

The role of sport activities in Alpine summer tourism

Veronika Wirth, Ulrike Pröbstl and Wolfgang Haider

Abstract – Throughout the Alps, natural integrity, outstanding landscape beauty, and the opportunity to pursue various sport activities are key elements of the tourism product, and influence the choice of destinations. This paper focuses on the role of sports activities in the choice of Alpine destinations. The data were collected from a representative random sample of German tourists. The core element of the survey is a stated choice survey in which respondents had to make repeated choices between two hypothetical alpine destinations which were disguised as web sites with changing characteristics and landscape features. The results of the discrete choice experiment show that the sport activities contribute significantly to the destination choice, and that the respondents are rather heterogeneous, leading to the identification of different segments in a latent class segmentation. The largest segment is comprised of the social and activity oriented tourists (55%), followed by nature and alpine oriented tourists (31%), and finally by tourists interested predominantly in relaxing (14%). Their divergent preferences and expectations will be described below. The importance of this research is that these segments have been identified directly from the choice responses, instead of from some attitudinal or motivational set of questions. The findings indicate that sport activities play an important role in the destination choice for alpine summer holidays, but their significance differs between segments. For marketing and management purposes these results highlight that the target groups and related marketing campaigns must be adapted to new trends and societal changes. To attract and enlarge the less active tourism segment the Alps should be positioned as silent place where relaxing in a healthy environment and outstanding landscape is possible.

Index Terms – Alps, destination choice, discrete choice experiment, sport activities, summer tourism

1 INTRODUCTION

The alpine region has always been one of the major destinations for summer tourism in Europe. The natural integrity, the options for special sport activities and the outstanding landscape beauty are key elements of the tourism product.

For visitors, destination choice is a complex decision process. A holiday is a high value purchase and usually high expectations are associated with it. The decision is also risky, especially for first time visitors who cannot test or inspect the product [3], [4]. The interaction among the crucial elements mentioned above in this decision process is not yet thoroughly investigated. In this paper we will focus on the role of various sports activities in destination choice.

Firstly, it is assumed that activities generally have a very high influence on the destination choice in the Alps. Secondly, it is assumed that activities that rely on specific alpine or mountainous features have more influence on the destination choice than activities that can be experienced in any landscape.

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2 METHODS

2.1 Sampling

The study is based on a representative random sample of German tourists, who constitute the major source of tourists for alpine summer tourism [5]. An online survey, investigating the choice for summer vacations in the Alps was run in February and March 2008. The sampling was conducted via an online panel. The survey consisted of 34 questions, reduced to 24 for non-alpine interested persons. With a return rate of 54% a total of 1,153 completed questionnaires were obtained.

2.2 Discrete choice experiment

A discrete choice experiment (DCE) was designed to investigate the complex destination choice process. Discrete choice experiments are a stated preference research method. In a DCE, two alternatives, varying in different attributes are contrasted. Thus, the alternatives are evaluated as a whole [6].

In this study respondents choose between two different alpine destinations or they were offered the opportunity to travel elsewhere. To make the choice task more realistic the alternatives were designed so they appeared like actual websites of holiday destinations, and varied in different attributes: several types of alpine landscapes and protected areas, different village sizes and various activity and cultural offers.

Altogether 17 attributes with 3 attribute levels each were used in the design, leading to 3^{17} , i.e. 129,140,163 possible combinations. An orthogonal fractional factorial design was used to select a small number of these combinations for the survey instrument [7], [8]. Only 72 choice sets were required to estimate all main effects and select interactions effects. One respondent evaluated six choice sets, so that the 1,006 respondents supplied a total of 6,036 choices.

For the analysis Latent Gold Choice 4.0 [9] was used, which produces a regular multinomial

logit model, as well as a latent class segmentation [10], [11]. Latent classes are characterized by maximizing homogeneity within classes and maximizing differences between classes and will be described below.

The following activities were offered by each of our summer destinations: Hiking, swimming, mountain biking, rock climbing/fixed rope routes, horseback riding, golfing, and (unspecified) indoor offers [12], [13]. It turned out that for the analysis it was most efficient to combine some of these activities in the following manner: mountain biking and rock climbing/fixed rope routes as both represent recent trend sports and are fairly dependent on the alpine environment; horseback riding and golfing, both representing prestige sports which are fairly independent of specific landscapes; finally, hiking, swimming and indoor offers were investigated as separate variables.

3 SELECTED RESULTS

In a rating task, the most important motives for spending summer holidays in the Alps were "resting and relaxing" and "experiencing nature and landscape". Interestingly, "physical fitness and sports" was rated fairly low in comparison.

In the choice experiment all activities are evaluated at once, and the various sport activities played a significant role in the destination choice but there are large differences.

To account for heterogeneity, three segments have been identified by latent class segmentation: social and activity oriented tourists (55%), nature and alpine oriented tourists (31%) and relaxing oriented tourists (14%) (the parameter estimates for each of the activity related variables are presented in Fig. 1-5, where the y-axis shows the part-worth utility, and the x-axis the availability of the respective activity; when activities were combined, then the number of stars were simply added up).

The group of social and activity oriented tourists is the youngest segment. For mem-

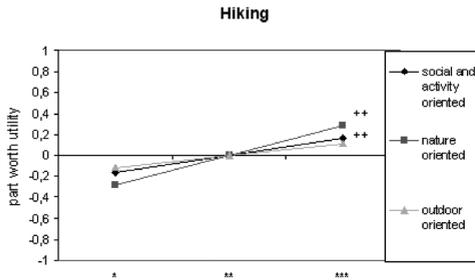


Fig. 1. Part worth utility of hiking in the destination choice in the Alps plotted against quality of the offer (n=1006) ++ p<0,01, + p<0,05, (+) p<0,1

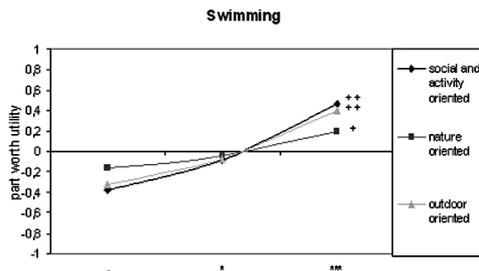


Fig. 2. Part worth utility of swimming in the destination choice in the Alps plotted against quality of the offer (n=1006), ++ p<0,01, + p<0,05, (+) p<0,1. In the current study the alpine interested respondents of the overall sample had to make a choice between two different alpine destinations or travelling elsewhere. Websites of holiday destinations were simulated in the study to make the choice task more realistic. The destinations varied in different attributes: various alpine landscapes and types of protected areas, different village sizes, cultural offers and various sport activities. Here, sport activities offered in alpine destinations have been selected [11], [12]: Hiking/mountaineering, mountain biking, climbing/fixed rope routes, swimming, horse-riding, golfing and indoor offers.

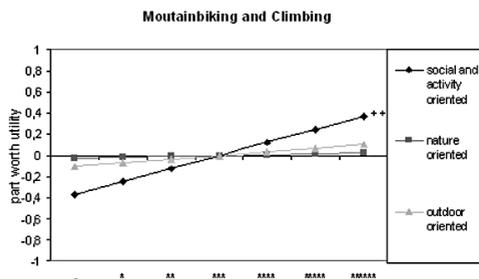


Fig. 3. Part worth utility of mountain biking and climbing in the destination choice in the Alps plotted against quality of the offer (n=1006) ++ p<0,01, + p<0,05, (+) p<0,1

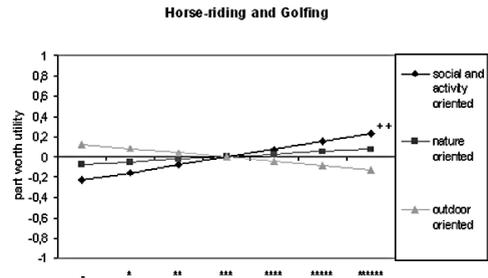


Fig. 4. Part worth utility of horse-riding and golfing in the destination choice in the Alps plotted against quality of the offer (n=1006) ++ p<0,01, + p<0,05, (+) p<0,1. In the choice experiment combining different attributes like landscape character, cultural, sport and educational offers, the sport activities played a significant role for the destination choice as assumed. Three groups have been identified by latent class segmentation: social and activity oriented tourists (55%), nature oriented tourists (31%) and outdoor oriented tourists (14%). There are some common characteristics and also several differences.

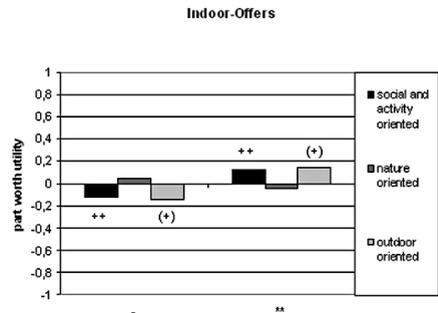


Fig. 5. Part worth utility of indoor offers in the destination choice in the Alps plotted against quality of the offer (n=1006) ++ p<0,01, + p<0,05, (+) p<0,1

bers of this segment it is important to experience sports in a group. In their destination choice all activity types, the alpine trend sports, the alpine independent prestige sports and hiking and swimming are significant.

The nature and alpine oriented tourists constitutes the oldest segment. For this group it is important to experience nature and solitude. Members of this group have above average knowledge of protected areas, and they have a special interest the Alps. For them only hiking as the classical alpine activity and swimming are significant in the destination choice (see Fig. 1 and 2).

The third group, the relaxing oriented tourists are also composed of mostly older tourists. For this group sport activities play a very subordinate role (see Fig. 3 and 4). In their destination choice only swimming and indoor offers are relevant.

So both hypotheses prove only partly true. Sport activities play an important role in the destination choice for alpine summer holidays, but their significance differs between segments.

Hiking as core alpine summer sport activity plays an important role for the vast majority of visitors, regardless of segment. Alpine related trend sports (climbing/fixed rope routes and mountain biking) are only slightly more important in the destination choice than sports independent of the Alps (golfing, horse-riding, indoor). The most important activity proves to be swimming that can be experienced in many alpine destinations as well as in other landscapes.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Tourism marketing for the Alpine area is in most cases illustrated with pictures of very active recreationists, like climbers, hikers or mountainbikers. Against the results of this study this tradition must be reconsidered. Overall the motive "physical fitness and sports" is ranked fairly low as a motive for spending summer holidays in the Alps. About 45% of the respondents are interested in little or no activities. Within this group of less active tourists there is a segment of 14% which perceives sport activities as not important in the destination choice for the Alpine area. The rest of this group is interested in hiking and swimming only. This segment might gain more importance in the future with an increasingly ageing society. Nevertheless for one segment sport activities proved to be an important decision criterion in the investigation of destination choice in the Alps.

The types of alpine visitors have always changed over time. These findings indicate that the target groups and related marketing

campaigns must be adapted to new trends and societal changes. To attract and enlarge the less active tourism segment the Alps should be positioned as silent place where relaxing in a healthy environment and outstanding landscape is possible. This theme might also get gain more prominence in the context of climate change [14] as longer periods of heat can be expected in lowland areas and in Mediterranean destinations.

When interpreting our data it should also be considered that these results include both the decision behaviour of alpine tourists as well as of potential new alpine tourists who indicated some interest, but so far have little or no alpine experience.

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