Tourism Streams and Mobility in Uusimaa Region in Southern Finland

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Abstract

While tourism research has paid a great deal of attention to motivational studies and reasons for destination selection, there is a lack of empirical research of the travel behaviour and mobility patterns of visitors. The objective of this study is to identify and measure the spatial and temporal travel patterns of visitors to Uusimaa region in Finland. In this regard, the study aims to increase understanding of the travel routes and sites visited on a regional level. The method used for the empirical part of the study was distribution of mobile devices to overnight visitors and analysing the results of GPS tracking in connection with a questionnaire. The results of the study will be available in November 2012 and they are expected to provide tourism stakeholders in the region with insights into innovative co-operation and partnership possibilities as well as practical improvements in the quality of tourism services available.

Keywords: tourist mobility; tourist mobility measurement; destination management.

1 Introduction

Uusimaa region is located on the south coast of Finland by the Baltic Sea. The region is home to approximately 1.5 million people. A majority of them inhabit the three main cities, Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa, in the only metropolitan area of Finland. In addition to these cities, the region includes a number of small towns, villages, islands and countryside amounting to a total of 28 municipalities and hundreds of tourist attractions in an area of 16,058 km^2. (Uusimaa Regional Council 2012)

From a tourism point of view, Uusimaa region contains a wide tourism resource base with many attractive destinations, receiving approximately 4 million visitors annually (Uusimaa Regional Council 2012). Although the main focus of tourism activity is on the cities, the surrounding rural area has its own merits. There are plenty of opportunities to combine even a city stay with visits to nature sites. Almost everything is within a relatively easy reach with public transport. The cities of the region provide a vibrant urban cultural scene and many of the small former manufacturing towns give visitors a glimpse of the industrial heritage of Finland.

The accessibility of Uusimaa region is good as it has the best transport connections in the country, not least because the main international airport of Finland, Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, is located within the city of Vantaa. The main railway and bus stations are located in Helsinki as are the passenger harbours. The main highways, including the one towards the Russian border and to St Petersburg, run through Uusimaa region. Although the location of Finland in relation to other countries is not

unlike that of an island, the accessibility from Russia is convenient. The new high-speed rail connection between Helsinki and St Petersburg takes just over three hours.

Uusimaa is a focal point of tourism interest in the country, as over a quarter of all bed nights registered in Finland is spent in the region (Visit Helsinki 2012). While the majority of all overnights in Espoo and Vantaa are by domestic tourists, the largest share of overnights registered in Helsinki is by international visitors. Important countries of origin of foreign visitors staying overnight in all three cities are Germany, Great Britain, Estonia and Sweden, but the clear leader in the foreign overnight statistics is Russia. (City of Vantaa 2012; Visit Espoo 2012; Visit Helsinki 2012). In fact, Finland has become the most popular destination country for Russian travellers. In year 2011, Finland received a total of 7.3 million visitors of which 45 % came from Russia. A third of the Russian visitors, i.e. approximately a million travellers, visited Uusimaa region. (Finnish Tourist Board 2012; Statistics Finland 2012.) There has been an increased global interest in the Russian outbound market as it is one of the fastest growing in the world, hitting double digit growth rates in recent years (European Travel Commission 2010; UNWTO 2012).

In order to cater for the lucrative Russian market, and for other tourist segments as well, there needs to be more insight into what the travel patterns and routes of the visitors are like. In recent years, there have been interesting new developments and applications of the tourist mobility measurement systems and GPS (global positioning system) tracking devices. With improved GPS technology, mobile devices (e.g. mobile phones with added programming) can be used to track locations accurately and reliably. It is possible to obtain information about trip origins, destinations and the routes travelled. The method used in this study was a spatial-analytical one in which GPS-enabled mobile devices were used to gather data about the absolute location and/or relative positioning of the sampled visitors at a given time in order to track their travel patterns. While mobile tracking of visitors is not a new method in tourism and there have been previous studies about tourist mobility in a destination (e.g., Ahas, Aasa, Silm & Tiru 2007; Alzua, Gerrikagoitia, Aranburu, Peralta & Espinosa 2010), it is a novel measurement tool to Uusimaa region in Southern Finland.

The technology used in this study is Ctrack -vehicle tracking system, a web-based vehicle tracking solution to provide visibility and control over mobile assets. The system was originally designed to be simple-to-use and instinctive, to enable businesses to better manage their fleet operation by knowing the exact location and status of vehicles in real-time. (Ctrack 2012)

According to Ctrack (2012) the Online is suitable for car, van, bus and commercial vehicle fleets of all sizes, providing immediate operational benefits and financial returns. Although Ctrack Online was developed to track vehicles, it can also be used to track visitors. Even though the system initially enabled only the follow-up of an individual device, the supplier allowed further programming of the software in order to accommodate the needs of the tourist mobility measurement study in Uusimaa region. For the purpose of this research, further programming meant adding the questions of demographics and emotions, and summaries of them.

The objective of this study is to understand the spatial and temporal travel patterns of visitors to Uusimaa region as well as to identify the routes travelled and links between destinations in order to improve the quality and availability of tourist services in the region. To put it into more practical terms, the aim of the study is to find out what tourists do in a destination, what sites (and combinations of sites) they visit, in what sequence and for how long. Also, it is of interest to see if the tourists only visit sites within the city they are staying in, or whether they also venture to nearby destinations. The results of the study are intended to be used for generating joint product ideas and marketing strategies with actors across city and municipality borders. Indeed, one of the expected outcomes of the project is an increase in networking and co-operation between different tourism stakeholders in Uusimaa region.

2 Discussion

"*Destination management is a subject of growing importance as destinations compete to provide the highest quality of experience for visitors; and to manage the impacts of tourism on host communities and environments.*" (UNWTO 2007).

According to UNWTO (2007, 1) a tourism destination is a physical space where tourists spend at least one night. A tourism destination contains for example attractions, public and private amenities, and tourism related resources. Furthermore, a destination has an image and character, is accessible and has prices for transport to and out of and services in it.

In general, we know the number of visitors to a destination as well the most visited attractions in a destination. There have also been a lot of tourism impact studies in various destinations from economic, environmental and social aspects. So far, however, little is known about tourist movements and travel patterns within a specific region. Rare exceptions are the recent studies undertaken in Spain which focused on measuring tourist mobility on a regional level (Alzua, Gerrikagoitia, Aranburu, Peralta & Espinosa 2010) and emotions experienced while visiting events (Alzua-Sorzabal, Fuentetaja & Peralta Ariza 2012).

Measuring tourist mobility can give valuable additional insight into tourism research regarding visitor behaviour and mobility patterns (Alzua, Gerrikagoitia, Aranburu, Peralta & Espinosa 2010). The information acquired can benefit both the businesses as well as the public sector stakeholders of the tourism industry. For instance, destination management organisations (DMOs) can get new information about the most visited sites and combinations of sites visited by tourists in the region. Moreover, the availability and application of this type of knowledge can lead to the improvements in route maps and signposts.

The background research for this study was conducted from November 2011 to April 2012. The empirical part of the study took place during the summer peak season (May-September) 2012. The raw data is to be compiled and analysed in October 2012. The results and analysis of the empirical part will be available by the end of November 2012.

The stakeholders of the project were Uusimaa Regional Council and Finnish Tourist Board, cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa as well as HAAGA-HELIA University of

Applied Sciences. The views of the stakeholders of the project played a decisive role in determining what types of visitors and attractions to track in the study. In order to start the empirical part of the study, the tourist attractions were selected by exploring tourism websites of the main cities in southern Finland (such as Helsinki, Tampere and Turku, which were seen as potential destinations to be visited and combined during one day of travel) and several travel portals (such as Tripadvisor, Trivago, Lonely Planet, Virtual Tourist) as well as websites specialising in events and ticket sales. After the selection process, the attractions were entered to Google Earth.

The sample consisted of 1,600 voluntary guests staying at selected hotels in Uusimaa region. Mobility tracking devices were assigned to selected guests of five hotels, of which three were located in Helsinki, one in Espoo and one in Vantaa. The hotels selected to this research were three or four star chain hotels popular among both domestic and international visitors. The decision to go for the mid-range accommodation option excluded such extreme visitor groups as young travellers who are more prone to stay in hostels as well as high-end visitors who prefer more luxurious accommodation. Each hotel had a student of HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences stationed in the lobby. The students performed the tasks of research assistants and took care of the sample gathering through recruiting voluntary guests to participate in the study, distributing the mobile devices to them and offering guidance on the use of the devices as well as asking background questions included in a questionnaire that will be cross-analysed with the data gathered via the mobile device. When choosing the participants, the research assistants aimed to reach hotel guests corresponding to the visitor profile of the capital region. The questionnaire included background questions regarding country and city of origin, travel companions, purpose and duration of trip.

The sample participants at hotels were given a GPS tracking device which they were asked to carry for one day. At the end of each sample day, the participants returned the devices to the student assistants at the hotels. The device was able to track the visitor every two minutes and record the location. The participants were asked to answer the questions provided when visiting a new site. Information about the spatial and temporal travel patterns of the visitors was derived from automatically stored raw data (GPS coordinates and time stamps), which was transmitted to a database for further analysis. This information will be combined with the questionnaire data results. A concrete result of the project will be a visualisation of the data in form of a visitor flow map presenting the movement of tourists within the region and its attractions.

Once the results are finalised, the study is expected to give valuable insights into the mobility and behaviour patterns of visitors to Uusimaa region. For the purpose of this study, the sample time was just one day even though the visitors might have stayed in the region for a longer period of time. Another limitation of the study includes the fact that it only tracked visitors staying overnight in hotels. Thus, all same-day visitors were excluded from the study, even though they make a very sizeable segment of visitors to the region. Also, for the same reason, visitors staying with friends or relatives were excluded from the study. Due to the fact that the mobile devices had to be distributed to and collected from the participants, tracking these two previously mentioned visitor groups would have been difficult. Moreover, the language of the

mobile device/questionnaire might have been a problem to at least some of the respondents if it was not in the native language of the visitors being tracked. However, measures were taken to accommodate the Russian visitors as two of the student research assistants stationed at the hotels were native Russian speakers. The importance of Russian visitors to the region was thus acknowledged. In the future, more developed applications on the mobile device could include a component with the ability to track emotions and experiences created by destinations visited. Further research possibilities also include the application and use of the devices and the mobility measurement system on a national level.

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