

Foreign Visitor's Evaluation of Lasithi prefecture and Spinalonga as a Tourism destination

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Abstract: A tourism environment which is educational and exciting, safe, clean, relatively cheap to access and where transportation is readily available, contributes immensely to a tourist's travel satisfaction. Given these factors, this study seeks to interrogate two aspects of relevance, namely the relative importance of the items that define the tourism environment, and how foreign visitors evaluate tourism to Lasithi prefecture and Spinalonga island in Crete. It is abundantly clear from the research conducted that what tourists prize the most is a safe environment which is easily accessible, and cheap to visit. Competition among tourist destinations is today more severe than ever before, due to the large increase in international tourists globally. Spinalonga island, like every destination has an image which must be transmitted to the potential market so as to obtain a competitive position. Consequently, the destination marketers need to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their tourism area so as to make it more marketable. They must position Spinalonga island in such a way as to make it recognisable as an important and interesting place to visit while in Crete. How tourists evaluate a destination subjectively and a quantitative analysis on the evaluation system of the tourism environment are thus also considered. Effective strategic destination image management is critical for attracting tourists and other resources that are capable of creating value-add for a destination.

Key Words: Tourism destination, foreign tourists, historical value, safety, accessibility.

Introduction

The island of Spinalonga (Σπιναλόγκα), officially known as Kalydon (Καλυδών), is located in the Gulf of Elounda in north-eastern Crete, in the Lasithi prefecture. It is adjacent to the town of Elounda which is a popular tourist destination and close to the port of Agios Nikolaos. The name Spinalonga seems to have first appeared in the 13th century, and was conferred by the Venetian conquerors, who being, unfamiliar with Greek, corrupted the name "στην Ελούντα" ("at Olounda"), originally to *Spinalonde* (13th century) and subsequently to *Spinalonga*. The island has been referred to in a number of novels including, Victoria Hislop's *The Island* (2005) and Victor Zorba's, *The Island of the Damned*. The book *Island of the Damned* relates the true story of the leper colony on Spinalonga and, since the author met with the last governor of the

colony, contains a variety of select photos and stories of the German occupation during World War Two. The book *The Island* shares the fictional story of a family's links to the leper colony that was established on Spinalonga. Spinalonga also featured in the popular British television series *Who Pays the Ferryman?* As well as Werner Herzog's experimental short film *Last Words* and is a relatively popular place to visit while in the eastern parts of Crete. The Venetian cartographer Vincenzo Coronelli asserted that Spinalonga was originally joined to the peninsula of Kolokytha island which is connected to Elounda by means of a narrow isthmus, but in 1526 the occupying Venetians carved a canal between the two, forming this small islet which would serve as an island fortress.

To understand tourists' varied perceptions, as well as images and motivations toward

a particular destination it is essential to comprehend and predict tourism demand and its impact on the tourism location.

Spinalonga island, like every destination has an image which must be transmitted to the potential market so as to obtain a competitive position. Consequently, the destination marketers need to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their tourism area so as to make it more marketable. They must position Spinalonga island in such a way as to make it recognisable as an important and interesting place to visit while in Crete. The strategic position of Spinalonga in Elounda harbour along with its turbulent history of military struggle and human suffering makes it an intriguing place to visit.

Brief history of Spinalonga

In 1526, the occupying Venetians carved away a part of the peninsula and created the island of Spinalonga. Due to its strategic position the island was fortified from its creation in order to protect the passage to the ancient port of Olous. A series of raids by Barbary corsairs and Arab pirates in the Mediterranean resulted in Olous becoming somewhat depopulated during the middle of the 7th century. Olous was consequently deserted until the mid-15th century after which the Venetians began to create salt-pans in the salty shallow waters of the gulf. This resulted in the region once again becoming populated and it acquired important commercial value. As this period coincided with rise of the Ottoman Empire and especially the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, as well as the continuous appearance of marauding pirates, the Venetians opted to significantly fortify Spinalonga. In 1578 the Venetian engineer Genese Bressani designed the island's fortifications. He established a number of blockhouses at apex of the northern as well as the southern side of Spinalonga. In addition to this he created a series of fortifications alongside the coast that eliminated possible sea assaults. In 1584, it became apparent to the Venetians that the coastal

fortifications would be ineffectual against hostile assaults from the nearby hills. As a result, they began to erect new fortifications at the highest point of the hill giving them additional artillery range. Spinalonga remained under Venetian jurisdiction well after the rest of Crete had fallen to the Ottomans in the Cretan War (1645–1669) and also until 1715, when it eventually succumbed and fell to the Ottomans during the last Ottoman–Venetian War and they occupied the last remaining Venetian fortress and removed all traces of the Venetian military presence from the island of Crete (Detorakis, 1988). Once the Turkish occupation of the island ended, Spinalonga became a place refuge for many Ottoman families that were fearful of Christian retaliation. Subsequent to the revolution of 1866 erstwhile Ottoman families made their way to the island from all the region of Mirabello. At the time of the Cretan revolt of 1878, Spinalonga and the bastion at Lerapetra were the only fortresses not captured by Cretan resistors. Consequently, by 1881 the remaining Ottomans, numbering some 1110 established a community and only in 1903, did the remaining Ottomans evacuate the island. From 1903 to 1957, the island was utilised as a leper colony and it was in fact, one of the last active leper colonies in Europe. The very last inhabitant, a Greek Orthodox priest, departed from the island in 1962.

Access to Spinalonga

Today, Spinalonga is renowned for its small quaint pebble beaches and shallow crystal clear waters. Thousands of tourists visit Spinalonga every summer by boat from the town of Agios Nikolaos, Elounda and Plaka. The main purpose of any visit is clearly due to its historical interest and ruined buildings, which are carefully maintained by the Hellenic Archaeological Service. There is no accommodation available on Spinalonga, and the average tour lasts only a couple of hours. In summer months, it is accessible from both Elounda (15 minutes) on an hourly basis at a rate of about 10 € per person, and Agios Nikolaos (55 minutes) generally

three trips per day at a rate of 20 € per person. The journey from Elounda takes roughly fifteen minutes while boat trips from Agios Nikolaos can take up to an hour. In the winter months no boat trips are scheduled but tourists may find a willing boat owner or fisherman willing to undertake the trip for a relatively inexpensive fee. In summer, there are tour guides willing to assist a tourist and they tend to offer their services at a reasonable fee. In winter there is no such service and the only likely people to be sighted on Spinalonga are the archaeologists who are investigating the ruins. Depending on the package taken, Tourists visiting Spinalonga from Agios Nikolaos, also have an opportunity to have lunch and swim off the beaches behind the Kolokytha Peninsula, before returning to Agios Nikolaos in the late afternoon. Entrance to Spinalonga costs a mere 2 €, which is a relatively cheap entrance fee/rate when compared to similar sites in other parts of the world.

Background - Current tourism

In 2002 Greece came 15th place in the world classification of tourist destinations, receiving 14.179.999 tourists (National Statistical Service of Greece, provisional data). This shows a significant increase took place in the four years up to 2006. The major portion of tourists (94,3 percent) originated in Europe (68,9 percent from the EU). 73,6 percent of foreign tourists arrived by aircraft, 5,6 percent by sea and 5,6 percent, by road. 15,2 percent arrived by train. The total number of nights spent in hotel accommodation by foreign and domestic tourists in 2001 was 61.567.209 nights. marked. Greece has 8.550 hotels with a total of 330.970 rooms translating into 628.170 beds (2003). Another 450.000 beds are provided by some 28.000 secondary accommodation establishments. Greece also has 352 camping sites with 30.241 tents and 1.005 bungalows. There are about 8.000 travel agencies, rent-a-car agencies, and yacht-brokers. Tourism contributes 8 percent of

the GDP. The tourism receipts in 2002 were a staggering 10.285.000 euros. The tourism industry is thus a major player in the Greek economy. Employment in the tourism sector is estimated to be as much as 10% (6,1 percent direct employment and 3,9 percent indirect) of the total employment in Greece (<http://www.athensguide.com/practicalinfo/tourismstatistics.htm>).

The Institute for Tourist Research and Forecasts however claimed in 2009 that tourism in Greece was down 20 percent. Greek airports experienced a 7 percent drop in their arrivals. (The Institute for Touristic Research and Forecasts). One reason for this highly significant drop is the global financial plunge that most European countries and United States are experiencing. This situation calls for innovation and creativity in regaining much needed tourism (Koutoulas, 2009). Tourism data provided by the Tourism Service for 2009, reflected that Spinalonga has on average 1200-1500 visitors per day in summer and 30-50 per day in winter. After Knossos, (an archaeological Minoan site near Heraklion) Spinalonga is the next most popular archaeological site in Crete. In 2006, 17, 293, 000 foreigners visited Greece (UNWTO, 2007). Crete has over one and a half million tourists a year and tourism is its most important source of revenue.

The population of Crete is 503 000 people who live mainly along the north coastal strip mainly due to the fact that the interior is covered with mountain ranges -two-thirds of the island comprises mountains and is relatively inaccessible and thus tourism is limited there. If Crete is to be regarded as an attractive destination, it is essential to more vigorously promote interesting places such as Spinalonga and provide greater travel services for foreign visitors including language aid to foreign language tour groups and individual travellers in the form of either, electronic equipment or formal guided tours as well as ongoing transportation by sea-going craft. It is equally critical to keep the one

and only 'café' on the island functioning right up until the end of the tourist season.

One could also argue that Spinalonga island, although not an ancient historical site, greatly contributes to the historical-cultural tenets of its location in the Lasithi prefecture and has certainly internationalized especially Elounda, more than would have been the case had it not existed.

A destination such as this should however not have a 'closed season' as it is of historical and cultural interest. The results of the research demonstrate that Spinalonga is visited primarily by affluent foreign tourists because of its varied and intriguing history and because service quality is good, rather than because it is considered to be easily accessible and safe.

Research shows that any supporting services such as public transportation and language assistance for foreign tourists as well as the hospitality of locals, all play a major role in tourist satisfaction which is critical to repeat visitation (Chi and Qu, 2008; Kozak, 2001). In order for Spinalonga to be viewed as a convenient and comfortable travel destination, it needs to offer these supporting services to tourists in both the summer and winter months. Consequently the researcher focused on these issues and defined them as the tourism environment in this study.

Figure 1. Cretan prefectures

Crete is generally considered to be a family resort, with 42% of total tourist arrivals representing families with children, 38% couples and 20% singles. It attracts predominantly 18-35 year olds (49%) while 36-45 years old accounts for 22% of arrivals. 46-60 years old represents 18% while 11% of tourists are 61 or older. The duration of the average length of stay on Crete has decreased from 2 weeks to 1 week and it has been fluctuating between 7.2 and 7.6 days. The tourist season lasts

from March to November with July and August being the peak months. Visitors to Crete are thus predominantly summer visitors.

(<http://userweb.port.ac.uk/~judgeg/IFEstudwebpages/Stavroulakis/Statistics.htm>)

Its competitive advantages are the temperate climatic conditions, its archaeological sites and Monasteries, Museums, places of historical and cultural interest, diverse natural resources from high mountains to long beaches, as well as high quality accommodation establishments which range from superb resort hotels to clean and accessible, cheap self-catering units. Crete attracts especially high quality tourism and is regarded as the Greek tourist destination with the highest pricing policy (20% higher than the country's average).

More than 93% of total visitors to Crete stay in hotels and self - catering apartments. Crete is accessible by both sea and air but roughly 85% of tourism to the island makes use of charter flights. This is directly related to the fact that Crete relies on package tourism and tour groups, that comprise up to 80% of total tourist arrivals. (see figure 2.)

Figure 2. (Source HNTO)

In the last decade or so there has been a notable increase of 9% and 18% respectively in in the prefectures of Heraklion and Rethymno, while in the other two Prefectures, Chania and Lasithi, have remained somewhat constant. HNTO data reflects that almost half of Crete's overnights (48%) were recorded in the Prefecture of Heraklion from 1996 and this trend continues. Tourist demand in the Prefecture of Lassithi is 16%.

Overnights of Greek tourists in Crete account for only 10% of total overnights on the island, while in Greece as a whole, 1 out of 4 tourists is Greek. Overnights of domestic tourism in Crete account for only

6,5% of total overnights of Greeks in Greece. This shows that Crete must make greater efforts to promote tourism and increase its arrivals volume. (see figure 3.)

Figure 3. (Source HNTO)

Problem Analysis

Brezovec, *et al* (2004) state that there are positive and negative associations with all destinations, local inhabitants and products, which are not easy to alter. Consequently, the destination image greatly influences the tourists' decision to embark on travel there. These associations also impact on satisfaction levels of tourists and their willingness to conduct repeat visits to a destination.

The tourism environment's destination attraction is comprised of the standard of accommodation, quality and price of supporting services. The natural beauty of a destination is however what generally makes it attractive to tourists and what influences foreign tourists' ultimate destination selection. The perceived images of a destination are the basis of evaluating and selecting a holiday destination and these provide the association between motivations and ultimate destination selection by travellers (O'Leary, & Deegan, 2003).

When tourists plan their next holiday abroad, the beauty of the place is thus the prime motivator. Tourists ask the following questions:

1. Is the destination safe in terms of both natural surroundings as well as crime-free?
2. Is it convenient and accessible as a destination?
3. Are the locals friendly?
4. Does the destination offer value for money?

These above aspects all contribute to the foreign visitors' travel satisfaction or lack

thereof in terms of comfort and convenience during their trip. If the destination is perceived not to be safe, or if there is great difficulty in communicating with locals, tourists are easily put off. This study focuses on the supporting services such as "accessibility", "service quality" and "safety" of visitors to Spinalonga. Tourists expect to have protection of their health as well as safety while on vacation. They desire reasonable prices for the facilities and services they obtain and also seek quality products and service quality excellence and especially accessibility to places of interest.

This study aims to understand 1) the relative importance of the abovementioned items making up the tourism environment from the viewpoint of foreign visitors to the Lasithi prefecture and how tourists can be 'steered' towards spending time in Spinalonga, and 2) how foreign visitors evaluate Crete's tourism environment by using a qualitative approach. 3) Suggestions are made for how the community and other stakeholders, local businesses and tourists could benefit by extending the season.

The terms of reference of this study are as follows:

Accessibility: This refers to the road traffic signs, maps, leaflets, car hire availability, private tour offerings, access to Spinalonga by boat throughout the year and also includes and multilingual guides and restaurant menus. Are ATMs easily accessible and credit cards are generally accepted at local businesses? Can tourists readily use their cellular phones and are Internet connection facilities available for them to utilise?

Service quality: In this study relates to the following questions: Are their guides available with requisite skills on Spinalonga and is there availability of restaurants? Are there Toilets available and are these facilities clean? Is there multilingual communication? Are locals generally kind and friendly as one tends to expect in Greece? Is access to

Spinalonga cheap and are fares charged by boat companies and packages offered reasonable? Do taxis operate until late at night and are public transport services available?

Safety: Do tourists feel menaced when they walk around at night or is there a constant threat of possible robbery and other crimes? Do tourists feel safe at Spinalonga and are there security measures in place. Are taxis transferring tourists from hotels to Spinalonga boats generally modern?

Crete’s destination image

Greater global product parity and substitutability of tourism destinations has emphasized the need for Crete to create a unique identity in order to differentiate

themselves from its many competitors in the Mediterranean. Crete is generally a successfully branded destination and has high cultural pull. The island has had international appeal as a tourism destination since classical times, based primarily on its relaxed pace of life, warm climate, beautiful scenery and warm and welcoming people. Over the last three decades, Crete has been profoundly transformed from a relatively poor, inward-looking agricultural society, to a prosperous tourism destination which is integrated into the mainland Greek economy. It attracts many immigrants from eastern Europe to satisfy its labour needs. Given the global economic decline, tourism to Elounda and Agios Nikolaos which are close to Spinalonga island, could begin to show signs of stagnation.

Research design

Table 1. Summary of the Spinalonga research methodology

Stage	Researcher comment
Stage 1	Derive competitiveness evaluation index of island tourism destination by factor through literature review
Stage 2	Conduct pilot study on small sample of tourists (quantitative descriptive survey).
Stage 3	Conduct main study on tourists to Spinalonga (n=50) by addressing possible touristic problems on accessibility, safety and service quality, as identified from pilot study.
Stage 4	Confirm variables of competitiveness evaluation for Lasithi prefecture and Spinalonga as favoured tourism destinations.

The approach implement for use in this study centred on the Echtner and Ritchie model for destination image research. This incorporates a preliminary pilot phase of qualitative research in order to ensure that

the attributes used were appropriate to the population being studied.

The research was finally in the form of a quantitative descriptive survey. This was

considered the best way to obtain accurate feedback from the respondents. Respondents also had opportunity to state additional points of concern or general comment at the end of the survey.

Study population

A questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of tourists to Spinalonga during October 2011. The information provided by the rating of attributes and the open-ended questions was used to assess the image of Spinalonga and surrounds as a tourism destination that exists in Crete along common attribute-based components and holistic aspects respectively. Areas investigated included accessibility, service quality and safety. Spinalonga island was chosen as the point of distribution.

Sample size and measuring instrument

This research which is exploratory in nature, examines tourism to Spinalonga and seeks to assess satisfaction with the quality of services in Lasithi prefecture in Crete, Greece. For this

The researcher built up, at random, a sample of 70 individuals (54 percent female and 46 percent male). The group was from Greece, Belgium, Australia, England, Germany, Norway, South Africa, Bangladesh, Spain, Italy and the United States of America.

The study population thus comprised international and domestic tourists visiting Spinalonga. There was a purposeful sample of Tourists (n=50) who were approached on a 'next to arrive' basis at Spinalonga in the interest of achieving as random a sample as possible. The majority of people agreed to participate in the survey and the refusal rate was fewer than 5 per cent of those approached. A total of 65 questionnaires were distributed and 50 were returned, representing a 76,92 percent response rate.

The measuring instrument for the investigation was a questionnaire

comprising 24 attributes relating to tourist satisfaction. Ethical clearance was obtained by informing all those approached that they were not in any way obliged to respond and that their identities would remain anonymous. A generally reliable and valid set of scales to measure the attribute based components, have been pre-selected by the literature review which the researcher undertook. The primary data collection was conducted by means of the questionnaire and the tourists' perceptions on aspects relating to their trip were obtained. Tourists can wait up to half an hour for boats to arrive to take them back to their point of embarkation for Spinalonga so this was considered a valid and reliable occasion to conduct the survey. It was thus convenient to the researcher as well as the respondents as the tourists had some time to spare while waiting for their boats to arrive.

Findings and analysis

Data was entered into Microsoft Excel for analysis. The respondents (n=50) were asked to rate each of 24 attributes on a scale of one to five according to how they thought Spinalonga and the Lasithi prefecture would perform (where 1 was a 'very poor performance' and 5, a 'very good performance'). The researcher was able to draw conclusions from the results and from the literature which was investigated. The interrater reliability or extent to which respondents gave similar judgements was high.

The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the 24 attributes was .913, and this suggests a very high level of internal consistency. A reliability of .70 and above is deemed to be acceptable in social science research solutions (UCLA Academic Technology Service, 2011).

54 percent of respondents were female and 46% were male, but this did not influence the study at all. 28 percent of respondents were aged 25-35 years of age. 72 percent were between 36-70 years of age. The results were not

conclusive but provide a reasonable indication of what needs to be done to make Spinalonga and the surrounding

area more tourist friendly in terms of accessibility, safety and service quality in general.

Table 2.

Rating Scale: 1-5 (%)	% rating expected performance	Mean rating
24 point attributes		
Accessibility:		
Road traffic signs in general	75	4,04
Maps on area	24	1,88
Leaflets on area/ tourist books on Spinalonga	18	1,36
Car hire availability	37	2,95
Private tour offerings	51	3,59
Multilingual guides on Spinalonga	87	4,56
Multilingual restaurant menus	28	2,97
Easy access to Spinalonga	83	4,32
ATMs easily accessible	65	3,44
Credit cards are generally accepted?	69	3,57
Can you readily use your cellular phones	39	3,08
Internet connection facilities	58	3,77
Service quality:		
Guides available with requisite skills?	78	4,16
Availability of restaurants on Spinalonga	20	1,45
Toilets available on Spinalonga	45	3,29
Multilingual communication at ticket booth	47	3,46
Are locals friendly?	95	4,78
Is access to Spinalonga cheap?	82	4,26
Do taxis operate until late at night?	76	4,07
Public transport services available?	31	2,78
Safety:		
Do not feel menaced when they walk around	93	4,71
Feel safe at Spinalonga	84	4,34
Security measures seem to be in place	86	4,45
Modern taxis	35	3,00

Table 2. shows that respondents felt that Spinalonga is cheap and easy to access and that guides are suitably trained and multilingual. The major problem is the lack of a suitable restaurant on Spinalonga to cater for the needs of tourists seeking refreshments. This is especially the case

where tourists stay on the island for more than two hours. People feel safe on the island. Another major area of shortfall is the lack of leaflets or tourist books available on the island which could inform tourists of what they are seeing. There are however a number of exhibits explaining

the island's chequered history that one passes by on one's walk around the island.

It appears that tourists prefer to have a guidebook they can keep for information and/or souvenir purposes. The area is considered to be tranquil and has a calm pace of life and warm and welcoming people. Tourists feel very safe when walking around the area and enjoy the nightlife and tavernas' which are in close proximity to their hotels and other accommodation. Their hotels were considered to be excellent in quality and value for money -many tourists cited the Porto Elounda Resort as the best hotel they had ever been to. Most tourists stated that they visited the area to view cultural and historical sites and many had already been to Knossos. Some tourists felt that the rapid economic development/urbanisation in Crete would ultimately make the destination lose its lustre. A few went to visit family and friends. The findings from this quantitative research thus provided detailed holistic impressions of the destination (qualitative). There were 50 respondents and some gave more than one reply and only one response was recorded where respondents gave two or more factors which were in the same category.

The very warm welcoming of tourists by Greek people in general was mentioned as a unique feature. Greek Culture, history and tradition were respected and valued by a number of respondents. Certain of the open-ended questions provided respondents with an opportunity to list additional specific details regarding certain aspects of their experience at Spinalonga and the Lasithi prefecture in general. This revealed the necessity of combining data from the attribute-based questions with the additional information provided by the open-ended questions, as suggested by Echtner and Ritchie. Only in this way can a more comprehensive picture of the destination be obtained.

The findings also suggest that Crete is perceived as being a family oriented destination. The value of its culture as a constituent of its destination image cannot be underestimated, which is why tourism to Spinalonga can and should be increased. Crete has a reputation as being one of the warmest locations in Europe, and this was reinforced by the constant references to sunny beaches and clear blue seas by some tourists. Unfortunately very few of the respondents' (19 percent of the sample), had any knowledge of other historical sites or places of interest apart from Knossos which was the most common response. Two respondents, a couple from Belgium, mentioned the mountain villages of Mohos and Kراس where they viewed a two hundred year old Cretan house. Two other tourists from Germany mentioned having visited Tzermadion which is the largest village of Lasithi where woven goods are sold. They were also visited the Minoan site of Karphi which is not far from Tzermadion. Five tourists' emanating from Australia and England also travelling together and on a package holiday, were impressed with the resort of Malia and its range of interesting cafes and nightclubs and proximity to a beach. One Greek couple from Athens had also visited the Toplou Monastery in the far east of Crete. Interestingly, almost all of the respondents (90 percent), stated that they would recommend that their family and friends try to visit Spinalonga and Knossos, and 80 percent would happily return if they had the opportunity to do so. About 15 percent of the respondents didn't need to obtain information about the island of Spinalonga. Their personal knowledge and 6 percent having read Victoria Hislop's book, was adequate to lead them to travel toward the destination. This confirms the familiarity of some tourists with the area and their repeated visits. Ryan and Cave (2005), revealed in a study of destination image the importance of the role of a visitor's familiarity with a destination and so previous experiences will more than likely affect tourist attitudes towards a particular destination.

There is definitely a need to ensure consistency between the image promoted of Crete and the reality at the destination. A more complete and accurate measure of image is needed and this will be critical for future promotional strategies. Consequently, the rating scales (quantitative) were utilised to provide a broader base of image information, the open-ended questions (qualitative) served to elaborate on specific aspects of the destination including accessibility, safety and service quality. Interestingly, no answers were provided which illustrated a bad experience compared with the expected outcome of the visits by the tourists. The majority of the tourists matched quite a few of their expectations with their own travel experience and 98 percent were satisfied but seasonality was an issue for 68 percent of these. The 2 percent unhappiness was attributed to a single rude taxi driver a day before.

Delimitations

Exclusion criteria: the research did not attempt to impose any specific approach to improve tourism to Spinalonga and the Lasithi prefecture, but was rather aimed at drawing attention to possible improvement areas.

Value and limitations

The study will benefit tourism stakeholders in the Lasithi prefecture. 65 questionnaires were distributed but only 50 were returned. A larger sample may yield slightly different results although it is the contention of the researcher that the sample was representative. When some elderly respondents who were not Anglophone deviated from the expected answers and requested support, the researcher asked probing questions to guide them in responding.

Economic Responsibility in the EU

Tourism plays a very important role in the economy of Crete and it still has scope for improvement if it is to fulfil its greater potential of bolstering the national income of Greece in especially trying economic times in the European Union. The primary focus of the Greek government has been on the continued growth in international arrivals, foreign exchange receipts and employment creation. Roughly 40 percent of the local population of Crete is either directly or indirectly linked to tourism to cater for the approximate 2.5 million tourist arrivals per annum (HNTO, 2004).

Local economic development is an important need in the Cretan economy. Tourism in the Lasithi prefecture in which Spinalonga resides, provides very good skills development opportunities for the local community. A number of locals are employed as tourist guides and many are employed in a wide range of roles in hotels in the area. About 23 percent of all employees in Crete emanate from other regions of Greece and come to work in Crete in the summer months and then return home in winter (Herzfeld, 1991). There are also many foreigners employed in hotels in Elounda and Agios Nikolaos. There are thus many migrant workers in Crete and many of these are of eastern European origin and enter Crete illegally due to high unemployment and poverty in their country. There are also many migrant workers from western Europe who are drawn to the warm climate and good life that Crete offers (Vaughn *et al* 2000). There should however be a drive to seek to reserve tourist benefits for locals by employing locals rather than foreigners through job reservation for Cretans. The local population should also be trained to meet industry needs and this will serve to reduce local poverty.

Spinalonga attracts international tourists as well as local tourists and creates a limited amount of opportunities for small entrepreneurs such as fishermen ferrying tourists to the island. Additionally, tourists support a wide range of service industries such as hotels, restaurants, handicraft manufacturing and car-hire. Elounda and Agios Nikolaos have some of the most

luxurious hotels in Europe but these are often besides lesser small hotels and rooms for rent. While one should cater for all tourist price ranges, this should be revisited as it is perceptually not always conducive to repeat visitation. The construction of many tourism enterprises along the coastline of Crete is transforming the landscape and this is predominantly in the popular northern part of the island (Tsartas *et al*, 1995). Elounda, in particular, as a renowned holiday destination of the “rich and famous” should set out to maximise the local economic benefits which tourism to Spinalonga can bring to the area. This would be possible by creating a more diversified tourism product and marketing a wider range of experiences, activities and services to tourists such as for example, package tours to Knossos and Spinalonga incorporating shopping and lunch/dinner in Agios Nikolaos. Established enterprises such as the Porto Elounda Resort can gain by encouraging and assisting in the development of complementary products. It already offers top-notch conference facilities and an enticing golf course, but more could be done. It is abundantly clear that the larger and more diversified a local tourism base is, the more successful all enterprises in an area will be. The Spinalonga tourism experience needs to be carefully woven into the fabric of the conventional Cretan tourism offering-much like Knossos has been over many years.

Both domestic and international tourists' expenditure in local communities contributes to the economic development of the Lasithi area. The larger the proportion of total tourism payments that remains in the area, the greater and more diverse the local economic base will become. All the local tourism enterprises must make an input in order to maximise local economic benefits and this will in itself assist in diversifying the local economy. Once complementary products are more developed, the local economy and local enterprises in Elounda and Agios Nikolaos, will benefit by being

strengthened. If hotels in the area cooperate with each other more, this can make a significant difference. A study by Ekinici and Hosany (2006), has specified three main dimensions of the perception of a destination's personality, namely sincerity, excitement, and conviviality. The researcher in this study has also found that the personality of a destination has a hugely positive impact on perceived destination image and every tourist's recommendation to family and friends is important for a destination.

Recommended Objectives and Indicators for Spinalonga

Any tourism destination is an amalgam of its products and services that attract visitors from beyond its spatial confines (Murphy, Pritchard *et al*, 2000). With this in mind, the Lasithi prefecture in which Spinalonga is situated, needs to develop its tourism even more, and this means that it is necessary to assess the economic impacts and promote niche marketing. This implies that the season must extend beyond summer by developing new products to generate more employment conditions and to provide a stronger base for needed local economic development. Many studies dealing with tourism outputs have sought to examine the gradual implementation of resort development and hotel development in Crete (Andriotis, 2003). In Tunisia for example, tourism has had a huge impact on deficit reduction and resulted in huge foreign capital inflows but also caused regional imbalances as coastal areas benefited the most (Poirier, 1995). Hotels should augment their products so as to achieve above average spending per customer and this in conjunction with packages created by high-quality tour operators. Alternative distribution channels must be sought for marketing Spinalonga. It can for example be marketed in historical and cultural magazines and electronic media, as a place worthy of a visit.

Hotels and Resorts must monitor occupancy levels or seasonality of

employment over the year to demonstrate progress in extending the season beyond the traditional summer months. Current seasonality in Crete has led to a very unequal seasonal tourism distribution. One finds that between May and September, occupancy rates at hotels are over 75 percent but in winter months, this drops to under 20 percent (Tsitouras, 1998). It is clear that resources are virtually unused in winter. Consequently, seasonality is a real problem for tourism to Spinalonga and the surrounding areas and there must be more services and attractions on offer outside of the summer months. According to Sharpley (2001), tourism has resulted in great economic growth in Cyprus. It is however dependent on a few major markets and tour operators and there is a period of high seasonality and this impacts negatively on the environment. Ideally the season should be extended by the creation of new products for tourists, such as a winter season where for example, religion tourism by especially Orthodox adherents could grow as tourists undertake visits to monasteries and important church sites.

It is imperative to thus begin to identify and encourage commercial responses to new off-season winter opportunities. Attractions such as Spinalonga which fall outside the primary summer season should of necessity be available off-season as well. This could be driven by organising of cultural activities directly related to the history of the island and would require a concerted promotional marketing campaign for off season periods. Marketing could for example, include conference packages, cultural heritage tours, traditional ways of life, avitourism and hiking in wildlife habitats. Inhabitants of Lasithi prefecture must understand that the cultural heritage of the area and especially Spinalonga should not only be assessed in terms of economics, and that tourism can also generate needed revenue from off-season activities as described above. It is a fact that about one third of the seasonal tourism employees and a number of locals, do not

really wish to work during the off-season (Mourdoukotas, 1988). Even if this work existed it would be unpopular. However the reality of a country on the verge of bankruptcy must surely stir locals to try to obtain as much revenue as possible throughout the year. A primary task should be to foster cooperation between foreign entrepreneurs keen to explore potential opportunities and local and emerging entrepreneurs. Discussions between tourism authorities in Crete and tourism stakeholders must involve and include the broader local economic development strategy. It would however be prudent to conduct market and financial feasibility assessments before raising expectations and exposing the local community or local entrepreneurs to risk. Della Corte and Micera (2007) highlight the importance of images in the actual demand for a destination, and this should not only be in the mind of the tourist. They, define destination image as “the whole of beliefs, ideas and impressions a destination can generate in potential and actual tourists’ minds”. With this in mind, images of Spinalonga should be incorporated in any marketing drive

How to maximise local economic benefits

The Greek Tourism Ministry and the HNTTO should strive to encourage all stakeholders in the vicinity of Spinalonga to upgrade their standards of service, especially the small, medium and micro-enterprises and emerging entrepreneurs. They should seek to maximise their revenue earning potential by adding value through winter season tourism marketing. Local communities and entrepreneurs should be assisted to further develop their products related to Spinalonga so that they can be more easily used by others and marketed to tourists throughout the year. Formal sector businesses must maximise the benefits for local community enterprises – for example, a boat ferrying tourists to Spinalonga may only be viable if a group of hotels commit to source the

tourist groups that could use a boat to get there.

All Spinalonga initiatives, whether for those interested in history and archaeology or those simply seeking a new adventure must become community projects and be funded by tourism revenue for the enterprises concerned or donations/fees from tourists or tour operators, or funding from donor aid agencies of the EU. There is great and urgent need for complementary products for formal sector tourism enterprises in Elounda and Agios Nikolaos.

All tourists to Spinalonga must have an opportunity to purchase locally produced crafts and curios which could be sold on the island. Multi-lingual tour guides must be readily available and informative books on the island's history in a variety of popular languages need to be available for sale. On the researcher's recent visit just before the end of the summer season, it was not possible to even purchase a soft-drink from the seemingly deserted coffee-shop on Spinalonga. The aforesaid shop looked deserted and although it is situated in a magnificent position, was in a sad state as far as creating a positive tourism experience is concerned.

Community buy-in on Spinalonga initiatives

There should be initiatives in place to develop strategic partnerships and joint ventures between stakeholders of Spinalonga in which the local communities of Elounda and Agios Nikolaos have a significant stake, and after apposite capacity building, a considerable role in management. Tourism projects should also be identified that can support especially the poor. This will aid the development of local communities and provide support such as mentorship for emergent entrepreneurs. Where there is limited community knowledge in for example marketing, training and managerial support should be provided by

those with the know-how. The bottom-line is that tourists must be encouraged to visit all year round and to spend more money in the local economy. This could be achieved by more visits to local traditional restaurants and by tourism participation in tours to local areas of interest such as Spinalonga and Knossos- for a booking fee or commission.

During the summer tourism season in Crete, electricity and water sources are somewhat stretched beyond the limits. This is exacerbated by ever increasing drought conditions and locals have to balance agriculture with tourism as main sources of income. Farmers and the tourism industry are often at loggerheads over water. Tourism usually requires great volumes of water for golf course and swimming pools and of course hotel guests. This may often result in shortages of water and even lead to the degradation of water supplies as groundwater is saltier and needs intensive treatment before it is drinkable (WWF, 2004).

Strife is not helpful and what should be happening is that the tourism industry and locals should be seeking solutions together such as desalination projects, rather than squabbling over limited availability of water. As tourism is an instrument for regional development policies (Konsolas & Zacharatos, 1993), tour operators should be encouraged and assisted to be more creative and innovative in their itineraries, by for example including local museums in Agios Nikolaos and Heraclion, arts and craft shops and local ethnic restaurants in their tour itineraries. Tourists keen to escape from a mundane urban lifestyle could be encouraged to spend a holiday exploring the countryside (Goodall, 1992) and the many villages in the Lasithi prefecture and be taught about local cuisine and crafts by locals. Despite its scant rainfall, the landscape of Crete is lush and there is a profusion of many wild flowers in spring. The island has 1500 plant species and apart from donkeys, goats and sheep,

there are unique reptiles and the rare agrimi mountain goat. There is an abundance of birdlife including griffon vultures, warblers, goldfinches and falcons as well as many migrating species which could be an avitourists dream come true.

Tourists can thus, provided they have opportunities, also directly contribute to sustainable tourism as they support the communities that are working to preserve their local traditions. Half and one day tours to Spinalonga for the more serious cultural tourists in conjunction with visits to ancient Knossos would be an ideal package option for tourists. As Crete has many olive trees and thus a top-notch oil industry and traditional villages and folklore museums, these would also be ideal breakaway destinations that would augment a trip to Spinalonga. Serious avitourists could also benefit by ecotourism initiatives being increased in Lasithi. Only in this way will tourists be encouraged to spend more. It is critical that any initiatives to promote Spinalonga more and make it more of a sustainable destination, require transparency when reporting benefits to the local community. Once seasonality issues are addressed, targets must be set to monitor progress in achieving the objectives of increased tourism and greater revenue derived from tourism which will bring relief to an increasingly poor local community. In 1998 the average tourist stayed in Greece for two weeks and average per capita expenditure was US\$ 456.00 (Psoinos, 1994).

Marketing & Product Development

In order to develop Spinalonga as a sustainable regional destination and to ensure the well-being of the local community, a number of initial changes are required, As far as transportation is concerned, local timetables could be improved and taxi drivers could be more reliable and punctual than is currently the case. Car-hire companies should be flexible enough to meet tourist needs and endeavour to improve the quality of their

vehicles for hire. As taxi drivers are on the road for most of the day, they should consider co-operative advertising, marketing and the promotion of new and emerging products and attractions with the tourism authorities. Enterprises should provide information about local services and attractions such as Spinalonga, and encourage their clients (individuals and operators) to promote visits by groups all year round. Pamphlets could be handed out to restaurants and hotels which promote Spinalonga.

It is important that such material is presented in a visual way which incorporates local cultural elements and emphasises the richness of Spinalonga's history and the local complementary products. There should be access opportunities for all visitors and potential visitors to Spinalonga, regardless of the season. Elounda and Agios Nikolaos' inhabitants, must play an active role in preserving the rich cultural history and natural beauty of Spinalonga.

Even-handed Business

Local communities must share risk with entrepreneurs and recruit and hire staff of Cretan origin in an equitable and transparent manner and maximise the proportion of staff employed from the local community so as to reduce poverty.

Enterprises can play a great role in increasing the skills and capacity of the local community but should not pay only a minimum wage. Rather motivate staff to work in winter months by paying a fair wage. Satisfactory wages will satisfy the needs of internal customers and provide the means for external customer satisfaction and this will greatly assist the profitability and also competitiveness of tourism to the Lasithi prefecture. Enhancing tourist satisfaction and delighting customers are pivotal to the success of tourism to Elounda and Agios Nikolaos, and Spinalonga has a great role to play in the realisation of tourism sustainability in the region. Consumer

satisfaction can only be realised if all stakeholders are prepared to work towards this goal. Major enterprises should thus pay fair prices for all local services purchased or packaged as part of tour package itineraries. Stakeholders should not abuse their market power and imposing unfair commissions or push down prices inequitably as this will damage smaller enterprises. A drive to augment products would enable the Spinalonga tourism experience to be one that typically exceeds customer expectations and increase their satisfaction. Service delivery for Spinalonga should be standardised and quality control systems should be developed. Service delivery should be flexible and products should be augmented while it is critical to extend the season. The Lasithi prefecture of Crete must analyse its current tourism offerings and resources, especially Spinalonga, and adapt its strategic planning for this islet as a result. All stakeholders involved in the preparation, distribution and delivery of the tourism product that is Spinalonga, must integrate their activities for their benefit and that of the the local community and tourist in a triple-bottom-line approach (Hall, 1994).

Managerial implications

The findings of this study have a number of important managerial implications. Firstly, it is critical that employees of all stakeholders in the tourism industry in Lasithi prefecture be trained to advise tourists on sites that are in close proximity to Elounda and Agios Nikolaos. Taxi drivers are particularly well-placed to promote the region, but their vehicles should be inviting and relatively new, or a tourist may obtain a negative perception of the area almost immediately. Restaurants should strive to have multilingual menus and even waiters should be promoting sites of interest.

Such values of customer care must be reinforced from time to time during in-

service training at hotels and restaurants for example. Managers must reinforce such behaviour. Hotel managers and tour operators in particular should do their utmost to increase the time period of the tourism season. Managers themselves must also be totally committed to promoting the region and its many offerings and seek out innovative and creative solutions which will benefit them and the society at large. As the Greek economy is in a shambolic state, this is the least that can be done to improve it.

Conclusions

This study has focused on the supporting services and facilities for foreign visitors' convenience and comfort travel in the tourism environment of Spinalonga including accessibility, service quality and safety. The relative importance of the items comprising part of the tourism environment such as service quality, safety and accessibility, cannot be ascertained through a qualitative approach only. It is complex to try to measure the benefits and to understand the relative priorities of the items that define any tourism environment for foreign tourists in this fashion. However, to evaluate the tourism environment with respect to attractiveness and necessity for foreign tourists, a further quantitative analysis is essential. A number of conclusions are derived from this study. Foreign visitors highly prioritized safety followed by transportation and price amongst the main aspects informing their trip to the Lasithi prefecture. From a practical point of view, this study makes some recommendations in order to provide a better tourism environment for foreign visitors. Safety was the crucial item of the eight items making up the tourism environment. From the analysis, the visitors who travelled to Crete more than once highly prioritized safety than first time visitors. Hotels in Elounda and Agios Nikolaos should do more about attracting tourists to Spinalonga. This must be done in conjunction with renowned travel tour operators from across the globe and should be linked to packages where visits

to Knossos are also included. Very often tourists have no information about what is available in Elounda or Agios Nikolaos and their modern culture is virtually absent. Yüksel, A. and Akgül, O. (2007), suggest that postcards be used to promote destination once again as was the case in the 1960-1980s. Postcards with images of Spinalonga and other places of interest in Lasithi prefecture would certainly create more interest in the destination.

There is surely far more than tavernas and night clubs. Foreign tourists to Crete have been given no idea of what the country has to offer in terms of contemporary culture, and not much is done to enlighten them once they arrive in Elounda or Agios Nikolaos. Crete's inhabitants, especially those in the Lasithi prefecture, whether permanent or temporary employees in the hospitality and tourism industry, must play an active role in preserving the rich cultural history and natural beauty, starting with more vigorous marketing of Spinalonga island and extended seasons. The role of visitor satisfaction with respect to repeat visits and word-of-mouth recommendations is clearly very significant for Spinalonga and Crete in general. If there are negatively perceived attributes about a destination, these will account for an unfavorable attitude toward that destination by potential tourists. So when tourists visit Elounda and try to get to Spinalonga in off season and find they cannot do so, they become negative and impart this feeling to prospective tourists. Most people create their own image of a destination, based on experience or recommendations of others, and so the image projected by Crete through promotional activities to potential tourists is critical. The comparison between any projected image and the perceived image by the tourist has to be capable of making the tourist opt to visit the destination and it is thus a critical link (Andreu, *et al.*, 2000). The image of Crete as a safe destination and one in which customer service and friendly locals abound was perceived to be correct by respondents but accessibility

could be bettered by seasonal extensions. Crete was considered to be good value for money.

Pike and Ryan (2004), state that a major objective of a destination's positioning strategy should be to reinforce positive images already held by the target audience and correct negative images, or create a new image. For Cretan tourism, to be more sustainable especially with Lasithi prefecture in mind, it is critical that a wide range of offerings in alternative tourism such as hiking, nature and wildlife activities, (ecotourism), and agrotourism in which tourists can undertake educational holidays in local villages and culture to sustain the rural population, be offered.

Tour operators serving Crete as well as local tourism stakeholders and visitors alike all appreciate and respect the culture and natural landscape of the area, but a holiday spent exploring the countryside and quaint villages and learning about the production of local cuisine and crafts can also be a refreshing and rewarding break from mundane urban environments. Tourists can thus also directly contribute to sustainable tourism efforts by supporting the local communities who toil to preserve their rich local traditions. The Lasithi prefecture should pay particular attention to the use of its tourists' resources and seasonality in order to maintain and further rejuvenate its image and also so as to maintain and better the quality of services offered to the tourists'. The analysed case study, even if it refers to a the Lasithi prefecture and specifically Spinalonga island, highlights some considerations that can be extended globally in Crete to promote greater tourism efficiency and the effectiveness of a sustainable tourism policy. Further research could focus on absent information on the general needs of physically disabled tourists to Spinalonga. Most current data is unreliable and there is hardly any scientific evidence available that would answer important questions in this regard.

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Figure 1.



Figure 2.

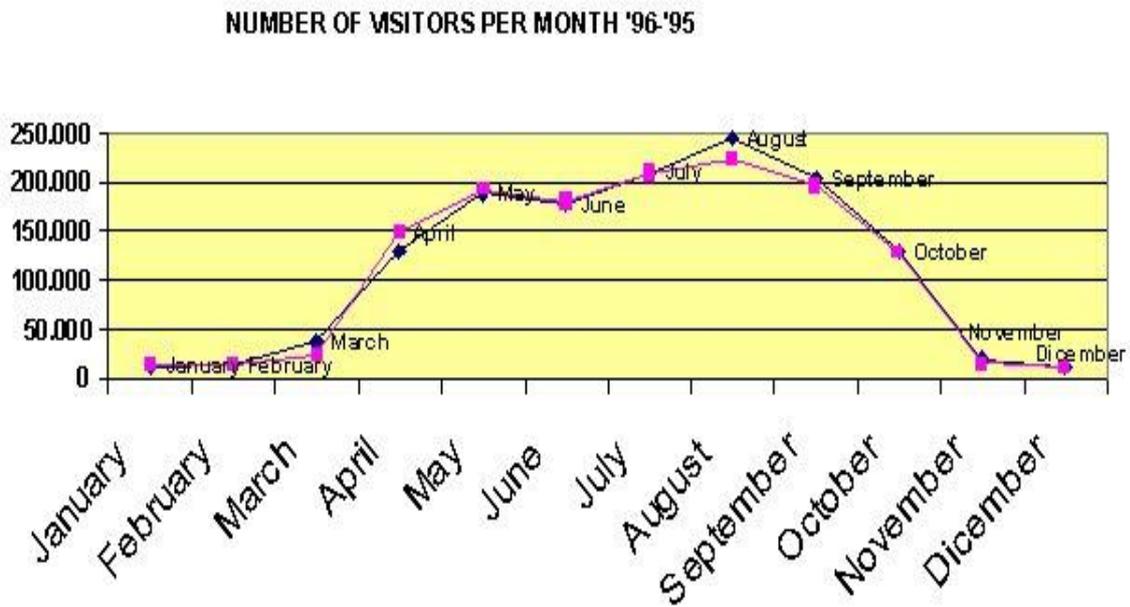


Figure 3.

