Satisfaction of Australian families travel experience to the Great Barrier Reef Islands of Queensland

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Abstract

This paper is designed to ascertain if the 'family friendly' resorts on the Great Barrier Reef are living up to the expectations and meeting or surpassing the satisfaction levels of the visitors to these resorts. Existing research has be undertaken on the satisfaction level of tourists to various destinations, however no research has been undertaken on the satisfaction of families visiting the Great Barrier Reef. Therefore this research specifically focuses on the satisfaction of families visiting the Great Barrier Reef. This is important because there are South Pacific destinations which offer marine wonders seeking to attract the Australian family market. General managers of family friendly' resorts on the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia will be contacted and permission will be sort to include a questionnaire in the compendium in each room of the resort. It is envisaged that a family member staying in the resorts will complete the questionnaire and then leave it at the reception on their departure. After analysis of the data the results will be forward to the General Manager of each resort. It is envisaged that the findings will assist the resorts in developing and delivering a product which will meet or exceed the expectations of the visitors.

Introduction

Located on the eastern seaboard of the Queensland coast of Australia are the islands of the Great Barrier Reef which are one of the seven natural wonders of the world. This is the longest reef in the world and stretches for approximately 1,200 miles and consists of many reefs and islands. Some islands have resorts which welcome families whilst others discourage families. The writer contacted Tourism Queensland to ascertain if they had undertaken research on the satisfaction level of Australian families to the 'family friendly' islands of the Great Barrier Reef and was advised that they had no information on this topic. It appears that this topic area is under researched and therefore this study looks at how one could ascertain the satisfaction level of families visiting these islands.

The Great Barrier Reef islands have long been a popular tourist destination in Queensland, Australia. Results from the Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) Reef Visitor Analysis survey (1999) indicate that international tourists make up 49% of visitors to the reef, while domestic visitors comprise 51%. Some of the islands in the Great Barrier Reef cater for families with the exceptions of Bedarra, Lizard, Orpheus, Peppers Palm Bay and Wilson Island which either advise that children are not encouraged or catered for or that the island is advertised as a 'child free' zone. This still leaves a choice of 'family friendly' islands which offer either children's menus, baby sitting or kids clubs. They are: Green Island Resort, Fitzroy Island, Dunk Island, Hamilton Island, Hayman Island, Daydream Island Resort & Spa, Long Island – Club Croc, South Molle Island Resort, Lady Elliott Island, Heron Island, Hinchinbrook Island, Wilderness Lodge and Brampton Island advise they do not have children's facilities but do have tariffs for children. The Contiki Great Keppel Island Resort is for 18-35's and the island is marketed as a 'party' island and will not be numbered in the 'family friendly' grouping.

In 1994, 1,508,000 people visited the Great Barrier Reef and by 1997 the figure rose to 1, 559,000 (BTR CRC Reef Research Centre 1999). Tourist numbers to the Great Barrier Reef have increased and tourism has been and still is, a very lucrative business for both public and private sector providers. Tropical North Queensland was ranked 4th in the top 20 regions visited by international visitors in Australia in 1999 and contributed $25.2 billion (4.5%) to Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is attributed with creating direct employment in the tourism sector for 513,000 people. This represents 6% of the total employment in Australia (BTR DATA CARD). However, in recent times with the September 11 terrorist attack, the Ansett Airlines

collapse, the Bali bombing and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic tourism around the world has taken a sharp decline. Figures released by the Australian Tourist Commission indicated that during the year ended 30 September 2003, there were 4.3 million visitors to Australia who were over 15 years of age. This represents a decrease of 1% from the 2002 figures. The report also indicated that 18% of the international visitors visited tropical North Queensland.

Development in both domestic and international travel and tourism destinations has increased competitiveness among the holiday destinations. As new destinations are established existing ones either progress or decline. It is therefore considered that such competitiveness is between tourism, leisure, and specific destinations, as opposed to countries because of the variety and different aspects and features of the destination within a particular country (Bordas 1994). Travel agents are the main contributors to the sale of travel products and often focus on selling destinations as opposed to countries (Klenosky & Gitelson 1998). This has resulted in a demand for package holidays and destinations have also become more important than a 'one off' or individual attraction. This would then reflect tourist satisfaction with a destination, rather than an attraction or facility and would drive repeat business. This emphasises the need for destination managers to direct tourism supply and to ensure the needs of the tourist are met.

Tourism Queensland (TQ) is promoting internal (domestic) tourism by advertising the safety of Queensland holidays and is urging Australians and international visitors to visit and discover Queensland, including the Great Barrier Reef. Ernie Dingo, a well known indigenous television presenter in Australia who is the 'face' for these

advertisements, urges Australians to "Get to know their families again", thus highlighting the need for a break from work and the value of the family unit. Therefore, this study investigates the Australian family's satisfaction level of Queensland Great Barrier Reef resorts.

Literature Review

Tourist expectations are important to successful destination marketing because they often influence destination choice (Ahmed 1991). Many tourists have experienced other destinations and often use these past experiences to compare facilities, attractions and service standards (Lawes 1995). The decision to visit a particular destination is complicated when there is more than one person travelling and involved in the decision making process (Nicholas & Snepenger 1988). Often the decision of where to travel to is difficult when there is more than one person involved in the decision making process. Whilst young children may not actually have a say in the decision process, they certainly influence the parents' decision because of the needs of the children.

Families travelling as tourists usually have expectations on the type and quality of service and the facilities which they want at various destinations. These expectations are often arrived at through information provided by family and friends, past experiences, tourism advertising, commercials, brochures, internet or travel documentaries or shows. The extent to which the family's expectations are met will determine the level of tourist satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Families have the opportunity to receive information about the destination through multiple information

sources. Both commercial and social environments have been shown to affect destination choice (Mill & Morrison 1992).

Several approaches to understanding customer satisfaction have been explored over the last several decades but it appears that a consensus has not been reached despite there being many articles concerning customer satisfaction within the marketing literature (Oliver 1980; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1985; Cronin & Taylor 1992).

Many different aspects of consumer satisfaction in tourism, travel, hospitality and leisure have been reviewed. For example Hsieh, O'Leary & Morrison (1994) investigated packaged and non packaged tours. Le Blanc (1992) investigated the operation of travel agencies and Bonjanic (1996) investigated guest satisfaction in hotels. The level of tourist satisfaction with the behaviour of local people was investigated by Pearce (1980) and recently by Cassidy (2002). Lastly, the tourist satisfaction with destinations was also researched by Cassidy (2002), Chon & Olsen (1991), Pizam, Neumann & Reichel (1978). Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml cited in Zeithaml and Bitner (2003 p. 74) note that "customers expect service companies to do what they are supposed to do. They expect fundamentals, not fanciness; performance, not empty promises." Oliver (1997 p. 13) defines satisfaction as: "….the customer's fulfilment response. It is a judgement that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment."

Family Satisfaction

Cultural differences in attitudes, behaviour and social class can also influence expectations (Lewis 1991; Mayo & Jarvis 1981). Destinations attract tourists and families from many different countries and cultures so there will be discrepancies in satisfaction levels depending on the country of origin of the tourist. The evaluation of the service quality (supply side) and attractions are considered important in determining the overall satisfaction of the tourist/family (demand side) (Whipple & Thach 1988).

Previous research in tourist satisfaction suggests that various decisions are made on when to measure tourist satisfaction. Some of these compare pre and post holiday perceptions (Duke & Perisa 1996), whilst others measure the satisfaction during the holiday (Gyte & Phelps 1989) before finishing the holiday (Goodrich 1978) and on completion of the holiday (Pearce 1980).

Research demonstrates that there is a definite relationship among tourist satisfaction, intention to return and positive word-of-mouth communication (Hallowell 1996; Ross 1993). A relationship also exists among tourists who are dissatisfied. They have a willingness to look for alternative destinations for future holidays and spread negative word-of-mouth (Pizam 1994). Dissatisfaction or satisfaction from previous experiences are also important as they will influence expectations on their next holiday/tourism purchase (Woodruff, Cadollte & Jenkins 1983). These findings are

significant, in that they suggest that favourable tourist perceptions and attitudes result in giving a competitive advantage.

Should the overall experience at the destination meet or even exceed the initial expectations then the tourist/family will usually be satisfied. However, if the experience falls below the tourist/family's expectations then they will be dissatisfied and the chance of a repeat client visit will be very slight. Usually satisfied clients will recommend the hotel or destination to friends and relatives and this is the cheapest and most effective form of marketing and promotion available (Crosby 1993).

Consumer satisfaction is usually linked to the retention of consumers which attributes to loyalty and this in turn helps to realise economic goals, such as increased revenue and number of tourists. This results in a positive bonding between the tourist satisfaction level and the destination's long term economic success. There are many ways in which a destination manager knows if the tourist/family is satisfied. These may include telling friends and relatives about the destination, returning time and again to the destination, or complementing the staff at the destination. It is during this process that there is a strengthening in the relationship between the tourist and the destination.

This research therefore will examine the satisfaction level of families travelling to the Great Barrier Reef Islands of Queensland and if the resorts are meeting or surpassing the expectation levels of the family unit.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire Design

Combining qualitative and quantitative research methods have become acceptable research practice in tourism and hospitality (Belson 1986; Patton 1990). By itself, quantitative research may not be able to give sufficient insight into the views of the respondents (Denzin & Lincoln 1998) hence qualitative research also needs to be considered in the chosen research design. Qualitative research may also be employed to gather background information on the areas that are subject to quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln 1989). It is intended that both qualitative and quantitative research will be used in this research.

A key requirement for effective research is the development of a research design that is based on the problem or problems to be investigated. The research design is then used to identify the methodologies to be used in the research, set research parameters and identify the target population of the research. Ritchie and Goeldner (1994) suggest that the research design should include the following elements:

- the selection of a data collection method

- design of a data collection instrument

- the selection of subjects for the sample

This primary research will take place on the islands of the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland and a questionnaire was considered the most appropriate form of exploratory research. Alternative methods of research such as mail surveys, telephone surveys and observations were considered inappropriate due to time and

monetary constraints. Hence a questionnaire will be designed for the purpose of ascertaining the families satisfaction of the Great Barrier Reef Island resorts in Australia as a holiday destination, their likelihood of returning to the destination and their likelihood of recommending the destination to relatives and friends.

The questionnaire will consist of three sections. Section one will contain questions relating to the demographics of the family while the second section will be based on a seven point scale ranging from *terrible (1)* to *delightful (7)*. Literature suggests that the Likert scale can be used for the purpose of evaluating tourist experiences at a destination because it is effective in measuring the attitudes of the consumer and it is easy to construct and measure (Echtner & Ritchie 1991). Using the *terrible-delighted* scale has been noted to limit the skewness of satisfaction responses (Maddox 1985). Therefore the numerical labels will not be used in this research as the literature shows that respondents prefer verbal labels as opposed to numerical ones (Haley & Case 1979). Hence, the following scale will be used: *do not know (0), terrible (1), unhappy (2), mostly dissatisfied (3), neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (4), mostly satisfied (5), pleased (6) and delighted (7).*

The third section of the questionnaire will consist of a question designed to elicit the family's suggestions or recommendations which would lead to improvement in the friendliness of the island resort for families. Their responses may cover areas of service, facilities, choices, children's areas and the guest rooms or any general observations. It is anticipated that the questionnaires will be placed in the compendium in each guest room and that a member of the family will complete it and return it to the reception area on check-out.

RESULTS

These results will then be analysed to determine the level of family satisfaction regarding the resorts on the islands and will highlight areas of dissatisfaction or satisfaction by the families. The results will be forwarded to the General Managers of the resorts and will also be made available to Tourism Queensland. Thus the findings from this study will provide valuable information in assisting the resorts in being able to develop and deliver products which will meet or hopefully exceed the expectations of the visitors. Future research is needed to explore the differences in push and pull factors among first-time users of family friendly resorts versus repeat visitors and among domestic and international families.

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