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Research paper

The rally experience: Exploring motivation patterns of Australian Grey Nomads

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ABSTRACT

Senior tourists are key figures in the world's drive tourism market. This study focusses on the 'Grey Nomads' in Australia, the core aim being to understand the tourists' motivations patterns for attending recreational vehicle (RV) rallies. At a typical RV rally in a key regional destination, 170 questionnaire-based surveys were collected. Building on the theoretical analysis of travel motivation studies, factor analysis of the combined internal and destination feature motivational attributes suggested five key motivations with three hierarchical levels of influence. The leading motivational influences were destination attractiveness and the appeal of the rally itself, while the desire to enhance one's relationship and socialisation were a powerful part of the total pattern. Escape and achievement, and knowledge enhancement, were important but significantly less prominent in the overall arrangement of the motivating forces. An analysis of the rally goers' activities on site and in the region reinforces the hierarchical nature of the RV participants' motivation. This work helps to better understand the forces shaping senior RV tourists' travel choices and also offers implications for regional destinations that are seeking to attract the large, nationally important and mobile tourism community.

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1. Introduction

In Australia, as well as many other countries of the world, the imbalance in economic well-being between the capital cities and regional areas has often been an issue (United Nations, 2013). The fluctuations and often decline in the traditional resource industries in regional settings, for example logging, agriculture, pastoral use of the land and sometimes mining, can generate recurring job losses and the decline of communities (Forth, 2001; Gore, 2013). Encouraging drive tourism has become a development strategy for the economic and social regeneration of rural areas in several continents (Liu, Zhang, & Nie, 2012; Prideaux & Carson, 2011; Rogerson, 2007; Shih, 2006). Due to restricted airline access, and limited coach and rail services, tourists can only reach many regional locations that are remote but appealing by driving themselves (Mahadevan, 2014). Indeed, drive tourism facilitates the regional dispersal of visitors thus enhancing the likelihood that tourism linked expenditure is shared across the country (TRA, 2012). The income derived from self-drive tourists helps sustain many small businesses in regional communities (Hardy, 2003).

Additionally, the skills of temporary visitors may also add to the human resources of a region in difficult times (Onyx & Leonard, 2010).

Considering the importance of drive tourism to the development of regional areas, it is valuable to have a better understanding of this heterogeneous market. The variability among drive tourists is considerable. There are Grey Nomads in Australia (Holloway, Green, & Holloway, 2011; Patterson, Pegg, & Litster, 2011) and Snowbirds in North America (Counts & Counts, 2001; Hardy & Gretzel, 2011): both these terms are used to describe the senior market. There are also family users and international tourists (Wu & Pearce, 2014). The market also includes itinerant workers and those without employment, as well as young adventurous backpackers in rented vehicles (Pearce, Murphy, & Brymer, 2009).

Among these segments, the senior group is the most prominent and of considerable importance to regional destinations, due to their great length of travel, reasonable amount of disposable income and strong preference for regions areas (Mahadevan, 2014). The senior group, especially recreational vehicle (RV) rally participants, is of particular interest in this study. An RV rally is an event when RVers get together at a particular site with other like-minded RV lifestyle enthusiasts. It is part of many senior RV tourists' travel experience. RV rallies have different types and sizes. There are large national rallies held annually or bi-annually. There

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are also regional rallies, hosted by RV clubs, manufacturers, and local chapters of various types. In addition, there are brand club rallies for owners of a specific brand of RV. No matter what kind of RV rallies are being considered, they do share some commonality. They tend to occur in regional cities or towns due to the site requirement and RVers' preferences. In addition, all of the rallies last for a few days and offer a series of on-site activities: for examples, various seminars (technical/educational, travel and lifestyle), crafts, services, new RV displays, socialising activities, entertainment, safety education and exhibitors selling products.

The question prompting the research is at core a motivational inquiry: why do the senior tourists participate in RV rallies in regional cities in Australia? The query can be reformulated as the first aim of the study which is to reveal and document the organisation of the motivational forces prompting rally attendance for the senior RV market segment. Associated and supplementary aims include firstly understanding how the activities of the RV tourists help explain the motivational patterns and secondly identifying ways for destination managers to attract RV tourists to their region. This study initially explores the existing knowledge about the drive tourism market, with an emphasis on the senior RV tourists in Australia. Consideration of the approaches to studying motivation and the importance of understanding patterns of motives in tourism studies provides the conceptual background for the work. The context and the research procedures of this empirical study are explained, followed by the detailed findings addressing these first two research aims. In the discussion and conclusion sections, connections with previous research are established, and points directed at fulfilling the third aim of offering advice for those who seek to build drive tourism in regional areas are outlined.

2. Literature review

2.1. Drive tourism

Drive tourism is defined as 'travel by any form of mechanically powered, passenger-carrying road transport, with the exclusion of coaches and bicycles' (Prideaux & Carson, 2011, p. 3). It thus includes day trip and overnight travel in a family car or a rental car, travel in four-wheel-drive vehicles (4WD), travel in RVs, and touring by motorbikes. In the drive tourism area, topics studied to date include, but are not limited to, the following areas: the key factors shaping successful touring routes (Denstadli & Jacobsen, 2011; Hardy, 2003), the changing nature of the drive market (McClymont, Thompson, & Prideaux, 2011), travel patterns of drive tourists (Lohmann & Zahra, 2011; Wang, Fang, & Du, 2011), generic motivations for undertaking drive tourism (Hardy, Carter, Beeton, Olsen, & Horneman, 2006; Zhou & Huang, 2016), the safety issues drive tourists face (Wilks & Pendergast, 2011; Wu, 2015), the culture of the drive tourist market (Hardy, Gretzel, & Hanson, 2013) and the key issues shaping the sustainability of the sector (Fjeistul & Fyall, 2015; Sykes & Kelly, 2015).

The modes of transport constitute one way to classify the market. A number of researchers have adopted a segmentation approach to inform their work: for example, 4WD drive tourists' experiences in Australian deserts (Carson, Prideaux, Coghlan, & Taylor, 2009), car-based tourists' spatial patterns in Scotland (Connell & Page, 2008), the risks of using mopeds in Queensland, Australia (Blackman & Haworth, 2013), the caravanning tourists and their changing characteristics (McClymont et al., 2011), and other vehicle users' travel behaviour (e.g. motorhomes, fifth wheelers, campervans) (Wu & Pearce, 2014). In addition to the categorisation based on the type of vehicles, the tourists' demographic background has often been used to classify the market: for

example, the age of the drive tourists (Connell & Page, 2008; Pearce, 1999; Viallon, 2012), the family composition, especially families with young children and the international markets (TRA, 2012; Wu & Pearce, 2014). The group of special interest for the current study is the grey nomads, the senior RV tourists in Australia. In this study, RV tourism, as a subset of drive tourism, is described as 'a form of tourism where travellers take a camper trailer, van conversion, fifth wheel, slide-on camper, caravan or motorhome on holiday with them, and use the vehicle as their primary form of accommodation' (Hardy & Gretzel, 2011, p. 194). RV tourism has been an important component of the tourism industry in many Western countries and is now gaining popularity in some emerging countries (Liu et al., 2012; Prideaux & Carson, 2011).

2.2. The senior RV tourists

There is a coherent body of contemporary knowledge about the RV market in Australia. The prevailing consensus is built on a combination of both the grey literature in Australia and academic studies at a worldwide level. Government documents, consultants' reports and the presentation of the RV market by industry associations and groups provide much non-academic information at a descriptive level (CMCA, 2015; CRVA, 2013; TRA, 2014). There is evidence that the market is large. For example, it is estimated that there are 70,000 to 80,000 RVs travelling on an extended tour around Australia at any one time (Baillie, 2011). For another example, by the end of January 2015, there are a total of 586,585 registered campervans and caravans in Australia (BDO Advisory, 2015).

Within the overall RV market, the senior segment is a visible and important sub-group. The senior market, however, is not homogeneous. It is possible to identify several sub-groups. For example, there are 'full-timers', who are on the road on a permanent basis, while there are many RVers spending only a few months of the year touring the country. Further subtle segmentation can be undertaken according to the origin of the visitor (domestic versus international), the degree of their trip planning (planners versus non-planners), the self-contained level of their vehicles, the tourists' economic well-being, the age of the participants and the preferences for socialisation (social enthusiasts versus independent travellers) (Hardy & Robards, 2015; Prideaux & Carson, 2011). Nevertheless, it is agreed that mostly the RV market in Australia consists of predominantly domestic tourists over 50 years old, a substantial portion of whom are retired (Onyx & Leonard, 2005).

Studies about the senior RVers suggest that they prefer travelling to regional and remote communities, thus bringing important economic and social benefits to small towns (Holloway et al., 2011). They not only spend money in the communities, but can sometimes offer valuable skills for rural towns and in areas stressed by natural disasters (Onyx & Leonard, 2007, 2010). Communities, especially those which present themselves as 'RV friendly', are the biggest beneficiaries from the Grey Nomads' arrival (Pearce & Wu, 2013). In Australia, state government bodies, especially in Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia, where the warm winter weather attracts considerable RV activity, seek to encourage this market (Carson & Schmallegger, 2011; State of Queensland, 2012). Most state bodies and many local councils have adopted strategic plans focused on providing infrastructure and facilities, identifying tourism routes and promoting safe, responsible driving behaviours.

Academic analyses of the senior market, especially studies concerning the sub-culture and the participants' travel motivations, offer several insights. In early work about senior nature-based tourists, Backman, Backman, and Silverberg (1999), Moisey

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