



Exploring length of stay: International tourism in south-western Norway



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ABSTRACT

This article explored length of stay (LOS) in the context of tour planning, to assess as to whether LOS can be increased. LOS is an important parameter for tourism destination management, at the same time as evidence have suggested that LOS is declining on a global scale. The study was based on responses from 1592 foreign leisure travellers in south-western Norway, a region dominated by round-trips. The study uniquely explored aspects that influenced visitor planning of length of stay, finding that perceptions of time 'needed' for desired activities is the most important aspect of holiday duration planning, followed by limitations in the number of vacation days, holiday budgets and accommodation-related considerations. Visitors with a focus on the region, those with their own vehicles and those emphasising outdoor recreation and/or landscape sightseeing were likely to have longer stays. Findings suggested that destinations have potential to increase LOS. The paper additionally reflected on how identification of tourist segments with flexible time frames can contribute to destination management focused on LOS.

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1. Introduction

Leisure travellers' length of stay (LOS) has received considerable attention because of its relevance for hospitality enterprises and holiday destinations at large (Alegre & Pou, 2006; Fleischer & Pizam, 2002; Gokovali, Bahar, & Kozak, 2007). There has also been a growing concern in many tourism destinations that travellers are not staying as long as they did in the past (Alegre & Pou, 2006; Barros & Machado, 2010; Eurostat, 2014; Ferrer-Rosell, Martínez-García, & Coenders, 2014; Fleischer, Peleg, & Rivlin, 2011; Gokovali et al., 2007; Salmasi, Celidoni, & Procidano, 2012; UNWTO, 2006, 2007). Declining LOS has various implications for destinations, as well as the overall environmental impacts of tourism. For example, where visitors stay for shorter periods, arrival numbers need to increase in order to maintain a given number of bed nights. This is of importance as destinations do not profit from arrival numbers per se: It is spending within the

destination, for accommodation (bed nights), activities, shopping or food that determines local economic contributions. Furthermore, where arrival numbers grow, environmental externalities increase as well: Most of the contribution of tourism to climate change, for example, is related to transport (UNWTO, UNEP & WMO, 2008). On the destination level, it is thus paramount to increase LOS if benefits of tourism are to be optimized without further growth in environmental externalities (Gössling, Ring, Dwyer, Andersson, & Hall, 2016).

LOS is in a global decline, a pattern that is also noticeable in Norway. This country experienced a decrease in the mean number of foreign leisure guest nights during the extended summer season, from 8.3 in 2000 to 7.9 nights in 2011, according to a foreign visitor border survey that was discontinued in 2011 (Farstad, Rideng, & Landa Mata, 2012; Haukeland, Rideng, & Grue, 2000). Several explanations of such development have been identified, including opportunities to travel more frequently at a low cost (Barros & Machado, 2010; Castillo-Manzano, Lopez-Valpuesta, & Gonzalez-Laxe, 2011), sociocultural changes with tendencies towards annual leisure trips for shorter periods of time (UNWTO et al., 2008), the popularity of multi-destination holiday tours (Jacobsen, 2004) and the emergence of social media with an

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emphasis on travel pattern communication for generation of social capital (Gössling & Stavrinidi, 2016). However, the factors that influence leisure travellers' planning of length of stay are still under-researched. This is more than an academic matter; this is vital to tourism-related livelihoods, particularly since length of stay may be indicative of overall tourist spending (Losada, Alén, Domínguez, & Nicolau, 2016) and of holiday budget shares spent in the places mobile tourists choose to call on.

This study uniquely investigated aspects of independent leisure tourists' considerations when deciding the length of stay in south-western Norway, a mature and rather expensive destination area. The article aimed at filling an empirical gap in the understanding of length of stay considerations in the context of a region with a large proportion of independent visitors on round trips encompassing other districts (Dybedal, 2014). The research additionally identified socio-demographic and other variables that influenced the duration of international tourists' visits, including weather forecast. The objective was to make an empirical contribution to the understanding of the factors that shape developments in length of stay and to discuss their implications for destination area management. Specifically, the project sought to understand differences in length of stay for international independent tourists in south-western Norway and to identify parameters that influence their decision-making related to length of stay. Implications of results for destination management are discussed, such as promotion developments and opportunities to improve tourism and hospitality enterprise earnings and tourism-related livelihoods.

2. Literature review

Length of stay is pivotal to tourism destination areas, as it influences both visitor activities and expenditures (see Baum & Lundtorp, 2001). On the one hand, declining length of stay may have a pronounced impact on lodging enterprises, as operating costs might increase and they would need to attract more visitors to maintain occupancy rates. On the other hand, shorter stays may imply that more tourists could find accommodation during peak season(s) (Alegre & Pou, 2006), thus benefitting tourism-related businesses and organisations such as transport companies, toll roads, activity providers, and museums. Length of stay has also relevance for climate change, as the largest share of emissions from long-distance tourism is commonly a result of transport: more leisure trips interfere with global efforts to mitigate global warming (UNWTO et al., 2008).

Various temporal constraints are known to affect the duration of an entire holiday tour and the length of stay in an area (Bull, 1995; Gronau, 1970). These include a limited number of vacation days, having to return at certain times, and also wanting to spend time in other regions or places (Gössling et al., 2016). Additionally, there might be temporal constraints on the supply side, as some accommodation can only be booked by the week, leading to large proportions of one- or two-week stays (Dybedal, 2014), with a possible addition of necessary travel time from and to a region's exit points. The availability of desired accommodation may thus have both a positive and a negative influence on length of stay.

Particularly in the context of multi-destination tours, the status of destinations and attractions in the tourists' minds may affect length of stay (see Botti, Peypoch, & Solonandrasana, 2008; Leiper, 1990). For instance, a study of both business and leisure travellers in Brazil associated multi-destination trips with short stays in each place (Santos, Ramos, & Rey-Maqueira, 2015). In the same vein, a study in Madeira found that tourists making short trips have tended to stay at central locations and visit major tourism attractions (Barros & Machado, 2010). Then again, a study in the Azores

(encompassing 9% business travellers) has shown that increase in the number of islands visited led to a statistically significant increase in the expected total duration of the stay in this archipelago (de Menezes, Moniz & Vieira, 2008).

Financial constraints and limited budgets may likewise affect length of stay (Alegre & Pou, 2006; Crompton, 1979; Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000). For instance, a study in the Balearic Islands revealed that high prices at a destination may not necessarily deter tourists but may affect visit durations (Alegre & Pou, 2006). Moreover, favourable prices on transport on certain days can affect not only travel timing but also the visitors' length of stay in an area. Such pricing patterns may vary with weekdays, seasons, and modes of transport (e.g. Alderighi, Nicolini, & Piga, 2016; Cosgunna, Ekinici, & Yanik, 2014).

Variations in travel motivations have also been found to influence length of stay (Alegre & Pou, 2006; Barros, Butler, & Correia, 2010). More specifically, holidayers' desire to participate in certain activities might affect how long they will stay in an area. A study of European leisure airline passengers in Spain found that those respondents taking part in hiking and in cultural visits tended to stay longer than tourists who did not (Ferrer-Rosell et al., 2014), though this may also indicate a specific, 'slower' type of visitor. Moreover, emphasis on event(s) in a destination has been found to lead to a longer stay (Barros et al., 2010).

Weather conditions and forecasts might also influence the length of stay in a district. Research in an area in Northern Norway found that predictions of adverse weather led to shorter stays in the study region, particularly for visitors travelling with their own motor vehicles (Denstadli, Jacobsen, & Lohmann, 2011). In contrast, a study of golf tourists in southern Portugal found that visitor highlighting of expected 'good' climate and weather was associated with longer stays (Barros et al., 2010).

Evidence from a number of studies suggests that repeat visitors stay longer in a destination than do first-time arrivals (Gokovali et al., 2007; Oppermann, 1997; Santos et al., 2015; Thrane & Farstad, 2012; Uysal & McDonald, 1989; Yang, Wong, & Zhang, 2011; de Menezes et al., 2008). These more recent studies contradicted earlier research advancing that first-timers would stay longer than return tourists (Paul & Rimmawi, 1992; Silberman, 1985).

Explorations of length of stay in terms of common demographic variables such as education and age have come up with mixed results. Research in Madeira found that more educated tourists tended to stay longer than those who were less educated (Barros & Machado, 2010). However, a survey in the Azores associated a higher level of education with shorter stays (de Menezes et al., 2008). In comparison, research on seaside destinations in Turkey found no influence of education on length of stay (Gokovali et al., 2007). Enquiries have uncovered a positive effect of age on the length of stay (see Martínez-García & Raya, 2008; Santos et al., 2015; Thrane & Farstad, 2011; Yang et al., 2011). Conversely, an investigation of people using charter flights from Portugal to Latin American destinations found that older tourists typically stayed for shorter periods than did the younger ones (Barros, Correia, & Crouch, 2008). There is also some evidence that younger travellers, born between the 1980s and the early 1990s (Generation Y), can be highly mobile, 'ticking off' destinations to accrue social capital through communication of travel patterns on social media (Gössling & Stavrinidi, 2016).

Taken together, although these studies pertain to different types of destinations and travellers, they show that length of stay is influenced by a wide range of factors. However, it remains unclear how these dimensions interact, whether they are hierarchically ordered, or whether there is flexibility regarding some parameters that destinations could focus on to increase length of stay.

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