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**FIT tourism in Israel: Behavior and Characterizes**

Until the Covid-19 outbreak, the number of international tourists was continuously growing and reached $1.4 billion in 2018, while their expenses climbed to $1.7 trillion (UNTWO, 2019). In 2020, however, the Covid-19 pandemic brought international tourism to a standstill. Although most experts predict that tourism will regain its former significance, they expect that it will change in form. A large percentage of international tourists already travel independently. Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, independent tourism is expected to blossom as it enables people to avoid exposure to large groups. As they consider risk management, tourists will look for less frequented sites, smaller hotels and restaurants, and will try to minimize unnecessary contact with large crowds, public transportation and public places by taking more nature-based vacations (Wen, Kozak, Yang and Liu 2020, Wen, Kozak, Yang and Liu 2020).

Independent tourism is defined as independent travel or travel in small groups in which the itinerary and services are planned and purchased by the tourists themselves. This form of travel has been growing as an alternative to organized tourism, and allows tourists to focus on specific needs and interests that fall within their economic range (Hernandez et al., 2018; Polukhina et al., 2020). The modern traveller prefers the individualized tour to the organized group package, since the former better meets his/her desires and wishes (Polukhina et al., 2020). In 2012, for example, independent tourists in China accounted for around 70% of all tourists in that year (Kristensen, 2013).

Most tourist literature considers the practice in general without distinguishing between organized and independent tourists. However, their characteristics differ. Independent tourists generally have a higher level of education and more experience traveling abroad, know more about their destination and its culture, and are seeking new challenges, unique adventures and self-realization (Ramseook-Munhurrun et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2017, Tsaur et al., 2010). Independent tourists also spend relatively more money and therefore have a greater impact on the economy.

The independent tourist ‘does homework’ before the trip, meaning he or she picks destinations, arranges itineraries, purchases tourist products, and allocates time and money. Y. Xiang (2013) has found that independent Chinese tourists behave differently in developed than they do in developing countries. When traveling to developed destinations, they plan their trip ahead of time for several reasons. For one, when applying for visas, they need to report all anticipated accommodations. They also need to use more sophisticated systems for making reservations ahead of time. Reservations made long in advance are more likely to come with discounts, and uncertainties about a trip can be reduced with a clear plan. As none of the above factors apply to travel in developing regions, decisions in such cases are made on the road.

The development of online platforms that enable easy information searches, purchases, and experience sharing drives independent tourism (Gretzel et al., 2019; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019) as it allows individuals to plan trips without the help of travel agents and diminishes the need for person-to-person contact (Wen et al., 2020b). Studying independent tourists from China, Y. Xiang (2013) found that the time spent searching for information ranged from ten days to several months, even after the destinations had been chosen and the main travel products purchased. She also found that the Internet is the primary source of information with a use rate of 100%. Newspapers, magazines, and guidebooks, especially those by Lonely Planet, are used by 68.4% of tourists. Travel books, newspapers, and magazines are generally consulted before the trip, while guidebooks are carried throughout the trip. Chinese tourists prefer personal travelogues, which they find to be more realistic, up-to-date, and interesting. Only 9.9% of tourists use travel agents as a source of information. In addition, Xiang found that websites of official destinations and private companies have a greater impact on tourists. Marketing on social media such as Sina Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter) has likewise increased in recent years. Tourists search here for specific information about transportation, accommodation, and sites. Finally, they also wish to acquire some general knowledge about destinations as well as information on culture and entertainment options. Least important to them is information about shopping.

In addition to conventional channels, direct and indirect online e-channels are involved in the multichannel operation of tourism services. Direct channels refer to service providers, while indirect channels refer to OTA (Online Tourism Agencies). Both tourism services and OTAs try to develop a competitive advantage through customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty lies at the basis of a company’s assets and financial sustainability. As Múgica and Berné (2020) find, a higher degree of loyalty can be generated by increasing the amount of participation or the level of satisfaction. Indirect channels are positively associated with higher participation levels. On the other hand, there is no difference in the level of satisfaction derived from direct or indirect channels. Once the choice of channel is made, consumer adoption of their service demand to their purchase expectations.

The level of satisfaction is an important challenge for tourism providers and is crucial to their business success (Al-Refaie et al., 2012). Satisfaction leads to loyalty and can create a competitive advantage even for a country. As Jurdana and Frleta (2016) have shown, expenditure by tourists who reported a high level of satisfaction in Opatia (Croatia) was higher than those who reported a low level of satisfaction.

In Israel, the number of international tourists reached a record 4.6 million in 2019 (Israeli Ministry of Tourism, 2020) and $6.6 billion in revenue. Tourism in Israel accounts for 2.6% of the GDP (direct), 16% of service export, and 7% of total export. Of the total number of international tourists in 2019, about 67% were independent tourists. <https://motwebmediastg01.blob.core.windows.net/nop-attachment/9090_%D7%A1%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%AA%20%D7%AA%D7%A2%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%99%D7%AA%20%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA%20%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%9D%202018.pdf> and is expected to increase due to the Covid-19. Crucial to any adjustments in the marketing strategy and policy management of tourism in Israel in the post Covid-19 era is an understanding of the behaviour and preferences of independent tourists visiting Israel.

The purpose of this research is to characterize the independent tourists visiting Israel and understand the method and timing of the various services that they purchase as well the level of satisfaction they derive from them. The uniqueness of this study is its focus on purchase phases, which it examines through a combination of questionnaires and interviews in order to get a full picture of tourist preferences.

**Methods**

This study relies on both questionnaires and interviews. The first part is based on closed questionnaires that were developed to draw information on the behaviour of tourists visiting Israel. The identity of the subjects was kept anonymous, and the data collected was used solely for research purposes. The questionnaire was developed and distributed by Martin and Hoffman, a company that conducts surveys for the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. Its questions were translated into English, Spanish, Russian, and French.

The questionnaire included the following sections: 1) socio-demographic details, including gender, age, education, and other personal questions (e.g., ‘Is this your first visit to Israel?’); 2) questions regarding the places and attractions visited in Israel; 3) yes-or-no questions regarding the usage of social networks before and during the trip; 4) questions regarding purchase method, times of purchase, and satisfaction levels with purchase processes.

The interviews were performed at various tourist locations in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and lasted an average of twenty minutes. The interviews were performed in English, Spanish, and Russian. Tourists were asked about the reason for their visit, the information they had collected regarding their trip to Israel, and their satisfaction with the information and services that they had purchased.

***Data analysis***

Statistical packages SPSS 24 were used to analyse the data. The analysis of the questionnaire included descriptive statistics and independent T tests.

**Results**

***Descriptive statistics***

The descriptive statistics include the demographics variables in the questionnaires.

Table 1. Description of sample by demographic data.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable |  | N | % |
| Gender | Male | 231 | 49.8 |
|  | Female | 233 | 50.2 |
| Marital status | Married | 260 | 56 |
|  | Single | 204 | 44 |
| Education | 12 years of school or diploma | 92 | 19.8 |
| Undergraduate degree | 199 | 42.9 |
|  | Graduate degree | 173 | 37.3 |
| Age | Below 24 | 52 | 11.2 |
| 25 to 34 | 115 | 24.8 |
|  | 35 to 44 | 87 | 18.8 |
|  | 45 to 54 | 120 | 25.9 |
|  | Above 55 | 90 | 19.4 |
| Country of Origin | USA | 88 | 19 |
|  | Russia | 64 | 13.8 |
|  | Germany | 46 | 9.9 |
|  | UK | 32 | 6.9 |
|  | Italy | 24 | 5.2 |
|  | Netherlands | 22 | 4.7 |
|  | Ukraine | 25 | 5.4 |
|  | France | 19 | 4.1 |
| Purpose | Vacation | 203 | 43.8 |
|  | VFR | 90 | 19.4 |
|  | Business | 138 | 29.7 |

For the entire sample of 464 valid respondents, the average length of stay was 15 days and the average party size was 1.45. Three hundred and fifteen people (67.9%) were traveling solo, 115 (24.8%) were traveling in a party of two, and only 34 (7.3%) were traveling in a party of more than two. The sample included a nearly identical percentage of men and women. About half (44%) were single, most (80.2%) had attained a higher level education, and 43.8% had come for vacation. Only 54.5% of the respondents were in Israel for the first time. Their main countries of origin were the US, Russia and Germany.

Interviews were held with 105 tourists, 18 of whom were between 20 and 29, 35 between 30 and 50, 14 over 50, and and an additional 38 of whom belonged to ten families. These were mainly from the US, the UK, Singapore, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, and Russia. Some of the tourists over 50 had come with a group tour and were staying in the country longer.

According to their responses, nearly all the tourists who came to Israel had visited Tel Aviv and over 60 percent had also been to Jerusalem, as shown in Table 2. The next most popular destinations were the Dead Sea and Haifa. The number of returning tourists was lower than that of first-timers in these cities/areas. Elsewhere (e.g. Eilat, Netanya, Nazareth, Tiberius, Golan, and Galilee), however, there was no difference in the percentage of first timers and returning visitors. One may thus conclude that a tourist returning to Israel is less likely to visit these cities/areas.

Table 2: Cities/areas visited by tourists (including differences between first and subsequent visits)[[1]](#footnote-1)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| City/area | Percentage of total tourists  N=464 | Percentage of first-time visitors  N=253 | Percentage of returning visitors  N=211 |
| Jerusalem | 65.9 | 73.1 | 57.3 |
| Tel Aviv | 80.2 | 85.4 | 74 |
| Dead Sea | 39.9 | 50.2 | 27.5 |
| Haifa | 28.7 | 31.2 | 25.6 |

***Source of information and use of social media***

The main source of information for the independent tourists traveling in Israel was the Internet (62.5%); another 23% relied on information from friends and relatives, while the rest resorted to other sources, such as books, travel agents, and advertisements. Forty-seven percent came on the recommendation of family and friends, 29% on recommendation from their workplace, and the rest for other reasons. About 53% of the tourists sought information on Israel on social media before the trip, while 51% used social media during the trip. Table 3 indicates the Internet sources and social media used before and during the trip to Israel. It was possible to put down more than one source. There is a difference in use before and during the trip. The percentages are based on the total number of independent tourists who used the Internet and social media.

Table 3: Use of Internet and social media regarding the trip

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Social Media | Percentage of uses before the trip  N=244 | Percentage of uses during the trip  N=236 |
| Google | 79.9 | 61.4 |
| Facebook | 24.2 | 24.6 |
| Twitter | 1.5 | 1.3 |
| Instagram | 13.5 | 14 |
| TripAdvisor | 38.1 | 35.6 |

It is clear that most users relied on Google. After that came TripAdvisor and Facebook. Apart from a decrease in the use of Google, there is no significant difference in the use of social media and Internet sources before and during the trip.

Table 4 shows the various ends for which the Internet and social media were used.

Table 4: The percentage[[2]](#footnote-2) of tourists using the Internet and social media according to service.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Service | Percentage of usage before the trip  N=464 | Percentage of usage before the trip  N=464 |
| Flights | 32.1 | 2.6 |
| Accommodations | 29.5 | 3.7 |
| Attractions | 4.3 | 4.1 |
| Sites | 17.9 | 22 |
| Other travellers’ opinions | 11.6 | 11.4 |
| Sharing experiences | 8.8 | 30.4 |
| Guiding services | 4.5 | 4.3 |

The results show that the Internet and social media were used for planning the trip, especially when it came to flights, accommodations and visits to particular sites. During the trip, they were used more often to select sites to visit and share experiences.

From the interviews we conclude that tourist drew information primarily from the Internet, blogs and Lonely Planet. Couples or individuals ages 20-50 mentioned friends’ advice as well. Most tourists reported ease of access to quality information. Couple or individuals ages 50 and up as well as families said it was easy for them to obtain information since this was not their first time in Israel. Some of the tourists in the 20-50 year-old category noted that Airbnb hosts had given them information on special places to visit before the trip. As a couple from Bulgaria told us, ‘We had contact with the hosts before the trip and they gave us details and information that helped us know Israel, including less touristic sites.’ Trip Advisor (TA), the website of Israel’s nature and parks authority, and TELAVEAT were all reported as being good sites. However, some tourists complained about the difficulty of finding information on public transportation and its hours of operation during the weekend. In addition, families complained about the lack of a single site with information and lack of information regarding religious sites behaviour aspects, and attraction for kids. Families also noted that information was available on the Facebook page "Visit Israel."

***Purchasing tourism services: Channels, timing, and satisfaction levels.***

Before or during the trip, the tourist payed for various tourist services such as accommodations, rented cars, and tour guides. Each service could be purchased through one of three channels: a general website (such as booking.com, Trip Advisor), a travel agent (online or offline), or directly from the service supplier (online or offline). The following table describes the distribution of the use of channels by tourists who reported paying for the service.

Table 5: The distribution of the use of channels by tourists who purchased services.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | General Web site | Travel Agent | Directly from the service provider |
| Accommodations (301) | 86.7 | 6 | 7.3 |
| Car Rental (48) | 77.1 | 8.3 | 14.6 |
| Tours (142) | 39.4 | 36.6 | 23.9 |

About 18.3% of the tourists reported that they had not paid for accommodations (8% of these had paid for accommodations as part of a package to Israel). The rest of those who paid for accommodations did so through general web sites such as booking.com or hotels.com. Most such purchases occurred between one week and two month prior to the trip: 29.6% occurred a week to a month before the trip, and 34.9% one to two months before the trip. The level of satisfaction for purchasing accommodation services was quite good (a mean of 3.83, in which 1=poor, 5=excellent) and was similar for all purchasing channels.

About 44.2% of independent tourists (who answered the question about car rental) did not rent a car in Israel. Most of those who did do so used general web sites such as Rentalcars.com. Of these, 37.5% did so one to two months before the trip, and 29% did so a week prior to, or during the trip. The average satisfaction level for car rental was 3.63 (in which 1=poor, 5=excellent). Those tourists who rented cars directly from the company were significantly more satisfied than those who did so through a general web site. The reason for this may lie in the complexity of the requested services.

About 26.2% of the independent tourists (out of those who answered the question) did not book any guided tours in Israel. Most of those (66%) who did book guided tours or guides, did so during their trip. As the tour approaches (or during the tour) fewer tourists used general web sites, and more used travel agents or tour companies. The average satisfaction level for this service was 4.28 (1=poor, 5=excellent). Tourists were generally satisfied with the process of purchasing tours and guides, especially if they did so through a travel agent.

When it came to purchasing channels and levels of satisfaction, the responses elicited from the interviews coincided with those obtained from the questionnaires. During the trip, couples and individuals between ages 20 and 50 purchased accommodations and car rentals primarily from booking.com, Expedia, Google Travel, and Trip Advisor. They purchased only accommodations before the trip, though some of them paid for rooms only for the first few nights and then purchased the rest while in Israel. Although most tourists were satisfied with their purchases, some claimed that the photos they had seen beforehand did not match the reality. Some tourists also noted the lack of guided tours in other languages, such as Italian.

Couples or individuals ages 50 and up purchased only accommodations before their arrival. Some purchased a fly-and-drive package organized by a travel agent ‘We bought a fly-and-drive package which includes flight tickets, car rental for the whole period, and hotels based on a round tour planned by the travel agent; we are very satisfied.’ Families booked mainly accommodations and rental cars. Some preferred booking through travel agents so that they would have someone to talk to in case something went wrong.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Like Xiang (2013), we found that independent tourists who visit Israel have a high level of education and ‘do their homework’ before the trip. As in developed countries, so in Israel, independent tourists reserve hotels and rental cars in advance. Nonetheless, such planning generally covers only the initial days of the trip and part of the services. The rest are brought during the trip.

A large share of the independent tourists in Israel have been to the country before. A reason for this may lie in the uncertainty surrounding any trip to Israel, as one tourist noted: ‘The media represents Israel as a dangerous and scary area, and a place inaccessible to individual tourists. It seems that the only option for tourists is to visit Israel with an organized tour. For this reason, many people avoid such tours, especially younger tourists.’

Almost all tourists visit at least Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, and most first timers go to the Dead Sea as well. Visits to the north and south of Israel are more frequent among tourists paying their first visit, but are still rare.

The Internet is the main source of information for the independent tourist, which is in line with Xiang’s (2013) findings. Tourists gather most of their information from Google, Trip Advisor, and Facebook. Such information relates to flights, accommodations, sites, and travellers’ reviews. The impact of Israel’s official destination web-site is limited in comparison to what Xiang (2013) found. Most tours and guides were booked during the trip, as were some hotels and rental cars. The need for accessible Internet access (Wi-Fi) is thus clear. According to some tourists, this was a problem in certain areas (Jerusalem, for example).

The preferred purchasing method for all services was via indirect channels, usually a general website, though tours were frequently booked through travel agents. Therefore, the use of indirect channels was higher than that of direct channels, as Múgica and Berné (2020) found.

Accommodations were generally booked between one week and two months before the trip, while rental cars were booked one to two months before the trip or during the trip. Most guided tours were purchased during the trip.

The level of satisfaction was very good, but differed according to service. Rental cars saw the lowest satisfaction level, and guided tours the highest. When it came to car rental or guided tours, the level of satisfaction with purchases made on a general website was lower than with those made through other channels. Whereas most of the tourists choose the general website channel. This result stands in contrast to that obtained by Múgica and Berné (2020), who claim that there was no difference in the satisfaction level with direct and indirect channels. One explanation might be that this paper distinguishes between both services and direct/indirect channels (general websites and travel agents) whereas Múgica and Berné (2020) do not.

The results of the interviews show that most tourists were very satisfied with their trip and said they would return to Israel and would recommend it to others. This is in line with Al-Refaie et al. (2012), who claims that satisfaction leads to loyalty. Indeed, for 45.5% of the tourists, this was not the first visit to Israel. All in all, 44.6 percent came on the suggestion of friends and family, while 19.8 percent came on the suggestion of their work place.

**Implications**

Israel should promote the accessibility of the country and the possibility of visiting it independently. It can do so by encouraging tourists to share descriptions of their visit to Israel in blogs and social media.

Wi-Fi accessibility and the official Israeli information web-site should be enhanced to improve the tourist experience as well as visitors’ ability to connect and make purchases during trips. The web site should synthesize information from various sites and include information on family travel, public transportation, and religious sites and rules. Tourist information could focus more on flights and travel experiences, and less on attractions and guided tours.

The Israeli Ministry of tourism should offer short guided tours (possibly private ones) in the north and south areas of Israel in order to allow for better distribution of tourists across the country. This would contribute to the development of peripheral areas.

Also recommended is the development of easier-to-use, secure and reliable purchasing platforms for services in Israel that would enhance tourist satisfaction.

Since most tourists were very satisfied by their contact with their hosts and local people, it is important that they be given details on local representatives in advance.

Although this study is unique in combining a questionnaire with interviews in order to reach a better understanding of tourists, it has some limitations. The number of interviews could be larger, and the questionnaires could be collected year round rather than in a single month. This study also did not distinguish between offline and online purchases from travel agents and service providers.

Future research may focus on the effect of satisfaction with the purchasing process on the overall level of satisfaction with the vacation, and on e-wom recommendations. In addition, due to cultural differences each country should be analysed separately.

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1. Only areas with significant difference appear in the table [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The percentage was calculated out of the total number of tourists, and more than one use was permitted [↑](#footnote-ref-2)