners of surfing destinations. Having good surfing conditions is necessary. However, it is insufficient to facilitate memorable experiences that promote repeat visitation and referrals. Surf destination providers need to also consider the combination of elements such as opportunities for positive, friendly connections with other surfers and the local culture. Additionally, the smoother the overall travel experience, the more opportunities that surfers will have to enjoy the ambience of an area. Meanings associated with travel experiences are highly personal, but facilitating opportunities to live surfing and connect with others in beautiful settings seemed to be key in providing experiences that surf tourists shared over and over with friends and family.

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