South Tyrol Culinary Tourism: 
Gaps between Expectation and Fulfillment for German Travelers

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While culinary tourism is not a new travel activity, interest in culinary tourism has seen significant growth over the past few years. Culinary tourism is thought to create distinctive experiences as part of a unique bundle of activities associated with local culture, landscape and food. With that said, culinary tourism as a research topic is a relatively new and under-researched phenomena. Therefore, the objective of this study is to bridge this gap and extent research on the relationship among expectations prior to visit, fulfillment of these expectations post visit and the relative importance of culinary aspects compared to other aspects such as nature and landscape, wellness, sports, etc.

To assess these relationships, the study ties methodology to theories of consumer satisfaction. Several theories provide proposed links between consumer satisfaction and its consequences. Three of these include expectancy-disconfirmation theory, norm theory, and equity theory. The most commonly accepted theory to explain consumer satisfaction is the expectancy-disconfirmation theory. Essentially, the theory indicates that customers have expectations of goods and services prior to consumption and satisfaction level is derived based on whether or not the actual outcome exceed, meet or do not meet a priori expectations.

Methodology

Data for this report was collected using a survey instrument during three days in the city center of Bolzano in South Tyrol, Italy. Bolzano is the largest city in the South Tyrol region; the region provides a unique location for study due to the blend of Germanic and Italian influences on food, wine and culture. Due to its proximity, the primary travelers to the region are German, Italian, Austrian and Swiss. The survey contained 46 items with sections on expectations of various tourism activities, fulfillment of these activities, activities with the greatest potential and related questions. For this study, the authors focus on the relationship between activity expectations and fulfillment for German travelers to the region. The sample for this study is 525 German tourists.

Following the expectancy-disconfirmation theory, the data were analyzed to assess tourist activities that had high expectations and high fulfillment (meeting expectations), moderate expectations and high fulfillment (exceeding expectations), moderate expectations and low fulfillment (disconfirmation of expectations), and low expectation and low fulfillment (confirmation of expectations but a negative or unimportant impact). The survey used a 5-point scale for expectation levels (1= very low expectations and 5= very high expectations) and fulfillment levels (1= not met at all and 5= exceeded expectations). The following break-points were used to separate high, moderate and low means: high = 3.75 or greater, moderate = 3.0 to 3.74, low = less than 3.0.

Results

For German tourists, the South Tyrol region had six activities or attributes that were rated both high in expectation and high in fulfillment. These include 1) nature and landscape, 2) traditional dishes of the region, 3) friendliness of staff in the hotels and restaurants, 4) friendliness of staff in wineries, 5) competencies of staff in hotels and wineries, and 6) competencies of staff in wineries. Five of these six regional attributes relate to culinary and hospitality capabilities of the region.

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Four attributes or activities had only moderate expectations but resulted in high fulfillment: 1) sports, 2) regional wines, 3) authentic food products that can be purchased, and 4) authentic food products on restaurant menus and wine lists. These tourist activities represent areas where the region exceeds expectations for German travelers relative to a priori expectations.

For one activity German travelers had moderate expectations but low fulfillment. This activity or attribute was the local culture which created a slight gap between expectation and fulfillment. The fine dining activity had a low expectation but moderate level of fulfillment; this activity exceeded overall expectations but only to a moderate level.

Two activities were relatively low on both expectations and fulfillment: 1) wellness and spa and 2) special events. Special events had a slight positive gap between expectation and fulfillment but still remains a relatively low attribute for German travelers in the region.

Conclusions

The study demonstrated the strength and consistency of six tourism attributes in South Tyrol, four attributes that resulted in a positive gap between expectations and fulfillment, and three activities or attributes that have negative gaps or low overall expectations and fulfillment. In total, nine attributes or activities provided a positive gap between expectation and fulfillment; of these, four were related to culinary tourism (traditional dishes of the region, regional wines, authentic foods that can be purchased, and authentic foods on menus) and four were related to hospitality and service activities in the region (staff friendliness and competencies in hotels, restaurants, and wineries).

Those that exceed expectations suggest that region reputation and promotion has a tendency to under promise and over deliver; this positive gap relationship is likely to provide positive consumer behavior consequences in the areas of intention to return, positive word of mouth and increased spending behaviors.

To assess the relationship between positive gaps, neutral gaps, and negative gaps, the authors will provide further analysis of tourist intentions to return and the impact of other demographic characteristics as well as the greatest potential of food tourism categories and their importance to German travelers in South Tyrol.

Keywords: Culinary tourism; Expectancy-disconfirmation theory; Tourism attribute fulfillment.

JEL-Code: Enogastronomical Tourism and New Activities; Association of Food and Wine.