

On top of the world: An exploration into the social worlds of climbers as serious sport tourists

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Aim of paper and research questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the social worlds and consumer behaviours of competitive ice climbers as serious sport tourists.

Literature review

Serious leisure is the “systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a leisure career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Stebbins, 2006). One quality of serious leisure is the unique ethos and social world for its participants (Stebbins, 1992). A social world is “an amorphous, diffuse constellations of actors, organisations, events, and practices which have coalesced into spheres of interest and involvement for participants [and in which] it is likely that a powerful centralised authority structure does not exist (Unruh, 1980: 277). Green and Jones (2005) suggest that sport tourism can provide serious leisure participants with (1) a way to construct and/or confirm one’s leisure identity, (2) a time and place to interact with others sharing the ethos of the activity, (3) a time and place to parade and celebrate a valued social identity, and (4) a way to further one’s leisure “career.” Previous research on serious leisure has examined sport participants in distance running (Shipway & Jones, 2007; 2008), triathlons (McCarville, 2007), and even dog shows (Gillespie, Lefler & Lerner, 2002). To date, no published study has explored competitors in extreme or adventure sports as serious sport tourists.

Research design and data analysis

In-depth interviews were conducted with 45 of the 52 total participants in the 2009 Ice Climbing World Cup Finals in Busteni, Romania 7 February 2009. A second survey was conducted two weeks after the competition to determine when participants began climbing, prior sport participation, social benefits of climbing, self-identification as a serious climber, travel behaviours, etc. Survey questions were based on research from Stebbins (2006), Shipway and Jones (2008) and Green and Jones (2005).

Results

Competitors represented national climbing associations from Bulgaria, Italy, France, Korea, Romania, Russia, Spain, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and the United States. Most started climbing in their late teens to early twenties after participating in other sports e.g. football, gymnastics, and equestrian. Most found climbing more physically challenging and rewarding than the other sports. Many were socialised into climbing from their parents and have spouses and siblings who also climb. Those introduced to the sport by their parents started at a young age. Climber A recalled her early years in climbing: *My first climbing competition was a*

provincial competition in South Tyrol (Italy) in 1999. I was 12 years old. Climbing is something natural to me. When I was a child I climbed on trees or anything else I could find. In climbing, I like to be outside in nature and the possibility to travel around, to see new countries, and meet new people. I like the competitions because they offer the possibility to meet a lot of friends.

Competitor B added: *First of all, I have been climbing since I was very young. I love the effort it demands me: strength, elasticity and mental.* All subjects have acquired close friends through climbing. Why do you climb? Competitor C stated: *I like this sport. I like the adrenaline that I gain from it...and my friends that came from climbing. I like the places I have been because of the climbing. I like to check my level with other climbers at the competitions and on the rocks.*

Climber A responded: *I think I am quite an ambitious person. I like it to confront myself with others and to give my best during competition. I also like the competitions because they offer the possibility to see and meet friends.* Climber D added: *It is not only about the competitions - it is about the fun, about the beautiful places, about the relationships with my friends!*

Discussion and conclusion

Varley (2006) asserts that adventure sports provide a breakaway from society's prescribed norms, and several climbers commented to that effect. Competitor E describes her immersion in the sport. I am completely fascinated by this sport. For me it is an extension of my life. Competitor F stated: *I love the spirit of climbing in nature. For me it's the way to live. I need that.* Are non-participant family members excluded from the social worlds of serious sport tourists? At what point does serious sport participation become an obsession? Serious sport participation may lead to serious problems i.e., over-training, injuries, eating disorders, neglecting professional and personal obligations, etc. and may ultimately halt sport participation. What happens to those who can no longer compete in climbing, endurance events, etc. due to injury? Are they removed from these social worlds and if so with what consequences? These questions about serious sport tourists are potential areas for future research.

References

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