

# CLIMBING TOURISM – A CHANCE TO REVITALISE LOW MOUNTAIN RANGE DESTINATIONS?

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## Context

We want to discuss whether climbing tourism can have the power to revitalize low mountain range destinations. Though climbing has become more and more popular recently, climbing tourism is debated as a means of increasing summer revenues. So far most arguments about efforts by destinations to promote climbing tourism are derived from managers' experience. Empirical tests are still missing, so far as we know, and our paper seeks evidence.

## Methods

Data was collected in three steps: First, qualitative interviews were conducted with destination managers and climbing experts (Study 1; N=13), to gain their insights. Second, a qualitative pilot study was done among climbing tourists (Study 2; N=83) exploring factors influencing destination choices. These results were used in step 3, a substantive questionnaire study among climbing tourists in Germany (German Alps, Elbe Sandstone Mountains and Frankenjura) and Italy (Arco) (Study 3; N=261), covering only visitors who considered themselves to be climbing tourists, and spent one or more nights at a destination.

Factors limiting economic benefits from climbing tourism are natural and cultural conditions. The former include the fact that climbing sites are scarce and scattered unevenly, mostly in remote areas. Cultural conditions cover specific characteristics and behaviours of climbers that impact on the economic benefits. Climbing tourists are seen generally as creating small revenues because of limited numbers and short stays, usually in cheap accommodation; but they increasingly demand convenient holiday conditions, narrowing the season to the summer (Bourdeau, 2004).

This lead us to test the in study 3 following hypotheses: **H1a**: Climbing tourists stay less than the average tourist. **H1b**: Most climbing tourists choose simple accommodation. **H1c**: Their expenditure is below the general tourism average. Our study 1 confirmed this negative image. Furthermore, climbing tourists often show variety-seeking behaviour by switching sites within a climbing area and between different areas, and make very seasonal use of sites, a pattern of behaviour called "diffused tourism" (Jamot, 1995). To assess this we wished to test hypotheses **H2a**: Most climbing tourists are variety-seekers; and **H2b**: Weather conditions are very important for the destination choices. Climbing tourists are also perceived as solely focused on climbing during their holidays, thereby limiting cross-selling potential. We wanted to test this by **H3a**: Factors apart from climbing conditions are irrelevant in climbing tourists' destination choices, and **H3b**: Climbing tourists do not engage in other sport and leisure activities.

The literature, however, also named some upsides (Bourdeau, 2004): Climbing offers additional revenue, especially for rural destinations in lower altitudes, while not requiring huge initial investments in facilities. Moreover, climbers show a high travel frequency. In addition, we thought that positive features had been overlooked, namely that climbers are a fast-growing customer segment compared to many traditional outdoor sports, and they are also relatively young and well-educated, factors that could lead to additional future revenue, once these tourists were convinced of the virtues of a destination. So, we wanted to test: **H4a**: Average age of climbers is below the general tourism average; **H4b**: Most climbing tourists have Higher Education; and **H4c**: Climbing tourists travel more often than most tourists.

A further argument was derived from climbers' information behaviour, characterized by the importance of word-of-mouth and specialized media, which greatly limits usable marketing instruments but also marketing costs. So, our final hypothesis was: **H5**: Recommendations are named most often by climbers as their decisive source of information for destination choice.

## Results

Results from Study 3 showed that the average length of stay of climbers was significantly below the average at the same destinations, so **H1a** was confirmed. The overwhelming majority of respondents chose cheap accommodation and their expenditure was well below average, so **H1b** and **H1c** were accepted, though expenditure varied greatly between destinations. Data from study 3 showed most climbing tourists to be variety-seekers, confirming **H2a**. Most participants also stated that expected weather conditions at a destination were important in their destination choice, supporting **H2b**.

Results on **H3a** that climbing tourists are singularly focused on climbing were ambiguous: Content analysis in study 2 on what climbers looked for in a destination showed that climbing potential was clearly the knock-out criterion, but it also showed they engage in other activities that could bring revenue (**H3b**). **H4a, b, c** concerning age average, education and travel frequency were supported. Personal recommendations were the most often-used information source, so **H5** was accepted.

## Discussion

Our empirical results support the arguments above that not every mountain destination can benefit substantially from climbing tourism: given the preferences of climbers, only those that offer or can develop excellent climbing sites can expect to be successful. The revenue per tourist per day is limited, but can be raised by active destination management, since some destinations can offer cross-selling opportunities. Costs for infrastructure for climbing tourism are low, and even though such tourists exhibit variety-seeking behaviour, the importance of word-of-mouth offers an opportunity to acquire new customers without excessive marketing costs (Woratschek & Horbel, 2005). Climbing tourists prefer to come in spring and autumn, so contributing to more even use of the capacities of the resorts.

In today's extremely competitive tourism environment, there are only a few promising customer segments still ignored by destination marketing. Because of this, and combined with the fact that only a few destinations have the necessary natural resources, climbing tourism can be a source of a Unique Selling Proposition. In addition, there are two indirect effects to be considered: first, as the Frankenjura shows, a high profile as a climbing destination can help promote the destination generally, also, a positive image of climbing can trigger a transfer to the whole destination (Hinch & Higham, 2004). Consequently, climbing tourism can be a mountain destination attractor, but intelligent, tailored marketing strategies are necessary, as is cooperative action by entrepreneurs.

## References

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