

**Suzana Marković, PhD, Full Professor**

University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management Opatija

E-mail: suzanam@fthm.hr

**Sanja Raspor Janković, PhD, Senior Lecturer**

Polytechnic of Rijeka

E-mail: sraspor@veleri.hr

**Zoran Tuntev, PhD, Full Professor**

Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality

E-mail: germanoff.ohrid@gmail.com

**Srdan Mitrović, PhD Student**

University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management Opatija

E-mail: mitrovic.srdan@gmail.com

**Josipa Mijoč, PhD, Associate professor**

Faculty of Economics in Osijek

E-mail address: Josipa.mijoc@efos.hr

## **HOW VISITORS EXPERIENCE TOURIST DESTINATIONS? A CASE STUDY OF CROATIA AND MACEDONIA**

### ***ABSTRACT***

*This study aims to measure and compare visitors' tourism experience at two different tourist destinations.*

*On-site survey was conducted in Opatija Riviera (Croatia) and Ohrid Riviera (Macedonia). The research instrument for collecting data was divided into two main parts. The first part was designed to measure tourism experiences, using multiple-item scale with 34 items. The second part of the research instrument was designed to measure demographic characteristics of the respondents, which included: gender, age, marital status, frequency of visit, employment status, education, source of information, type of accommodation, and length of stay. Bivariate analysis was used to test the significance of difference between two tourist destinations and their visitors. The results of analysis showed significant differences in ten out of 34 tourism experience items, revealing that self-beneficial experience was rated significantly higher in Croatia, while hospitality of local people and tourist-guides were rated significantly higher in Macedonia.*

*The results presented in this study may contribute to the existing literature of tourism experience construct, indicating how different tourist destination attributes contribute to visitors' experience of the destination.*

**Key words:** *tourism experience, tourist destination, bivariate statistical analysis, Croatia, Macedonia*

## 1. Introduction

Tourists have started to expect unique, gratifying and diverse experiences on their travels but conventional destination marketing is still driven by the quality of services that are focused on amenities or facilities at the destination (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2015). However, in recent years, competitiveness between destinations has become fierce and with the recognition of tourism destinations as amalgams of tourism products offering an integrated experience to consumers (Buhalis, 2000) destination managers have turned their focus to delivering unique memorable experiences as a means of differentiation on the tourism marketplace (Kim and Ritchie, 2013). Their reasoning is that experiences can ‘touch’ people better than products or services. They are intangible and immaterial and, although they tend to be more expensive, people attach great value to them because they are memorable (Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009).

Focus on marketing experiences instead of products and services has resulted in significant interest in memorable tourism experiences and its underlining dimensions among tourism researchers (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2015). Various authors (Tung and Ritchie 2011; Kim et al. 2012; Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2015) have developed scales to measure memorable tourism experiences. However, many of the studies have used only student samples to examine the framework of the memorable tourism experiences therefore additional research, employing different groups of respondents from more representative populations, is needed to confirm the psychometric properties of memorable tourism experience dimensions. Kim (2013) found that evaluation of some of the memorable tourism experience dimensions varied between students in the United States and Taiwan. Therefore, this study aims to measure and compare dimensions of memorable tourism experience for visitors in two different tourist destinations: Opatija Riviera in Croatia and Ohrid Riviera in Macedonia.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, a literature review is provided regarding the research construct of memorable tourism experience. Next, research methodology is explained, and lastly, research results and conclusions are presented.

## 2. Study framework

The trigger for widespread interest in the tourism experience literature can be traced to work of Cohen (1979) who defined tourism experience as the relationship between people and their total world-view dependent on the location of their center with respect to the society to which they belonged. Recently, memorable tourism experiences are viewed as multidimensional constructs selectively formed from tourists’ experiences based on each individual’s assessment of the experience (Kim et al., 2012).

In other words, a tourist’s experience, which has been viewed as the subjective mental state felt by participants as a part of service encounter (Otto and Ritchie 1995), does not always translate into a memorable tourism experience. Therefore, to successfully capture the components of tourism experiences that strongly affect individuals, we first need to look at the subjective nature of tourist experiences and previous research regarding the underlying dimensions of the tourism experience (Kim et al., 2012). Ooi (2005) found that tourists’ different interests and backgrounds can lead to wide array of interpretations of a single tourist product or service. Also, since tourists tend to have different experiences even if they are doing the same thing in the same place, at the same time their moods and personal feelings at a particular moment affect

their interpretations of the experiences. Even if all tourists say that they enjoyed themselves during an experience, it does not necessarily mean that they all had the same existing and memorable experiences (Ooi 2005).

Therefore, research on the dimensions underlying tourist experiences has shifted from the products or services provided by tourism businesses towards tourists' personal interpretation of the meanings of those objects (Uriely 2005). By identifying these objects in the qualitatively different ways in which individuals experience tourism, researchers have conceptualized the tourist experience as subjective (Cohen 1979; Hjemdahl 2003; Larsen 2007; Ryan 2002).

As the trend of emphasizing the experience economy concept in business literature has grown, a rich body of research has followed that examines the antecedents, outcomes and dimensions of experiences and how to measure them. Brakus et al. (2009) developed a four-dimensional scale that identifies sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions of brand experience. They noted that individuals develop feelings and impressions toward a brand as well as undertake physical actions while searching, shopping or consuming brands.

In the tourism literature, Oh et al. (2007) developed a measurement instrument that applies Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four dimensions of experiences, namely aesthetic, education, entertainment, and escapism. They found that all four proposed realms of experiences are valid in assessing tourist experiences. Tung and Ritchie (2011) explored the essence of memorable experiences based on research from the field of psychology, with a view to understanding the cognitive processes that limit individuals from paying attention to their experiences, as well as the conceptual processes of memory formation and retention. Their research revealed four key dimensions of memorable experiences: affect, expectations, consequentiality and recollection. Kim et al. (2012) developed a 24 item memorable tourism experience scale (MTE scale) that consisted of seven dimensions: 'hedonism' (refers to experiences connected to emotions such as pleasure or excitement), 'refreshment' (associated with feelings of revitalization of freedom), 'local culture' (represents tourists experience with local people), 'novelty' (consists of unique experiences encountered as part of MTEs), 'meaningfulness' (indicates engagement in personally significant activities), 'involvement' (represents tourists active participations in MTEs), and 'knowledge' (represents exploration of new cultures and the acquisition of new knowledge during the trip).

On the other hand, Chandralal and Valenzuela (2015) claim that their 34 item scale that spreads across ten experiential dimensions: authentic local experiences; self-beneficial experiences; novel experiences; significant travel experiences; serendipitous and surprising experiences; local hospitality; social interactions with people; professional local guides and tour operators; fulfilment of personal travel interests and affective emotions is expected to be more reliable and more accurate in its application to a wider travel population than Kim et al.'s (2012) scale because it was purified and validated using a relatively large sample of authentic leisure travellers.

### **3. Methodology**

This study aimed to measure and compare tourism experience of visitors in two different tourist destinations. For this purpose, the present study addressed two research questions: (a) are there significant differences in visitors' demographic characteristics in Croatia and Macedonia; (b) are there significant differences between Croatia and Macedonia in terms of visitors' tourism experience?

To meet study objectives and answer research questions, questionnaire was developed based on Chandralal and Valenzuela's (2015) research. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts. The first part was designed to measure tourism experiences, using multiple-item scale with 34 items. The level of agreement with these items was rated using a 7-point Likert scale with anchors "strongly disagree" (as 1) and "strongly agree" (as 7).

The second part of the questionnaire was designed to measure demographic characteristics of the respondents, which included: gender, age, marital status, frequency of visit, employment status, education, source of information, type of accommodation, length of stay.

Data was collected using on-site questionnaires that were randomly distributed to travellers visiting Opatija Riviera (Croatia) and Ohrid Riviera (Macedonia) during the summer in 2017. The participation was voluntary and questionnaires were gathered on site as soon as they were completed.

Data analysis included descriptive and bivariate statistical analyses. To determine respondents' demographic profile and to evaluate tourism experience items, descriptive statistics was used. Chi-square was performed to test the significance of difference regarding the respondents' demographic characteristics. The independent samples t-test was conducted to test the significance of difference between the scores in each tourism experience item.

### **4. Study results**

The results are presented in two parts. Firstly, respondents' demographic characteristics between two tourist destinations are compared. Secondly, comparison of tourism experience in two destinations is provided.

#### **4.1 Respondents' profile**

Respondents' profile in terms of demographic characteristics is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: The comparison of respondents' demographic characteristics**

Demographic attributes		Ohrid Riviera <sup>a</sup>	Opatija Riviera <sup>a</sup>	Test value <sup>b</sup>	p
Gender	Male	50.8	67.0	10.736	0.001
	Female	49.2	33.0		
Age		40.74	52.03	6.987	0.000
Marital status	Married	43.4	54.2	12.115	0.007
	Single	28.9	30.7		
	In relationship/ Engaged	17.5	9.9		
	Separated/Widowed/ Divorced	10.2	5.2		
Frequency of visit	First-time guest	65.9	75.6	5.427	0.020
	Regular guest	34.1	24.4		
Employment status	Employed	49.7	43.2	41.992	0.000
	Self-employed	20.4	26.4		
	Retired	10.2	25.6		
	Unemployed	10.2	2.6		
	Other (student, home economics, etc.)	9.6	2.3		
Education	High School	24.9	28.1	57.222	0.000
	College	22.5	44.1		
	Technological Education	17.2	17.8		
	Faculty/University	26.0	8.6		
	Post-Graduate (MSc, PhD)	9.5	1.4		
Source of information	Friends/relatives	31.3	37.9	46.399	0.000
	Guide books	15.3	25.2		

Demographic attributes		Ohrid Riviera <sup>a</sup>	Opatija Riviera <sup>a</sup>	Test value <sup>b</sup>	p
	Newspaper/Magazine	4.3	11.3		
	Television	9.2	7.8		
	Social Media	22.1	4.2		
	Travel Agency	17.8	13.6		
Type of accommodation	4 or 5-star hotel	45.6	88.6	149.365	0.000
	3 or 2-star hotel	13.5	9.4		
	Apartment	17.5	1.4		
	Private accommodation	18.7	0.6		
	Other	4.7	0.0		
Length of stay	< 3 days	30.7	21.5	7.740	0.052
	4 – 7 days	48.8	49.1		
	8 – 13 days	14.5	22.6		
	14 days +	6.0	6.8		

Note: <sup>a</sup> values are percentages; <sup>b</sup> Chi square or t-test; Age: mean and t-test values.

Source: Authors

The comparison of demographic characteristics of the respondents between two tourist destinations revealed significant differences in all demographic attributes, except one.

In terms of gender proportion, male respondents outnumbered female ones, although in Ohrid Riviera sample both groups were almost evenly distributed. When comparing two destinations, there were more males in Opatija Riviera sample than in Ohrid Riviera sample.

In terms of age, respondents in Ohrid Riviera sample tend to be significantly younger than in Opatija Riviera sample.

When comparing marital status of the respondents, in both samples majority of the respondents were married or single ones. Significantly more married and single ones were in Opatija Riviera sample, while those who are in relationship/engaged or separated/widowed/divorced were more in Ohrid Riviera sample.

In regard of the frequency of visit, in both samples most of the respondents were first-time visitors. However, more first-time visitors were in Opatija Riviera sample. The number of employed and unemployed respondents was higher in the Ohrid Riviera sample. Self-employed and retired respondents in Opatija Riviera sample significantly outnumbered those in Ohrid Riviera sample.

The comparison of respondents' education level revealed that majority of the respondents in Opatija Riviera sample reported they had college education. In Ohrid Riviera sample respondents were more evenly distributed among levels of education, with slightly more respondents who completed university. Accordingly, respondents with high school or college education in Opatija Riviera sample outnumbered those in Ohrid Riviera sample, while number of those with university or post-graduate education was higher in Ohrid Riviera sample.

In both samples friends and relatives were the most commonly reported source of information about the tourist destination. In addition, guide books tend to be more frequently used in Opatija Riviera sample, while social media are more popular among respondents in Ohrid Riviera sample.

Furthermore, it was found that respondents mostly stayed in 4 or 5-star hotels. However, the choice of accommodation differs in regard of tourist destination. Namely, in Opatija Riviera sample almost twice the percentage of the respondents stayed in 4 or 5-star hotels than did those in Ohrid Riviera sample. Other types of accommodation were more popular among the respondents in Ohrid Riviera sample.

The only insignificant difference in demographic attributes between two samples was revealed regarding the length of stay. However, the results showed that respondents mostly stayed in destination between 4 and 7 days.

#### 4.2 The comparison of tourism experience in two destinations

The results of descriptive statistics and t-test for tourism experience attributes are presented in Table 2.

*Table 2: The comparison of tourism experience scores*

Items	Ohrid Riviera	Opatija Riviera	T-value	Sig.
I closely experienced the actual local cultures.	5.44 (1.539)	5.44 (0.957)	-0.005	0.996
I was exposed to authentic local villages and markets.	5.35 (1.504)	5.53 (1.050)	-1.390	0.166
I could immerse myself in local festivals and other cultural ceremonies.	5.12 (1.755)	5.68 (4.479)	-1.573	0.116
I visited authentic local restaurants/food outlets.	5.67 (1.430)	5.52 (1.119)	1.206	0.229
It gave me an opportunity to experience the real day-to-day life of locals.	5.25 (1.637)	5.41 (1.222)	-1.168	0.244
It helped me to improve my self-confidence.	4.57 (1.840)	5.45 (2.969)	-3.523	0.000**
It helped me to developed my personal identity.	4.61 (1.821)	5.31 (1.469)	-4.349	0.000**
It helped me to learn more about	4.61	5.43	-3.755	0.000**

Items	Ohrid Riviera	Opatija Riviera	T-value	Sig.
myself.	(1.812)	(2.571)		
It helped me to acquire new skills.	4.46 (1.995)	5.20 (1.438)	-4.388	0.000**
Local guides were very informative and knowledgeable.	5.70 (1.451)	5.67 (0.950)	0.258	0.797
Social skills of local guides were very impressive.	5.72 (1.362)	5.62 (0.997)	0.842	0.401
Local guides were always very supportive.	5.97 (1.211)	5.67 (0.968)	3.042	0.002**
Local tour operator services were outstanding.	5.63 (1.520)	5.59 (1.020)	0.248	0.804
Many aspects of this trip were novel to me.	5.48 (1.484)	5.40 (1.347)	0.614	0.539
The trip provided a unique experience to me.	5.62 (1.388)	5.47 (1.274)	1.182	0.238
It was an adventurous experience.	5.47 (1.403)	5.38 (1.420)	0.669	0.504
I felt I was in a different world during the trip.	5.16 (1.642)	5.40 (1.327)	-1.614	0.108
Local people I encountered were genuinely helpful.	6.07 (1.097)	5.76 (0.914)	3.145	0.002**
Local people I encountered were genuinely friendly.	6.08 (1.138)	5.86 (0.889)	2.218	0.027*
Local people I encountered were genuinely generous.	6.00 (1.183)	5.82 (0.934)	1.730	0.085
I felt very stimulated during the trip.	5.71 (1.229)	5.54 (1.161)	1.478	0.140
I felt very excited during the trip.	5.75 (1.268)	5.50 (1.299)	2.108	0.035*
I was very pleased during the trip.	5.96 (1.202)	5.82 (0.917)	1.360	0.175
It was a special experience for me personally.	5.81 (1.369)	5.56 (1.099)	2.042	0.042*
It was a once in a life time experience for me.	4.99 (1.587)	5.47 (1.242)	-3.454	0.001**
It was an extraordinary experience for me.	5.34 (1.397)	5.43 (1.325)	-0.706	0.480
I highly enjoyed the comradeship among my travel companions of the trip.	5.56 (1.388)	5.63 (1.058)	-0.530	0.596
I enjoyed the trip very much	5.69	5.64	0.461	0.645



Items	Ohrid Riviera	Opatija Riviera	T-value	Sig.
because I was with a wonderful group of travellers.	(1.371)	(1.088)		
It enhanced the existing bonds with my friends and travel companions.	5.70 (1.384)	5.60 (1.073)	0.842	0.400
I faced unplanned and unexpected good incidents/experiences during the trip.	5.30 (1.683)	5.43 (1.483)	-0.830	0.407
I experienced certain random things that really surprised me during the trip.	5.24 (1.727)	5.40 (1.366)	-1.023	0.307
I received unexpected benefits/advantages during the trip.	5.25 (1.665)	5.47 (2.388)	-1.070	0.285
I engage in activities which I really wanted to do.	5.76 (1.411)	5.65 (1.313)	0.891	0.374
I visited the places where I really wanted to go.	6.01 (1.211)	5.87 (0.994)	1.346	0.179

Note: values in parentheses are standard deviations;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.01$   
Source: Authors

Respondents from both samples rated the item “It helped me to acquire new skills” with the lowest score, while the highest scores were given to the item “Local people I encountered were genuinely friendly” (in the Ohrid Riviera sample) and to the item “I visited the places where I really wanted to go” (in the Opatija Riviera sample).

The analysis of difference in tourism experience scores between Ohrid Riviera and Opatija Riviera indicated higher scores in the Ohrid Riviera sample for 18 out of 34 tourism experience items.

The results of t-test show that in 10 out of 34 tourism experience items significant differences were found between Ohrid and Opatija Riviera samples. In 5 items tourism experience in Opatija Riviera was rated significantly higher. These items are “it helped me to improve my self-confidence”, “it helped me to develop my personal identity”, “it helped me to learn more about myself”, “it helped me to acquire new skills”, and “it was a once in a life time experience for me”. In addition, significantly higher scores for tourism experience in Ohrid Riviera was found in following items: “local guides were always very supportive”, “local people I encountered were genuinely helpful”, “local people I encountered were genuinely friendly”, “I felt very excited during the trip”, and “it was a special experience for me personally”.

## 5. Conclusions and implications

This paper reported the findings from two studies that addressed differences in two tourist destinations regarding the respondents' demographic profile and their experience of the destination. Thus, the research questions were answered.

Firstly, significant differences emerged regarding the respondents' demographic attributes. Visitors of two tourist destinations differ according to gender, age, marital status, frequency of visit, employment status, education level, source of information and type of accommodation. In particular, visitors of Opatija Riviera were significantly older, tended to be married or single more often, used guide books, friends or relatives as source of information, completed college education, stayed in 4 or 5-star hotels more frequently, and were mostly first-time visitors at the destination. On the other hand, those visiting Ohrid Riviera completed university education, were more frequently influenced by social media, and were younger.

There was one similarity, as well. The results indicated that in both tourist destinations visitors stayed similar lengths of time, mostly between 4 and 7 days.

Secondly, significant differences were found regarding the level of experience with destination. Self-beneficial experiences were more memorable for visitors of Opatija Riviera, while professional local guides, local hospitality and affective emotions were more beneficial to those visiting Ohrid Riviera. In addition, experiences dealing with perceived significance tend to be memorable for visitors in both destinations.

Since present study is limited to a single (although significant) geographical area in each country of interest, future research should be broadened to other tourist destinations in Croatia and Macedonia to be able to conduct more comprehensive comparison. In addition, future research could examine how visitors' experience with destination affect their satisfaction and intention to return, as well as does the nature of these relationships differ between the tourist destinations.

*Acknowledgement* - This paper is the result of the scientific project "New Approaches to Measuring Visitor Experience in the Tourist Destination", which is supported by the University of Rijeka (project ZP UNIRI 3/17).

## References

- Binkhorst, E., Den Dekker, T. (2009): *Agenda for Co-Creation Tourism Experience Research*, Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management, Vol. 18, No. 2-3, pp. 311–327
- Brakus, J. J., Schmitt, H., Zarantonello, L. (2009): *Brand Experience: What Is It? How Is It Measured? Does It Affect Loyalty?* Journal of Marketing, Vol. 73, No. 3, pp.52-68
- Buhalis, D. (2000): *Marketing the competitive destination of the future*, Tourism Management, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 97-116
- Chandralal, L., Valenzuela, F.R. (2015): *Memorable Tourism Experiences: Scale Development*, Contemporary Management Research, Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 291-310
- Cohen, E. (1979): *A phenomenology of tourist experiences*, Sociology, Vol. 13, pp. 179–201

- Hjemdahl, K. M. (2003): *Negotiating Theme Park Culture*, Ethnologia Scandinavica, Vol. 26, pp. 1-14
- Kim, J., Ritchie, J. R., McCormick, B. (2012): *Development of a scale to measure memorable tourism experiences*, Journal of Travel Research, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 12-25
- Kim, J. (2013): *A cross-cultural comparison of memorable tourism experiences of American and Taiwanese college students*, Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research, pp. 1-15
- Kim, J.H., Ritchie, J. R. B. (2013): *Cross-Cultural Validation of a Memorable Tourism Experience Scale (MTES)*, Journal of Travel Research, Vol. 53, No.3, pp. 323–335
- Larsen, S. (2007): *Aspects of a Psychology of the Tourist Experience*, Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality & Tourism, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 7-18
- Oh, H., Fiore, A.M., Jeong, M. (2007): *Measuring Experience Economy Concepts: Tourism Applications*, Journal of Travel Research, Vol. 46, pp. 119-32.
- Ooi, C. S. (2005): *A Theory of Tourism Experiences: The Management of Attention*, in: O'Dell, T., Billing, P. ed.: *Experience escapes: Tourism, Culture, and Economy*, Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen, pp. 51-68.
- Otto, J., Ritchie, J. (1995): *Exploring the quality of the service experience. A theoretical and empirical analysis*, Advances in Services Marketing and Management, Vol. 4, pp. 37–61
- Pine, J.B., Gilmore, J.H. (1999): *Welcome to the Experience Economy*, Harvard Business Review, pp. 97-105
- Ryan, C. (2002): *The Tourist Experience*, Continuum, New York
- Tung, V. W. S., Ritchie, J. R. B. (2011): *Exploring the essence of memorable tourism experiences*, Annals of Tourism Research, Vol. 38, Vol. 4, pp. 1367-1386
- Uriely, N. (2005): *The Tourist Experience: Conceptual Developments*, Annals of Tourism Research, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 199-216