

**SATISFACTION OF AUSTRALIAN GREY TOURISTS TO THE GREAT BARRIER
REEF ISLANDS OF QUEENSLAND**

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Abstract

This paper is designed to ascertain if the resorts on the Great Barrier Reef are grey tourist (senior) friendly and living up to the expectations and meeting or surpassing the satisfaction levels of their visitors. Existing research has been undertaken on the satisfaction level of tourists to various destinations, however no research has been undertaken on the satisfaction of seniors visiting the Great Barrier Reef. Therefore this research specifically focuses on the satisfaction of seniors visiting the Great Barrier Reef. This is important because there are other South Pacific destinations which offer marine wonders seeking to attract the grey market. General managers of the resorts on the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia will be contacted and permission will be sought to include a questionnaire in the compendium in each room of the resort. It is envisaged that a senior member staying in the resorts will complete the questionnaire and then leave it at the reception on their departure. After analysis of the data the results will be forward to the General Manager of each resort. The findings will assist the resorts in developing and delivering a product which will meet or exceed the expectations of their senior visitors.

Key Words: Great Barrier Reef, Seniors, Grey Tourism, Tourism.

The Introduction

Grey tourism is the term which is used to refer to the seniors market, whilst the term seniors is usually used to refer to those aged 60 and over (Tourism Queensland 2004). The grey tourists tend to have more leisure time than their younger counterparts and choose to spend this time travelling (Golik 1999). The grey tourists (seniors) are the fastest growing niche travel market in Australia and of these 2.97 million seniors, 75% of them travel domestically each year. They spend \$895 million on domestic travel annually and this figure is expected to increase to \$2.3 billion by 2051 (Golik 1999).

In 2002 Tourism Queensland conducted research into the seniors market to gain a better understanding of their needs in relation to tourism. It was discovered that the seniors or grey market presents an opportunity to expand Queensland's domestic tourism and that seniors are the fastest growing market. This is not surprising as seniors have more discretionary income than younger people, and choose to spend it on travel (Golik 1999). Therefore, this study looks at seniors travelling to the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia.

The islands of the Great Barrier Reef are located on the eastern seaboard of the Queensland coast of Australia and is one of the seven natural wonders of the world. This is the longest reef in the world and stretches for approximately 1,200 miles and consists of many reefs and islands. Most islands have resorts which welcome a variety of age groups. The writer contacted Tourism Queensland to ascertain if they had undertaken research on the satisfaction level of Australian seniors to the islands of the Great Barrier Reef and was advised that they had no information on this topic. It appears that this topic area is under researched and therefore this study seeks to explore this area.

The Great Barrier Reef islands have long been a popular tourist destination in Queensland, Australia. Results from the Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) Reef Visitor Analysis survey (1999) indicate that international tourists make up 49% of visitors to the reef, while domestic visitors comprise 51%.

In 1994, 1,508,000 people visited the Great Barrier Reef and by 1997 the figure rose to 1,559,000 (BTR CRC Reef Research Centre 1999). Tourist numbers to the Great Barrier Reef have increased and tourism has been and still is, a very lucrative business for both public and private sector providers. Tropical North Queensland was ranked 4th in the top 20 regions visited by international visitors in Australia in 1999 and contributed \$25.2 billion (4.5%) to Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (BTR 1999). It is attributed with creating direct employment in the tourism sector for 513,000 people. This represents 6% of the total employment in Australia (BTR DATA CARD). However, in recent times with the September 11 terrorist attack, the Ansett Airlines collapse, the Bali bombing and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic tourism around the world has taken a sharp decline. Figures released by the Australian Tourist Commission (ATC) indicated that during the year ended 30 September 2003, there were 4.3 million visitors to Australia who were over 15 years of age. This represents a decrease of 1% from the 2002 figures. The report also indicated that 18% of the international visitors visited tropical North Queensland.

Development in both domestic and international travel and tourism destinations has increased competitiveness among the holiday destinations. As new destinations are established existing ones either progress or decline. It is therefore considered that such competitiveness is between tourism, leisure, and specific destinations, as opposed to countries because of the variety and different aspects and features of the destination within a particular country (Bordas 1994). Travel agents are the main contributors to the sale of travel products and often focus on selling destinations as opposed to countries (Klenosky & Gitelson 1998). The result of this has seen a demand for package holidays and destinations have also become more important than a 'one off' or individual attraction. This would then reflect tourist satisfaction with a destination, rather than an attraction or facility and would drive repeat

business. These issues emphasises the need for destination managers to direct tourism supply and to ensure the needs of the tourist are met.

Tourism Queensland (TQ) is promoting internal (domestic) tourism by advertising the safety of Queensland holidays and is urging Australians and international visitors to visit and discover Queensland, including the Great Barrier Reef. Ernie Dingo, a well known indigenous television presenter in Australia who is the 'face' for these advertisements, urges Australians to "Get to know their families again", thus highlighting the need for a break from work and the value of the family unit. However, no advertising has been specifically directed in this campaign to the seniors market to 'Discover Queensland'. Research conducted by Wei and Ruys (1998) through the National Seniors Association of Australia, found that mature travellers required safety, convenience, security, service and comfort to be of importance to this market throughout Australia. Therefore, this study investigates the Australian senior's satisfaction level of Queensland Great Barrier Reef resorts in relation to these and other areas of concern.

The Literature

The significance of mature aged travellers has been researched by Lago and Poffley (1993) who explored the demographic variability of the elderly in relation to health status, income and family structure. They suggested that careful review should be undertaken by tourism providers in relation to the age of their clientele and their needs. McGuire, Uysal and McDonald (1988) looked at the methods used by the tourism industry to attract the senior market and where they obtained their information. The holiday patterns of senior Germans have been studied by Romsa and Blenman (1989) who discovered that retirees had similar needs as the population in general. In 1992 Van Harssel and Rudd researched the lifestyle profiles of single seniors travelling and Schlagel and Tas (1992) researched the common characteristics and needs of the senior segment. However, these studies did not relate to island tourism.

Tourist expectations are important to successful destination marketing because they often influence destination choice (Ahmed 1991). Many tourists have experienced other destinations and often use these past experiences to compare facilities, attractions and service standards (Lawes 1995). The decision to visit a particular destination is complicated when there is more than one person travelling and involved in the decision making process (Nicholas & Snepenger 1988). However, seniors will select a destination by planning ahead and they seek value for money which is more about the quality of the experience as opposed to the cost (Golik 1999).

Seniors travelling as tourists (grey tourists) usually have expectations on the type and quality of service and the facilities which they want at various destinations. These expectations are often arrived at through information provided by family and friends, past experiences, tourism advertising, commercials, brochures, internet or travel documentaries or shows. The extent to which the senior's expectations are met will determine the level of tourist satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Senior's have the opportunity to receive information about the destination through multiple information sources. Both commercial and social environments have been shown to affect destination choice (Mill & Morrison 1992). However, Golik (1999) found that seniors reasons for travelling are as diverse as the market itself. For example, they may travel for nostalgic reasons, social interaction, to learn, to escape or for mental or physical stimulation.

Several approaches to understanding customer satisfaction have been explored over the last several decades but it appears that a consensus has not been reached despite there being

many articles concerning customer satisfaction within the marketing literature (Oliver 1980; Parasuraman, Valeria, Zeithaml & Berry 1985; Cronin & Taylor 1992).

Many different aspects of consumer satisfaction in tourism, travel, hospitality and leisure have been reviewed. For example Hsieh, O'Leary & Morrison (1994) investigated packaged and non packaged tours. Le Blanc (1992) investigated the operation of travel agencies and Bonjanic (1996) investigated guest satisfaction in hotels. The level of tourist satisfaction with the behaviour of local people was investigated by Pearce (1980) and recently by Cassidy (2002). Lastly, the tourist satisfaction with destinations was also researched by Cassidy (2002), Chon & Olsen (1991), Pizam, Neumann & Reichel (1978). Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml cited in Zeithaml and Bitner (2003 p. 74) write that "customers expect service companies to do what they are supposed to do. They expect fundamentals, not fanciness; performance, not empty promises." Oliver (1997 p. 13) defines satisfaction as: "...the customer's fulfilment response. It is a judgement that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment."

Senior Satisfaction

Cultural differences in attitudes, behaviour and social class can also influence expectations (Lewis 1991; Mayo & Jarvis 1981). Destinations attract tourists and seniors from many different countries and cultures so there will be discrepancies in satisfaction levels depending on the country of origin of the tourist. The evaluation of the service quality (supply side) and attractions are considered important in determining the overall satisfaction of the tourist/family (demand side) (Whipple & Thach 1988).

Previous research in tourist satisfaction suggests that various decisions are made on when to measure tourist satisfaction. Some of these compare pre and post holiday perceptions (Duke & Perisa 1996), whilst others measure the satisfaction during the holiday (Gyte & Phelps 1989), before finishing the holiday (Goodrich 1978) and on completion of the holiday (Pearce 1980). Muller and O'Cass (2001) suggest that seniors can be divided into two groups, those who feel young-at-heart and those who feel their chronological age. This would also have an impact on their satisfaction level.

Research demonstrates that there is a definite relationship among tourist satisfaction, intention to return and positive word-of-mouth communication (Hallowell 1996; Ross 1993). A relationship also exists among tourists who are dissatisfied. They have a willingness to look for alternative destinations for future holidays and spread negative word-of-mouth (Pizam 1994). Satisfaction or dissatisfaction from previous experiences are also important as they will influence expectations on their next holiday/tourism purchase (Woodruff, Cadollte & Jenkins 1983). These findings are significant, in that they suggest that favourable tourist perceptions and attitudes result in giving a competitive advantage.

Should the overall experience at the destination meet or even exceed the initial expectations then the tourist will usually be satisfied. However, if the experience falls below the tourist's expectations then they will be dissatisfied and the chance of a repeat client visit will be very slight. Usually satisfied clients will recommend the hotel or destination to friends and relatives and this is the cheapest and most effective form of marketing and promotion available (Crosby 1993). Research conducted by Wei and Ruys (1998) found that 60% of seniors surveyed responded that the main source of travel information was by 'word of mouth' from other seniors or family and friends. This is also supported by Roy Morgan Research Holiday Tracking study which was conducted in December 2001. It is not however, consistent with the findings of the National Visitors Survey (BTR 2001) which suggests that the most popular sources of information for seniors are:

The travel agent

The internet

Tourist offices/visitor information centres/ government tourism commissions

Motoring associations
Travel guide or book
Advertising in newspapers, magazines, TV or radio.

These findings by the National Visitors Survey may indicate that the grey (senior) market is changing in the way they source their information and this should continued to be researched by those marketing to this group.

Consumer satisfaction is usually linked to the retention of consumers which attributes to loyalty and this in turn helps to realise economic goals, such as increased revenue and number of tourists. This results in a positive bonding between the tourist satisfaction level and the destination's long term economic success. There are many ways in which a destination manager knows if the tourist/senior is satisfied. These may include telling friends and relatives about the destination, returning time and again to the destination, or complementing the staff at the destination. It is during this process that there is a strengthening in the relationship between the senior tourist and the destination.

This research therefore will examine the satisfaction level of seniors travelling to the Great Barrier Reef Islands of Queensland and determines if the resorts are meeting or surpassing the expectation levels of senior tourists.

Methodology

Questionnaire Design

Combining qualitative and quantitative research methods have become acceptable research practice in tourism and hospitality (Belson 1986; Patton 1990). By itself, quantitative research may not be able to give sufficient insight into the views of the respondents (Denzin & Lincoln 1998) hence qualitative research also needs to be considered in the chosen research design. Qualitative research may also be employed to gather background information on the areas that are subject to quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln 1989). It is intended that both qualitative and quantitative research will be used in this research.

A key requirement for effective research is the development of a research design that is based on the problem or problems to be investigated. The research design is then used to identify the methodologies to be used in the research, set research parameters and identify the target population of the research. Ritchie and Goeldner (1994) suggest that the research design should include the following elements:

- the selection of a data collection method
- design of a data collection instrument
- the selection of subjects for the sample.

This primary research will take place on the islands of the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland and a questionnaire was considered the most appropriate form of exploratory research. Alternative methods of research such as mail surveys, telephone surveys and observations were considered inappropriate due to time and monetary constraints. Hence a questionnaire will be designed for the purpose of ascertaining seniors satisfaction of the Great Barrier Reef Island resorts in Australia as a holiday destination, their likelihood of returning to the destination and their likelihood of recommending the destination to relatives and friends.

The questionnaire will consist of three sections. Section one will contain questions relating to the demographics while the second section will be based on a seven point scale ranging from *terrible (1)* to *delightful (7)*. Literature suggests that the Likert scale can be used for the purpose of evaluating tourist experiences at a destination because it is effective in measuring the attitudes of the consumer and it is easy to construct and measure (Echtner & Ritchie 1991). Using the *terrible-delighted* scale has been noted to limit the skewness of

satisfaction responses (Maddox 1985). Therefore the numerical labels will not be used in this research as the literature shows that respondents prefer verbal labels as opposed to numerical ones (Haley & Case 1979). Hence, the following scale will be used: *do not know (0), terrible (1), unhappy (2), mostly dissatisfied (3), neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (4), mostly satisfied (5), pleased (6) and delighted (7)*.

The third section of the questionnaire will consist of a question designed to elicit the senior's suggestions or recommendations which would lead to an improvement in their satisfaction level of the island resorts. Their responses may cover areas of service, facilities, choices, safety, convenience, security, comfort and the guest rooms or any general observations. It is anticipated that the questionnaires will be placed in the compendium in each guest room and that a senior will complete it and return it to the reception area on check-out.

Results

These results will then be analysed to determine the level of satisfaction by seniors regarding the resorts on the islands and will highlight areas of dissatisfaction or satisfaction by them. The results will be forwarded to the General Managers of the resorts and will also be made available to Tourism Queensland. Thus the findings from this study will provide valuable information in assisting the resorts in being able to develop and deliver products which will meet or hopefully exceed the expectations of the senior visitors. Future research is needed to explore the differences in push and pull factors among first-time senior users of the resorts versus repeat visitors and among domestic and international seniors.

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