

Competitiveness and Responsibility of Tourist Destinations

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This paper deals with the competitiveness of tourism destinations in connection with destination management organizations (DMO) and corporate responsibility. The primary aim of the research was to assess the overall competitiveness of the north Adriatic seaside resort of Portorož and to identify the elements whose performance the destination should improve in the future in order to enhance its competitive position. The secondary aim was to evaluate whether Portorož is oriented towards responsible tourism. Specifically, in many respects responsible tourism makes destinations more competitive. The results of the study show that the destination has some unexploited potentials to become more competitive and responsible.

Keywords: competitiveness; tourism responsibility; seaside destination; Portorož

Introduction

Any tourism company's primarily goal is economic success, which is also a crucial principle of destination management organizations. Economic success can, of course, be achieved in many different ways. Furthermore, the approaches for ensuring long-term success might differ considerably from those targeting short-term success. The responsibility is essentially connected to the issue of sustainability, including its economic component, since no business ignoring the needs of stakeholders (suppliers, local community, etc.) can survive and be successful over the long term (Sedmak, Majdič, & Sedmak, 2011).

'In an ever more saturated market, the fundamental task of destination management is to understand how a tourism destination's competitiveness can be enhanced and sustained. There is thus a strong need to identify and explore competitive (dis)advantages and to analyze the actual competitive position' (Omerzel

Gomezelj & Mihalič 2008). Or, as Ritchie and Crouch (2003) put it, a tourism destination is truly competitive when it is able 'to increase tourism expenditure, to increasingly attract visitors while providing them with satisfying, memorable experiences, and to do so in a profitable way, while enhancing the well-being of destination residents and preserving the natural capital of the destination for future generations.' In fact, in many respects, except perhaps for enclave destinations, it can be argued that what is good for tourists is also good for local people. Neither of them likes the devastation of natural or cultural heritage, traffic congestion, pollution or poverty in the destination. Since the 1970s, awareness of the mutual dependence between business, environment and society has become increasingly present among managers and tourists (Smith & Nystad, 2006).

Van de Ven and Graafland (2006) state that corporate responsibility integrates two main missions:

long term care for social welfare and a fair relationship with all stakeholders, but also for value creation, which includes the creation of employment, and the ecological and social aspects of an enterprise's operation. This statement can be easily adopted on the destination level. In the future, destinations that will support the requirements of emerging sophisticated clientele and that will follow the trends of flexible specialization can develop competitive advantages and also support local suppliers and the region as a whole as it evolves. Strategic marketing and management can maintain the competitiveness of the destination on the long term only via the optimization of tourism impacts for all stakeholders, tourists, local community and tourism suppliers (Buhalis, 2000). Dodds and Kuehnel (2010) identified four areas that tour operators recognize should be addressed in this respect: care for scarce resources in the destination (like drinking water), minimization of waste generated by tourists, cultural and natural heritage protection, and the encouragement of the local production of goods and services, which bring some economic benefit to the destination.

According to the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations (2002): 'Responsible tourism is about making better places for people to live, and better places for people to visit.' Buhalis (2000) is of the opinion that tourism marketing should not only be regarded as a tool for attracting more visitors but should operate as a mechanism to facilitate regional development and ensure suitable gains to all stakeholders involved in the tourism system.

Destination Competitiveness

According to Dwyer and Kim (2003), a competitive advantage could be attained if the overall appeal of a tourism destination is higher than that of an alternative destination open to potential visitors. In this paper, competitiveness is dealt with on the destination level. Previous studies on destination competitiveness were mostly based on Porter's (1990) and Ritchie and Crouch's (Crouch & Ritchie 1999; Ritchie & Crouch, 2000) models. According to the latter, destination competitiveness depends on four aspects: qualifying determinants, destination management,

core resources and attractions, and supporting factors and resources. However, this model is not without deficiencies as some important indices, such as eco-environment quality, are neglected (Zhang, Gu, Gu, & Zhang, 2011). In contrast, 'resource-based view' advocates claim destination competitiveness depends predominantly on its own tangible and intangible resources, as well as combinations of resources and their management (Abfalter & Pechlaner, 2002; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Dwyer, Knežević Cvelbar, Edwards and Mihalič (2012) suggest that destination competitiveness in the final stage depends on tourists' perception. Specifically, the so-called core resources and other destination characteristics and features are those that provide the opportunity for tourists to experience the destination. In the stage of deciding where to spend their holidays, they compare these elements, consciously or not. Cracolici and Nijkamp (2008) agree that tourist destinations' competitiveness derives predominantly from the attractiveness characteristics of a certain area. However, the bundles of these characteristics should be (due to the heterogeneity and dynamicity of the market) highly flexible and able to constantly reconfigure.

Omerzel Gomezelj and Mihalič (2008) investigated the application of different models of destination competitiveness in Slovenia as a destination and conclude that; 'it is more competitive in its natural, cultural and created resources, but less competitive in the management of tourism and demand conditions, with both uncompetitive elements reducing the Slovenian tourism industry's ability to add value.' Results also show for which areas actions need to be taken in order to enhance Slovenia's tourism competitiveness.

There were two analyses of competitiveness in Slovenian tourism conducted in the previous 20 years. Sirše and Mihalič (1999) investigated competitiveness of Slovenia using the De Keyser-Vanhove model and the Integrated model. The results of the study show that Slovenian tourism was stronger in its non-produced attractiveness than in its built infra- and superstructure, and management's capability to add value. For the second analysis (Omerzel Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008), the authors used the same models and

argued that, in comparison to its competitors, Slovenia is more competitive in its inherited and partly created resources (spas, natural endowments, cultural heritage). The authors suggested improvement of managerial efforts and marketing activities in order to improve the country's competitiveness.

Based on the abovementioned literature, the following 22 destination competitiveness elements were included in this research; gambling facilities, wellness centers, accommodation quality, health tourism facilities, beaches, safety, accessibility and adjacency, local transport (bus, taxi), neatness, sport and recreation facilities, suitability for family holidays, restaurants, hospitality (local people, tourism workers), relaxed atmosphere, shopping possibilities, night life and entertainment, cultural events, pleasant spirit of the place, natural attractions, authentic local gastronomy offer, prices, cultural heritage.

Portorož as a Tourism Destination

Portorož is a typical northern-Mediterranean seaside destination in Istria, lying on the southern part of the Piran peninsula. With its adjacent tourism hamlets, it has approximately 6000 hotel beds (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2011). With 415,000 arrivals per year, the municipality of Piran, as the most important Slovene destination, accounts for one fifth of the total Slovene tourism income (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2011). A rough national structure of tourists is: 40% domestic guests, 20% Italians and 15% of both Germans and Austrians; the rest is distributed among other, mostly European, nationalities (Sedmak & Mihalič, 2008).

Portorož is presently situated between the second-generation destinations, offering 3S mass tourism following a Fordist production model based on a lack of differentiation, and the third-generation for which high quality accommodation, conference venues, etc. are typical. While tourists visiting second-generation destinations generally do not care much about sustainability, new tourists have modified their values and lifestyles and demand that the tourism industry be responsible in the conduct of its business (Claver-Cortés, Molina-Azorín, & Pereira-Moliner, 2007). As in the majority of Mediterranean destinations, a strong

seasonal oscillation in tourist arrivals is a problem. In order to retain appeal throughout the year, in the mid-1990s hotels started investments with a focus on wellness, gambling and congress facilities. To a certain point, these investments turned out to be the right decision; however, the development on the destination level was not coordinated, and a part of integral tourism product remained focused on the 'old type' of services. Moreover, the overall connection between the tourism industry, i.e. the Portorož ITP (integral tourism product) and its hinterland in terms of typical products and heritage presentations is extremely poor. Thus, the present market position of the destination suffers considerably from a lack of distinctiveness and consistency (Sedmak & Mihalič, 2008). For further actions, a thorough analysis of present competitiveness of the destination in terms of its strengths and weaknesses is needed.

The aim of this paper is threefold. Firstly, we wanted to identify which destinations are perceived by the low season visitors as being competitive with Portorož. The low season was chosen as there is much more potential for improvements to increase capacity occupancy than in the high season when capacities are full. Next, we measured destination's competitive position; in general and regarding its individual features and attractions; finally, the connection between tourism destination competitiveness and its responsibility is discussed.

Research

Survey Instrument

For this study, *subjective consumer measures* were decided to be appropriate for competitiveness assessment, as suggested by Enright and Newton (2004), who claim that 'specific tourism destinations are not competitive or uncompetitive in the abstract, but versus competing destinations.' In fact, in many previous studies, respondents were asked to rate a destination under study against one or a set of locations chosen by researchers as being competitive to it (Omerzel Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008). Cracolici and Nijkamp (2008) say that the destinations aiming to be competitive: 'have to face the challenge of managing and organizing their scarce resources efficiently in order

to supply a holiday experience that must outperform alternative destination experiences on the tourist market.' In our research, we assumed that by leaving to tourists the free choice of the alternative (or 'second choice') destination the problem of potential unfamiliarity with it, which was found to be often problematic (Dwyer et al., 2012), was considerably diminished. *Therefore, we decided to measure Portorož's competitiveness through comparison of the destination's performance in the eyes of tourists in relation to their closest alternative destination.*

Therefore, we developed two research questions:

RQ_{1.1} What is the overall competitiveness of Portorož?

RQ_{1.2} According to which elements should the destination improve its performance in order to strengthen its competitive position?

RQ₂ Is Portorož oriented to responsible tourism?

The empirical work was carried out from November 2011 through January 2012. Information from 451 tourists/interviewees were gathered using a structured questionnaire form (in the Slovene, Italian, English and German languages). As 15 forms were not completed correctly, only 436 were used for analysis. Information gathering was performed by three trained students under the supervision of the researchers. The sample blueprint was formed using proportional stratification based on shares of tourists by the type of accommodation in previous years. However, due to the relative scarcity of tourists in the low season we were forced to 'catch' some extra interviewees in the hotels during the events, conferences, etc. Interviews took place in hotel lobbies and at a tourist information center. In terms of nationality, the final structure of the sample is comparable to the usual structure of tourists in the low season.

The survey instrument was a questionnaire in which the first part included the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and their motives for their visits. The second part measured destination competitiveness; in tourists were asked which destination they would have visited on this particular holiday if they had not visited Portorož. Then they were asked to compare Portorož's performance in relation to their closest alternative destination. These were subjectively

perceived destinations with which Portorož directly competes. In the central part of the questionnaire, the perceived competitiveness of the destination was measured by 22 elements via a five-point scale.

Mazanec, Wöber and Zins (2007) present several theories and approaches to destination competitiveness assessment, as well as sets of indicators used in previous research. Buhalis (2000) suggests six as a framework for the analysis of tourism destinations (attractions, accessibility, amenities, available packages, activities, ancillary services). However, all of these general indicators seem to overlook some essential specific items, such as security, suitability for family holidays, authenticity of food, lively spirit of the destination, etc., which were found to play a crucial role in tourist decision-making process in some previous studies (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2008; Enright & Newton, 2004; Nemeč Rudež, Sedmak, & Bojnec, 2011; Sedmak, 2006).

The authors therefore believed the set of competitiveness elements/parameters should be determined according to the type of destination and the segments of tourists visiting it. In our case, the set of variables was supported by the research carried out by Prašnikar, Brenčič-Makovec, and Cvelbar Knežević (2006) in Portorož, Grado, Opatija and Nova Gorica, where variables considered to be important for this specific area were included in the indicators set. The majority of these variables could easily also be considered indicators of tourism sustainability/responsibility: cultural and natural heritage resources, safety, neatness, pleasant spirit of the place, local transportation, sport and recreation facilities, authentic local gastronomy offer, cultural events and accessibility of the place, tidy beaches, etc.

Thus, interviewees were asked to rate on the five point scale (from -2 'much worse than the competitive destination' to +2 'much better than the competitive destination') the performance of Portorož comparing to the 'second choice destination' for each of the 22 competitiveness elements shown in Table 1. For those elements that could not be compared between the destinations of which they did not have knowledge, they were asked to choose the answer 'I don't know.' These cases were excluded from the analysis.

Results

The sample comprised 53% women and 47% men. The average age was 46 years. One half of the interviewees were Slovenes (50%), followed by Italians (26%), Austrians (10%), Germans (4%) and Russians (1%). Other nationalities were present at levels of less than one percent. The majority had finished secondary education (49%) or had a bachelor degree (41%). In 73% of cases, they were lodged in hotels and in 27% in other accommodation facilities.

The main motives of the visit were: 'relaxation' (54%), 'fun' (23%), 'business or education' (11%), 'wellness' (7%), 'VFR' (visiting friends and relatives) (4%) and 'medical care' (2%).

For the question 'Where would you go if you would not come to Portorož?' more than one answer was allowed. The majority, 42% of interviewees, answered they would choose a resort in the Croatian part of Istria (Umag – 49, Poreč – 31, Opatija – 29, Pula – 20); 37% would visit some other Slovenian town/resort (Bohinj – 32, Bled – 28, Kranjska Gora – 28, Krvavec – 11, Ljubljana – 9); 34% stated spa centers in Slovenia (Čatež – 31, Moravske toplice – 27, Laško – 21); 28% would go to Dalmatia (Dubrovnik – 25, Split – 15, Pag – 10); 22% of interviewees would choose another place on the Slovenian coast (Koper – 50, Izola – 38, Ankaran – 7). Among more remote destinations, Tunisia (13), the US (13), Sicily (11), London (11), Vienna (11) and Spain (9) were mentioned most frequently.

In Table 1, the mean values of destination competitiveness elements ratings are presented. Those elements having positive mean value signs are perceived to be Portorož's competitive advantages, while those with negative one competitive weaknesses. The overall mean shows Portorož has a relatively strong competitive position. Its main disadvantages are (presentation of) cultural heritage, price level and the availability of authentic local gastronomy. On the other side, gambling facilities, wellness centers, accommodation quality, health tourism facilities, beaches and safety were assessed as being considerably better than in competitive destinations. This confirms the results of the study Prašnikar et al. (2006), which claims that tourists in Portorož (in comparison to three competitive destinations) are satisfied with the wellness of

Table 1 Mean Values of Destination Competitiveness Elements

Destination competitiveness element	(1)	(2)	(3)
Gambling facilities	312	0.87	0.79
Wellness centers	343	0.60	0.75
Accommodation quality	366	0.45	0.61
Health tourism facilities	343	0.44	0.81
<i>Beaches</i>	373	0.38	0.89
<i>Safety</i>	369	0.34	0.61
<i>Accessibility, adjacency</i>	377	0.27	0.63
<i>Local transport (bus, taxi)</i>	326	0.25	0.69
<i>Neatness</i>	370	0.24	0.62
<i>Sport and recreation facilities</i>	356	0.23	0.60
<i>Suitability for family holidays</i>	368	0.19	0.58
Restaurants	367	0.17	0.70
Hospitality (local people, tourism workers)	358	0.16	0.60
<i>Relaxed atmosphere</i>	370	0.16	0.59
Shopping possibilities	350	0.12	0.81
Night life, entertainment	292	0.08	0.91
<i>Cultural events</i>	287	0.05	0.77
<i>Pleasant spirit of the place</i>	370	0.03	0.68
<i>Natural attractions</i>	374	0.00	0.67
<i>Authentic local gastronomy offer</i>	361	-0.01	0.65
Prices	369	-0.05	0.72
<i>Cultural heritage</i>	370	-0.12	0.66
Mean		0,22	

Notes Column headings are as follows: (1) *n*, (2) mean, (3) standard deviation.

fer and personal safety and dissatisfied with the price level.

The elements written in italic were identified by the researchers as having some positive impact on the quality of local people's lives. They were chosen on the basis of previous research findings. Gursoy, Jurowski, and Uysal (2002) found that the environment, economic wellbeing of the community, recreation facilities, and culture crucially influence local community's attitude towards tourism. Munda (2002), in research carried out in Portorož, asked inhabitants what they expect to gain from tourism development.

Table 2 Mean Values of Destination Competitiveness Elements by Different Motives of Visit

Motive	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Cultural heritage	-0.24 (0.61)	0.09 (0.69)	0.13 (0.69)	0.27 (0.65)	-0.26 (0.75)	4.11 (0.00)
Pleasant spirit of the place	-0.04 (0.61)	0.26 (0.75)	0.17 (0.78)	0.09 (0.30)	-0.26 (0.82)	3.34 (0.00)
Shopping possibilities	0.12 (0.80)	0.29 (0.71)	0.17 (0.94)	0.00 (0.63)	-0.30 (0.92)	2.28 (0.04)
Local transport (bus, taxi)	0.20 (0.64)	0.48 (0.65)	0.26 (0.86)	0.09 (0.54)	0.00 (0.87)	2.90 (0.01)
Authentic local gastronomy offer	-0.03 (0.55)	0.24 (0.64)	0.13 (0.76)	-0.20 (1.03)	-0.50 (0.75)	6.39 (0.00)
Cultural events	-0.03 (0.79)	0.28 (0.70)	0.19 (0.75)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.29 (0.90)	2.46 (0.02)
Night life, entertainment	-0.02 (0.89)	0.43 (0.92)	0.24 (0.77)	0.09 (0.54)	-0.48 (0.91)	4.75 (0.00)
Mean	-0.01	0.30	0.18	0.05	-0.30	

Notes Column headings are as follows: (1) relaxation (standard deviation), (2) fun (standard deviation), (3) wellness (standard deviation), (4) VFR (standard deviation), (5) business, education (standard deviation), (6) *f* (significance).

The highest ranked statements were: nature preservation, neatness, events and sport and recreation possibilities. Simpson (2008) claims the 'community benefit tourism' should (among other factors) take care of the environment and natural assets, infrastructure development (roads, communications, public transport, etc.), safety and security, civic pride in community (culture, heritage, natural resources, unique crafts and skills) and the sense of well-being. Of course, the above selection was to a certain degree subjective, and one could argue the restaurants and entertainment facilities, for example, are also important for the local community. However, as the researchers know the destination exceptionally well, they know that these elements are used only sporadically by local people.

Interestingly, those destination features ranked at the top in terms of competitiveness do not contribute (directly) to the local community's quality of life, while the four ranked on the bottom do. These results coincide with the findings of Sobočan (2012) who, on a sample of 135 Portorož inhabitants, found out that only 13% of interviewees think tourism companies in Portorož are responsible in their conducting of business

(33% think they are not responsible; the rest answered 'I do not know'). Expectedly, interviewees working in the tourism industry (according to Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2011) they represent approximately 25% of the active population) were less critical than those who were not.

Although several comparisons between *a priori* segments were made, only the differences between the segments based on the motivation of visit brought to significant differences. In Table 2, comparisons of mean values are presented.

From the last row, it can be read that tourists coming to Portorož with business or education reasons are the most critical concerning its competitiveness, as they did not assign any positive value to the seven elements differing significantly among the groups. They gave the lowest marks to authentic local gastronomy and night life/entertainment.

In contrast, those tourists who came to the destination to have fun or to enjoy wellness programs found Portorož competitive on all seven elements. The most problematic features seem to be the offer of authentic food, which was assessed negatively by three out of five segments.

Discussion

The primary aim of this research was to assess the overall competitiveness of Portorož and to identify which elements the destination should improve in the future in order to strengthen its competitive position. The secondary aim was to evaluate whether Portorož is oriented to responsible tourism. While the methodology for the achievement of the former aim was quite straightforward (on-site survey among tourists), the latter was obtained indirectly through an analysis of the relative competitiveness of different elements. We departed from the thesis that responsible tourism development should make a destination appealing for tourists, providing them with pleasant experiences, but at the same time enhance the well-being of destination residents, and preserve and valorize the natural cultural and natural heritage and other resources in a sustainable way.

Resorts in the Croatian part of Istria, other Slovenian towns/resorts and spa centers in Slovenia turned out to be the most serious competitors to Portorož in the low season. Generally, the destination holds a relatively strong competitive position, but for three features its performance is worse than in competitive destinations: cultural heritage, price level and the offer of authentic local gastronomy. While due to the shortfall of more in-depth information on the products of competitive destinations, we are reluctant to give recommendations regarding the prices (perhaps high quality may well justify them), we believe that the rich cultural heritage of nearby hinterland, including typical gastronomy, offers enormous unexploited potential and many solutions for overcoming this disadvantage (Brezovec, Sedmak, & Vodeb 2009; Sedmak 2004). This would be especially welcome for business/education visitors and those visiting Portorož for relaxation, who were the most critical in this regard. Moreover, a more intense inclusion of these elements would also make tourism more responsible towards inhabitants. Namely, cultural heritage and local gastronomy play significant roles in the local community as they represent a building block of people's identity and they are something people are proud of (Vodeb, Sedmak, & Brezovec, 2009). The absence of typical/authentic features in the offer of tourism ser-

vices might therefore cause a feeling of marginalization and alienation from tourism.

The present perception of local people is that the tourism industry in Portorož is not responsible. Moreover, tourists also assessed that the destination is the most competitive on those features that cause more negative than positive effects on the social and natural environment: gambling and wellness facilities and hotels (except perhaps for people working there). At this point, it should be mentioned that the largest gambling company in the destination has faced serious financial problems in recent years, and there is a real possibility it will have to close down. Bearing all this in mind and the findings of some previous research (Brezovec et al., 2009) showing the relatively high interest of tourists in knowing and learning about cultural heritage, the destination would improve its competitiveness and at the same time become more responsible if it shifted its development efforts towards more authentic products valorizing typical features and heritage.

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