Travel Destinations Choice and Activities: The Case of Gondar and Its Environs

*Solomon LingerihWoreta

***Department of Tourism Management, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia

Abstract

The purposes of this study is to identify the most important attributes of Gondar that effectively attracts the international tourists, to identify the popular tourist activities in Gondar and to identify the major problems that tourists are facing in Gondar and its surrounding. The study is qualitative in its design. Interview, Focus Group Discussion and document analysis were the main data gathering tools used in this study. Accordingly, the finding demonstrated that rich culture and history, scenery and natural attractions, climate, good hospitality, positive attitude of locals, fair cost of food, transport and accommodation, relative peace and security, rich biodiversity, religious festivals and events and relative image change of the country are the most important attributes of Ethiopia that effectively attract tourists other than other factors. A visit to historical sites and monuments, religious sites, sightseeing, trekking and walking and bird watching are among the most popular activities carried out by tourists. Moreover, the finding reveals tourists are satisfied with their trip to Gondar despite the dissatisfactory attributes of inappropriate signage, poor quality and range of accommodations, easy access to get information and nightlife and entertainment. Finally, additional problems were also identified in the study that causes for tourist dissatisfaction and shorten length of stay with possible recommendations.

Key words: Destination, choice, Attributes, Activities, problems

1. Background of the Study

The travel & tourism industry is becoming an increasingly competitive market place at international level, where only the best-managed and marketed enterprises and destinations are likely to enjoy the competitive market. Over the past six decades, tourism has continued to expand and is, according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), now one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world with an estimated number of 1,235 million international tourist arrivals in 2016, with a growth of 3.9% over the previous year. It is also the largest employment generator worldwide in the service industries. These service industries include transportation services, such as airlines, cruise ships and taxicabs; hospitality services, such as accommodations, including hotels and resorts; and entertainment venues, such as amusement parks, casinos, shopping malls, music venues and theatres.

Africa's cultural and natural resource endowment is such that it ought to be benefiting hugely from tourism. Despite its positive endowment and good growth in tourism over past decade, it remains that Africa's tourism potential is underexploited and underdeveloped. Africa's share from total international tourist arrivals and receipts is very few.

The situation in Ethiopia is even worse. On the one hand, its tourism potential is diversified: natural attractions that include some of the highest and lowest places in Africa along with immense wild life including some endemic ones; a very old and well preserved historical traditions with fascinating obelisks, churches and castles, an attractive cultural diversity of more than 80 nations and nationalities; and various ceremonies and rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which open a window on the authentic world of the Old Testament. On the other hand, it is one of the poorly performing countries in terms of tourist arrivals and receipts.

To exploit the tourism potential and make it contribute in the effort to reduce poverty and underdevelopment in Ethiopia, finding the main determinants of tourist choice of destination and activity is of great necessity. In consumer behavior literature (e.g. Oliver, 1997), the individual buying process is described in terms of motivation, choice of product or services, satisfaction and consequences of satisfaction (e.g. intention to repurchase a product and/or to recommend the product to others). Once an individual has the right motivation to travel, the type of holiday and destination is often decided based on his or her perceptions or value of the various options in the market place. Sometimes the choice of destination is influenced by activities offered at the destination. After the choice of destination has been made, the tourists will demand various products and services. Tourists' activities considered important amongst researchers in order to recognize the relationships between tourists' motives and choice of destination and satisfaction.

2.   Statement of the Problem

There are diverse reasons why it is important to study about determinants of tourists' choice of travel destinations and activities. The researcher selects this issue as a research problem because a due consideration has not been given to tourist behavior by tourism Marketers' and destination Managers. The researcher has intended to find out what really determines tourists to choose and visit destinations. Along with the huge and steadily rising number of international tourist arrivals, more and more areas of the world are developed for tourism, which means destination choice available for tourists are continually expanding. The result is fierce competition where about 200 nations are "clamoring for a share of the tourist's heart, mind and wallet" (Balakrishan, 2009).

In order to make better strategic decisions, marketers and destination managers must know: what tourists buy and why, where and how they make their purchases? What type of destinations tourists like to travel to; and what type of travel arrangements, accommodations and amenities they prefer? Are tourists interested in authentic or staged attractions? What encourages and discourages them from travelling? What information do they seek about the product or destination? How likely are they to revisit the same destination and use the same travel products and services? What activities tourists likely want to experience? The answer to all this questions can provide tourism marketers and managers with important information that will help to design strategies to respond better to the needs of tourists. For example, when tourists feel dissatisfied with their choice of a holiday spot, and various other 'handling reasons', perhaps because of lack of services or information about available activities, they may decide not to visit the same destination in the future. They may express their dissatisfaction to their friends and relatives and discourage them from future purchase. Tourists may never come back to the same destination again, limiting their own future selection decisions.

In an ideal world, tourism policy makers would be pro-active about the growth and preservation of their industry. Knowing what kinds of travelers choose to holiday in their country and why travelers made this choice can help planners solidify demand for their current tourism services as well as expand and adapt services to attract new types of tourists. Unfortunately, tourism is a competitive and perishable economic product that shifts over time, depending on the changing values and preferences of holiday travelers. These shifts in traveler behavior, in turn, make predicting tourism demand quite challenging.

Policy makers, planners, and industrial practitioners will better respond to the challenges by attempting to design strategies that enhance tourist holiday experience and satisfaction, increase demand for the product, improve business profitability and consequently contribute to the success of tourism industry.

3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this research is to critically review and examine tourists' choices for destinations and subsequent post purchase behaviors in the case of Gondar and its environs. Specifically the study addresses the following objectives;

- To assess the possible motives driving tourists to experience Gondar.
- To identify the popular tourist activities in Gondar.
- To identify the problems that tourists face.

4. Methodology

A qualitative research approach is used for the study. The researcher used Purposive sampling, simply because, it ensures that the selection of potential respondents who are restricted to key institutions and areas that contribute to the realization of the objectives of the study. The research subjects are from different stakeholders including small business enterprises directly or indirectly involving in tourism activities, government offices such as culture and tourism offices and departments, agencies of micro and small scale enterprises, church officials, hotel owners and managers, restaurant owners, travel agencies, tour guides, and souvenir shops.Interviews, observation and focus group discussions are used to gather primary data. Secondary data sources such as books, journals and articles are also be used for data gathering.The collected data from the various sources are analyzed and synthesized to draw inferences and make conclusions using thequalitativeapproach.

5. Results and Discussions

5.1   Important Attributes Driving Tourists to Visit Gondar

According to the study the followings are the most important attributes driving tourists' to visit Gondar;

5.1.1. Rich culture and history

In Ethiopia the interaction and intermixing of different cultures paved the way for the availability of various civilization centers across the country. Each civilization centers are now the hub of Ethiopian cultural world heritage sites.

For instance, Axum and its environs had been a center for Damat and Aksumite civilizations. This civilization center was established following the trade route which was extended from the Red sea coast to Indian Ocean. In terms of architect it has left us its monolithic obelisks, its subterranean tombs, its ruins of palaces and rock hewn churches, other impressive edifices and monuments.

After the fall of the Aksumite dynasty the center moved to Roha-Lalibela and its vicinities, under the Zagwe dynasty (1150-1270 AD). This dynasty had played a great role in spreading the Christian culture and the construction of Rock hewn churches taking important architectural elements from Aksumite civilization. Following the decline of the Zagwe dynasty, the Solomonic dynasty took the power in 1270. Before establishing its permanent center in and around Gondar, the Solomonic dynasty was characterized by the absence of permanent capital as its kings moved from one royal encampment to another due to constant war with the powerful Muslim sultanates bordering on their territory.

The Christian highland kingdom constructs palaces, castles, bridges, and church and buildings in and around Gondar area. This old palaces, castles, bridges, churches and buildings are now serving as a major source of tourism in the area.

Figure 1 Partial View of the Royal Compound

Source: Minnesota University and University of Gondar project team, 2016

5.1.2. Beautiful scenery, natural attractions and rich biodiversity

According to this study Gondar area's beautiful scenery and natural attractions attracts a significant number of tourists every year. Since the day when tourism became a mass market due to a number of people starting to enjoy travel, tourism has been defined as a "landscape industry", and regarded as fully integrated with destinations' environment (Formica, 2000). Tourists, especially those in holiday mood, would like to enjoy their destinations' natural views and beautiful scenery. Natural vistas and appealing landscapes have always been key attributes in determining the tourism attractiveness of a destination. Thus, nature-based beautiful scenery could be deemed as a meaningful attribute for a destination to attract more visitors.

5.1.3. Conducive weather and climate

Climate and weather could become attractions in their own right and play a decisive role in tourists' decision on destination selection. When tourists are thinking about buying a tourism product, they weigh up its different attributes, such as services, entertainment, price etc. The climate and weather also evaluated in this process, as they could be deemed as the natural resources that usually form a part of the product (Martin, 2005). Although climate and weather can be deemed as an important attribute associated with a destination, tourism planners and marketers can do nothing to affect them.

However, the understanding of how tourists perceive a destination's climate and weather would be helpful for tourism planners and marketers to better arrange their tourism resources and activities.

5.1.4. Good hospitality and positive attitude of the local people

Local people's attitude toward tourists is a major social factor forming part of the macro-environment of a destination, which may influence tourists' satisfaction with their trip and is, therefore, vital to the success of the destination. Local people's attitude toward tourists is determined by how they perceive the tourism industry. Most residents of Gondar and its surrounding perceives tourism in a positive way due to its potential for job creation, income generation and enhanced community infrastructure. This lead to a friendly attitude towards tourists. If most residents of a destination perceive tourism in a negative way due to the socio-cultural and environmental costs, local people's attitude toward tourists will not be gracious.

5.1.5. Religious festivals and events of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church(Timket&Meskel)

Religion is an integral part of Ethiopian life and culture and is celebrated with impressive ceremonies, traditional dress, and music and dancing. Gondar's attractions are not only limited to tangible heritages of fascinating Castles, Churches and Arts. It is a home of many intangible resources where many people from different corners of the country and the world comes every time to be a part of the celebrations.

The Finding of True Cross (Meskel) has been celebrated in Gondar for over 1600 years. It is celebrated in memory of the finding of the True Cross by Empress Elenion every September 27.On the day of the festival, as it is coincides with the mass blooming of the bright yellow Meskal daisies, called Adey Ababa, are tied to fronds, and piled high in town squares. Colorful processions carrying bumming torches converge on to the square, where a pyre is lit and the celebrations continue until dawn, symbolically heralding the advent of a new year after the rainy season is over.

Figure 2Timket and Meskel Celebration

Source: Gondar City Culture and Tourism office

Timket (Epiphany) in the town of Gondar is undoubtedly the most interesting; celebrated with spectacular procession accompanying the 'Tabots' carried by priests with joyous mass songs, dances and rhythmic clippings' and beating big drums. **Timkat** (which means "baptism") (also spelled *Timket*, or *Timqat*) is the Orthodox celebration of Epiphany. It is celebrated on January 19 (or 20 on leap year). Timket celebrates the baptismof Jusus in the River Jordan. This festival is best known for its ritual reenactment of baptism (similar to such reenactments performed by numerous Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land when they visit the Jordan); early European visitors confused the activities with the actual sacrament of baptism, and erroneously used this as one example of alleged religious error, since traditional Christians believe in "one baptism for the remission of sins".

During the ceremonies of Timkat, the Tabot, a model of the Ark of the Covenant, which is present on every Ethiopian altar (somewhat like the Western altar stone), is reverently wrapped in rich cloth and borne in procession on the head of the priest. The Tabot, which is otherwise rarely seen by the laity, represents the manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah when he came to the Jordan for baptism. The Divine Liturgy is celebrated near a stream or pool early in the morning (around 2 a.m.). Then the nearby body of water is blessed towards dwn and sprinkled on the participants, some of whom enter the water and immerse themselves, symbolically renewing their baptismal vows.

6. Popular Tourist Activities in Gondar

There is no well-kept statistics about the nature and characteristics of tourists visiting Ethiopia. Still there is no any study or document carried out that verify about the popular tourist activities. However, a senior marketing expert from bureau of Culture and Tourism said that:

Visit to historical and religious sites, Trekking and walking, Sightseeing, visits to museums are among the most popular activities that tourists are experiencing during their stay in Gondar. Bird watching as an activity is also an emerging tourist activity around Gondar.

Appropriate and well-kept statistics is one of the ways forward to bring development in tourism. It is important for planning and marketing activities. As mentioned above, Ethiopia's tourism lacks statistics regarding the nature and characteristics of tourists in general and activities specifically. Nevertheless, there is an initiative from Ministry of Culture and Tourism to have an appropriate statistics, which is the stepping-stone to develop tourism in the country and to make it a means for poverty reduction.

7. Problems that tourists face while in Gondar ant its surrounding

The study identifies the following summary of all the problems faced by the tourists during their experience in Gondar:
➢ Infrastructure (e.g. poor access roads to attraction sites)
➢ Poor quality of hotels and restaurants
➢ Poor quality of service by suppliers at a relatively high price
➢ Shortage of tourist standard hotels
➢ Poor public transport
➢ Problem to get around without guides because of inappropriate signage
➢ Lack of quality maps
➢ Poor communication skills of some local guides
➢ Poor Ancillary services (banking, telecommunications) to the international standards
➢ Poor relationship with the outbound tour operators
➢ Charging of a different price to products and services (internationals were charged much more than the locals)
➢ Problem of hygiene on streets and toilets
➢ Too many hassles around tourist sites
➢ Too much music noises in hotels and restaurants (noise pollution)
➢ Beggary
➢ Inappropriate presentation about attraction sites by local guides
➢ More focus on money than the traditional hospitality of the locals where tourist's enjoy very much

In addition to the above-mentioned problems that cause dissatisfaction and shorten length of stay of tourists that in turn affects the number of tourist arrivals, Ethiopia's tourism is bound with a number of problems. Poor Marketing and promotion activity because of budget constraints, government structure, limited trained man power at all levels is one of the major problems that accounted for small number of tourist arrivals despite of the area's rich tourism potential.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study attempted to identify the pull motives driving tourists to visit Gondar, the sources of, popular tourism activities and the major problems tourists face during their stay in the city and surrounding environment. Important attributes, namely, rich culture and history, beautiful scenery and natural attractions, pleasant weather and climate, Good hospitality, positive attitude of the locals towards visitors, religious events and festivals of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church were identified as the most important attributes that can effectively attract tourists to choose Gondar as their own holiday destination. However, the attributes that may attract tourists to Gondar are not limited to the above mentioned attributes only. According to the finding a visit to museums, historical sites and monuments, sightseeing, visit to religious sites, trekking and walking and bird watching are the popular tourist activities in the area.

To be successful in competing in the international tourism market, standards of excellence must be introduced for its products, particularly for infrastructure and accommodations and services. Tourism is far more dependent on infrastructure than are most economic activities. Furthermore, unlike other activities, the absence of any infrastructural service can seriously harm the marketability of the tourism product. Access to the area and specifically to the destination, are as important to the client as the availability of water and power. Therefore, Ministry of Culture and Tourism should consistently strive to

perform quality control and assurance, product designing, training, availing utilities, and maintenance, all to impact the ultimate goal of any tourism development activity.

Government at all levels also need to address human resource development and capacity building to enhance tourist's length of stay and satisfaction. Local firms need to learn how to manage tourism if they are to succeed. Whatever their area of specialization is, e.g., resort, wildlife, nature or cultural tourism, managers must keep abreast of activities by their competitors. If there is a sufficient body of local expertise in the sector, professional and business associations can help to transmit knowledge and experience to raise standards in the sector. A travel and tourism sector today also requires services in transport, banking and telecommunications that have grown increasingly sophisticated and that require local staff with the capacity to operate the services. The international competitiveness of the tourism sector requires that the staff of hotels and other accommodation and in the related service sectors are need to be trained to be efficient in their specific jobs, as well as pleasant and knowledgeable in their interaction with tourists.

9. References

1.   Melodena Stephens Balakrishnan, (2009) "Strategic branding of destinations: a framework", European Journal of Marketing.

2.   Formica, S. (2000). Destination Attractiveness as a Function of Supply and Demand Interaction.

3.   Klenosky, D. B. (2002). The "Pull" of Tourism Destinations: A Means-End Investigation. Journal of Travel Research.

4.   Martin, M. B. G. (2005). Weather, Climate and Tourism - A Geographical Perspective. Annals of Tourism Research.

5.   Oliver R.L. (1997). Satisfaction. A Behavioral Perspective on the Consumer. Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill.