



Perceptions of attractiveness for salt heritage tourism: A tourist perspective



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We identify theme, product and design as the most important attributes for salt destinations in Taiwan.
- The findings show that tourists preferred participatory experiences and interpretation programs.
- A combination of theme and design were viewed as the most significant attributes for attractiveness.
- The interactive elements were regarded by tourists as key sources of learning and entertainment.

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ABSTRACT

Salt tourism includes tours in the salt fields, participation in the salt production process, and the purchase of salt-related products. The study identifies theme, product and design as the three most important attributes that contribute to the attractiveness of a salt destination and affect tourists' decision making process. The survey was undertaken on the southwest coast of Taiwan, a region once dominated by the salt industry. The findings show that tourists preferred to visit salt tourism destinations that offer participatory experiences and interpretation programs. A combination of theme and design were viewed as the most significant attributes for attractiveness of salt heritage sites. In particular, tourists express a desire to visit salt heritage sites that present traditional themes, but offer modern exhibition designs and souvenir products. The interactive elements were regarded highly by tourists as key sources of learning and entertainment. Participatory experience influences tourist perception of, and satisfaction with, their experience in salt tourism.

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1. Introduction

Tourism represents a powerful option for preserving industrial heritage and an effective means of reconstructing “landscapes of nostalgia” (Halewood & Hannam, 2001, p. 566). The remains of industrial culture are identified and repackaged as sites of historical, technological, social, architectural or scientific value (TICCIH, 2003). As a subset of the wider field of cultural tourism, industrial heritage tourism refers to “the development of touristic activities and industries on man-made sites, buildings and landscapes that originated with industrial processes of earlier periods”

(Edwards & Llundés i Coit, 1996, p. 342). Promoters of industrial heritage tourism have sought to improve the image of old industrial sites and encouraged appreciation for the industrial tradition. The subjects of industrial heritage encompass the material remains of industry, such as agricultural fields, factory complexes, buildings and architecture, or entire communities with a considerable industrial base.

Despite the growing interest in industrial heritage worldwide, analysis of industrial heritage for the purposes of tourism development and policy evaluation is still an under-developed research field (Xie, 2006). There have been, though, many studies that look at facilities located in former industrial sites (Kerstetter, Confer, & Bricker, 1998; Pretes, 2002; Timothy, 2007). In other words, the majority of research focuses on the supply side of industrial sites while neglecting travellers' characteristics, preferences, motivations, and other demand-related variables. Poria, Butler, and Airey

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(2003) suggest that few studies have explored the relationship between the demand perspective and the core of site attributes to attract tourists. In particular, little research has been done to understand the perceptions and motivations “pull” tourists to specific sites, and the reasons why some industrial sites draw more tourists than others. There is a need for heritage planners to focus more directly on understanding tourists’ needs, motivations, experiences and the benefits tourists both expect and actually gain from visiting industrial heritage sites (Apostolakis, 2003).

Pine and Gilmore (2011) argue that as the advent of commodification, staging experience occurs when a tourist destination intentionally uses service as a stage and goods as props, to engage tourists in a way that creates a memorable event. Borrowing the concept of “shoppertainment” or “entertailing” from the retail industry, destinations progressively draw tourists in by offering fun activities, attractive displays and promotional events. In other words, experiences can be thematized and characterized by tourists’ participation and connection with the destinations. They derive from “an iterative process of exploration, scripting, and staging” (p. 102). The transformation of salt fields into sites of leisure and tourism is facing a similar challenge: to create and maintain a balance of entertainment versus education; cultural preservation versus economic development; and mass tourism versus sustainable tourism.

This research attempts to broaden understandings of salt tourism by exploring various factors that contribute to the overall attractiveness of the industrial site. More specifically, this paper presents salt tourism in Taiwan as a case study in order to isolate and examine the characteristics that contribute most to the perceived attractiveness of salt heritage sites. Tourism is viewed as a viable way to preserve the traditional practice of salt-making as a commercial activity and enhance the market effects of the salt as a natural and industrial heritage. Three key attributes of tourist sites, e.g., themes, programs and designs, are identified as focal points of study through the extant literature in industrial heritage tourism. Researchers drew on this literature to devise a study measuring which attributes contribute most to tourists’ perceptions of the salt fields of southwestern Taiwan as an attractive place to visit. Tourists were asked to assess these attributes and to explain their perceptions of the destinations, experiences, and products offered by heritage salt destinations.

The purpose of the paper is to shed light on the demand side of industrial heritage tourism by ascertaining how domestic tourists perceive salt destination in Taiwan. It begins with a literature review on the issue of what makes a site attractive to tourists, and explores the range of themes, programs and designs used in salt tourism. A brief history of the salt industry in Taiwan is introduced and research methods detailed. The tourist survey results are reported and the research implications are discussed in the end.

2. Salt heritage tourism

Traditional industries provide tourists with a mixture of nostalgic affection and novel experiences. By stressing the value of the industrial past and present, an industrial area’s shift from a site of active production to tourist attraction may enhance the community’s identity and encourage localization in an increasingly globalized world. Salt heritage tourism includes tours in the fields, participatory experiences in the salt production process, and the purchase of salt-related products. The development of salt resource engenders an interesting “new combination” (Hospers, 2002, p. 401) of industrial heritage tourism, which improves a region’s image and functions as a public relation tool to counteract public prejudices against industrial areas in decline (Goodall, 1994; Harris, 1989). It is a type of alternative tourism where “sustained value

creation” (Ryan, 2002) aims to benefit communities, environments, businesses and tourists. Salt tourism is widely viewed as an attempt at reclaiming traditional agriculture practices by adding a contemporary twist and inviting tourists to experience industrial sites and modes of production (Daher, 2005).

Salt fields are sites of resource extraction and production which have increasingly been viewed in terms of their cultural, heritage, aesthetic and recreational values for postindustrial service activities such as tourism (Sauri-Pujol & Llordés i Coit, 1995). MacCannell (1989, p. 8) evokes “a museumization of work and work relations”, which he terms “work display”, as a cultural production of curios marking the death of industrial society. He further suggests that the “museumization” of pre-modern cultural forms transform labor into cultural productions by tourists and sightseers who are moved by “the universality of work relations, not as this is represented through their own work (from which they are alienated), but as it is relevant to them at their leisure through the displayed work of others” (p.7). As developer capitalize upon industrial heritage culture for recreational purposes, “work watching” becomes a normative practice, in which both landscape and labor become interpreted and marketed for tourists (Wanhill, 2000).

Che (2011) suggests that salt fields formerly or currently in operation, including underground mines, can provide tourists with opportunities to experience and learn about the unique histories and settlement patterns associated with extractive industries. The development of salt tourism endeavors to create overall tourist experiences that maintain a historical identity and the spirit of the past. For example, Cardona, a salt mine region located in Catalonia, Spain, transformed into a tourist town when the decline of salt mines occurred worldwide. Building on salt’s status as the region’s primary source of financial development, the region developed a project called “the Salt Mountain”, open for leisure and tourism purposes (Sauri-Pujol & Llordés iCoit, 1995). The Wieliczka Salt Mine in southern Poland was converted into a tourist attraction to help visitors appreciate rock salt and its production process. Tourists can view artifacts illustrating mining techniques as well as ornaments carved out of rock salt (Smith, 2009). The underground tour takes tourists on a 2-km walk that passes through 20 caves. The nearby Cracow Salt-Works Museum was placed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 1978, followed by the Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans in France in 1982, to demonstrate the historical significance of salt mining. The idea of using salt for medical tourism is also gaining popularity especially in former Soviet Union nations, such as the Kyrgyz Republic (Schofield, 2004) which has developed a number of health spas, advertising the efficacy of therapies utilizing local salt and brine springs to alleviate arthritis and circulatory ailments (Connell, 2007; Kurlansky, 2003).

As a subset of heritage tourism, salt tourism not only brings the industrial past to life and engages with tourists in the present by explaining manufacturing processes and demonstrating the use of equipment, it also interprets a destination’s history and transforms its culture and heritage into popular images palatable for tourist consumption (Frew, 2011). Tourism activities tend to refer to tradition and to exalt a past way of work, while ignoring the fact that the living industries actually offer higher and more innovative levels of authenticity than “traditional” heritage sites. The act of visual consumption (Watson & Waterton, 2010) and the focus on experiential authenticity that makes industrial heritage a viable and increasingly popular form of tourism may also contribute to the distortion of industrial landscapes, transforming them into aestheticized spaces of leisure and entertainment (Urry, 2002).

Tourism experiences have centered on themes, products and designs that mix with modernity with nostalgia (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009; Xie, Wu, & Hsieh, 2012). Salt heritage and its

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