

ANALYSIS OF TOURISM OFFERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL TOURISM. CASE STUDY TURKEY

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to analyse cultural tourism offerings in Turkey in terms of experience and depth. Despite Turkey's rich cultural heritage, it has been found that most agencies focus more on sun, sea and sand tourism in the Mediterranean, Aegean and Istanbul regions rather than promoting these, and do not address other cultural riches in depth. Eighteen Turkey-based travel agencies were examined and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The travel agencies were divided into two groups: Group A (n=10, mass market operators) and Group B (n=8 niche operators). Agencies in Group A offer standardized, tangible heritage-focused, passive observation-based circuit tours based on mass tourism logic. Group B agencies, on the other hand, offer tours that are more focused on intangible heritage, active experiences and expert guidance. As a result, it is evident that the problem with Turkey's cultural tourism supply is one of quality rather than quantity. The current offerings fall short of demonstrating Turkey's true potential.

Key words: *tourism, culture, destinations, heritage, travel agencies.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 21st century, the mass tourism industry has begun to evolve from passive sightseeing tourism to active experiential tourism [10,11,16]. The components of tourism supply have been described in an academic way [7,9]. Cultural tourism is no longer defined as visiting museums and historical destinations, but rather encompasses many elements, from understanding the spirit of the destination, reviving memories, and tasting the local cuisine to communicating with the local people [11,12]. Cultural tourism offers tourists with higher education levels and spending potential the opportunity to choose personalized tours over standard packages [6]. Turkey is not only geographically diverse but also a melting pot of civilizations spanning thousands of years. It is one of the world's richest and most diverse destinations, offering both tangible and intangible tourism products [14,15]. With its gastronomic culture, UNESCO World Heritage List destinations, and diverse history, Turkey plays an important role in the sustainability of mass tourism [1,4]. However, when examining the supply of cultural tourism in Turkey, the extent to which this is done correctly is a subject of debate in itself. Although research shows that some activities undertaken by agencies for cultural tourism do exist in quantitative terms, the question that needs to be addressed is this: Are these tours truly designed to delve into the depth of that culture and keep it alive, or are they all products of a standardized cliché? [1,4] The aim of this research is to analyse the extent to which cultural tourism activities are conducted in a profound and sustainable manner, to determine the degree to which tangible and intangible cultural heritage [15] is addressed, and to identify the model through which this is attempted. This study aims to reveal Turkey's potential for creating supply in this sector, as well as the obstacles and opportunities involved in this process.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was prepared using a qualitative research model to evaluate the quality of cultural tourism offerings in Turkey [17]. The research method is content

analysis, which is used in the examination of tourism products [5]. The research is based on tours and tour packages offered by major agencies actively operating in Turkey.

Purposive sampling was used in the data collection process [17]. In order to better analyse the data, the agencies were examined in two separate groups:

1- *Group A (mass market operators)*: based on data obtained from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey and TÜRSAB, the 10 largest travel agencies that are most powerful in the market.

2- *Group B (niche/thematic operators)*: eight niche travel agencies whose areas of expertise are mostly cultural tourism.

Focusing on the offers on the websites of these 18 agencies, they were coded according to the criteria in the analysis table. Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding such as product type, heritage focus, and service quality. Product type describes the structure of the offer (circuit tour and thematic tour), heritage focus describes the content of the tour (tangible or intangible heritage), and service quality describes the guided services offered.

From a methodological point of view, the article presents some limitations. The fact that the study focused on the tourist offer of 18 travel agencies indicates that the results cannot be generalized to the entire tourism industry in Turkey. The analysis is based exclusively on the information found on the websites of the travel agencies studied. Since these are marketing tools, there is a possibility that they do not provide complete operational details of the tours. Also, the websites of the travel agencies are frequently updated. The information collected represents the tourist offers at the time of data collection, they can change quickly depending on seasonality and trends in the tourism market.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The study presents the profiles of 18 travel agencies examined to observe Turkey's cultural tourism products. Analysis of the collected data reveals that the agencies can be divided into two groups: niche and mass market. The first 10 agencies shown in table below are classified as group A (mass tourism operators), while the remaining 8 agencies are classified as group B (niche) (Table 1).

Table 1.

Comparative analysis of cultural tourism offerings of Turkish travel agencies

Travel agency	Is cultural tourism found in the offer of the travel agency?	Type of tourism product	Duration	Services included	Tourist sights	Availability
ETS Tur	Yes	Circuit	2-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Nationwide	Year-round
Setur	Yes	Circuit	2-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Nationwide	Year-round
Jolly Tur	Yes	Circuit	2-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Nationwide	Year-round
Tatilbudur	Yes	Circuit	2-5 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular routes (Black Sea, Cappadocia, Aegean region)	Year-round
Touristica	Yes	Circuit	2-5 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular routes (Black Sea, Cappadocia, Aegean region)	Year-round

ProntoTur	Yes	Circuit	3-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular and internationally known routes	Year-round
Coral Travel	Yes	Limited circuit	2-3 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular and internationally known routes	Seasonal
Anı Tur	Yes	Circuit	2-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular routes (All regions)	Year-round
Tatil Sepeti	Yes	Circuit	2-5 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular routes (All 2-7 nights)	Year-round
Gezinomi	Yes	Circuit	2-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular routes	Year-round
Fest Travel	Yes	Thematic	4-10 nights	Transportation, accommodation and specialist guide	Less-known routes	Seasonal
Antonina tourism	Yes	Thematic	1-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and specialist guide	Istanbul	Seasonal
Şerif Yenen	Yes	Thematic	1 night	Transportation, accommodation and specialist guide	Istanbul	Seasonal with demand
Bukla Tur	Yes	Thematic	3-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Black Sea	Year-round
HİS Travel	Yes	Circuit	2-5 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular routes	Year-round
Gezgin Damaklar	Yes	Thematic	2-3 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Gastronomy regions	Seasonal
MNG Tourism	Yes	Circuit	2-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular routes	Year-round
RotaNil	Yes	Circuit	3-7 nights	Transportation, accommodation and guiding	Popular routes	Year-round

Source: Authors' Research

The opportunities offered by these agencies for cultural tourism and the differences between them have been examined in detail and synthesised (Table 2, Table 3).

Table 2.

Qualitative characteristics of cultural tourism supply by market group

Analysis criteria	Group A: mass market operators	Group B: niche operators
Primary product type	standardized "circuit tour"	specialized thematic tour
Primary heritage focus	tangible heritage (archaeological sites, museums, monuments)	intangible heritage (gastronomy, workshops, living culture)
Tourist role	passive observation (seeing, visiting, photographing)	active participation (experiencing, tasting, learning, doing)
Service quality	standard professional guiding	specialist guiding
Marketing emphasis	price, popular routes, hotel quality	authentic experience, expertise, depth

Source: Authors' Research

Table 3.

Analysis of "experience economy" components in cultural tourism offerings

Experience component	Related heritage type	Frequency in group A offerings	Frequency in Group B offerings
Visiting / Observation	tangible	high	medium
Gastronomic Tasting	intangible	low	high
Specialist Narrative	intangible	very low	high
Local Interaction	intangible	very low	medium

Source: Author's Research

Finding 1: Dual market structure and differences in product types. When evaluated collectively, all agencies offer separate packages (Table 1). However, upon detailed examination of all packages, it is seen that the agencies are divided into two groups (Table 2).

1. *Group A:* Agencies in this group mostly follow a standard approach, selling circuit tours to tourists. Operating on the principle of mass tourism, their routes and programmes are largely similar.

2. *Group B:* Agencies in this group generally create thematic tour offers and cater to a specific audience rather than mass tourism. This has been called standardised packaging of heritage [3,13]. The problems associated with such an approach have been documented [8].

Finding 2: Heritage focus and experience level. The most noteworthy finding of the research is the differences in how two different groups market the word "culture". Group A's offers are mostly based on tangible heritage. In these and similar tours, tourists participate passively (Table 2). They are based solely on seeing and taking photographs. This finding is supported by the research shown in Table 3.

While Group A's offers have a high degree of visiting and observation, the levels of intangible heritage components are low or very low (Table 3). On the other hand, when Group B is examined, it is clear that the offers are more focused on intangible heritage. It is focused on active participation. Components such as tasting and expert guidance are at a high level. This conclusion reveals that Group B offers tourists some suitable products under the name of the experience economy [10].

Finding 3: Service quality and added value differentiation

When the service details of the two groups are examined, the difference between them becomes more apparent. When considering Group A agencies under the heading of service quality, it is understood that the service provided is only standard professional guidance for all agencies (Table 2). On the other hand, when Group B agencies are examined, it is seen that the most important selling point is expert guidance. Group B agents aim to transform these tours into unforgettable and educational experiences, accompanied by archaeologists, historians and gourmet guides [12], and market them accordingly.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary objective of this study is to analyse Turkey's cultural tourism from a supply perspective by conducting an in-depth examination of 18 major agencies in Turkey. The final conclusion of the research is that the issue in Turkey's cultural tourism is one of quality, not quantity.

The big players in the market (Group A) offer a standardised version of mass tourism under the name of cultural tourism, and they follow a passive, observation-based and low-cost approach. This approach largely disregards Turkey's tangible and rich

intangible offerings, its cultural heritage, and the opportunities offered by the experience economy.

Group B agencies, which have found a niche in a small part of the market, have mapped out a thematic and experience-based approach in line with global trends, but this approach occupies only a small place in the market.

If Turkey wishes to be sustainable in cultural tourism, increase tourist spending, and bring tourism revenue into the country throughout the year, it should plan to improve the content of existing packages rather than increasing the number of tour packages.

Recommendations:

1. *For major agencies:* Agencies with significant market share should prepare and market their tours based on a thematic approach. Active experiences should take precedence over passive ones. The content of existing tours should be enriched.

2. *For product development:* Instead of standard guiding practices, specialist guiding approaches should be adopted. The quality of service should be enhanced by employing guides such as archaeologists, gourmets, and historians.

3. *For the Ministry and TÜRSAB:* Agencies active in the field of cultural tourism, which value active participation and promote intangible heritage should be rewarded and supported. Collaboration should be established with agencies that embrace this mindset, and tours to lesser-known destinations should be developed.

The study can be extended both to Turkey and to other countries by conducting comparative research between what agencies offer in terms of cultural tourism offers and the expectations of cultural tourists. Also, future research can explore practical solutions for implementing the recommendations.

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