

A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF LITHUANIA: PERCEPTIONS OF GERMAN TRAVEL CONSUMERS

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Abstract. *This paper compares potential German travel consumers' perceptions of Lithuania. The research was conducted at ITB-Berlin over a six year period. Some of the specific topics that were investigated included: (1) impression of Lithuania as a tourist destination; (2) perceived safety of Lithuania; (3) frequency of information received from various sources. In general, it was found that Lithuania was perceived as a safe place to visit, and the impression of Lithuania as a travel destination, improved steadily over the last six years.*

Key words: *travel consumers, Lithuanian tourism, German tourists*

Introduction

German travel consumers are an important target market in the tourism industry because they have the time and resources to travel great distances and spend significant amounts of money. In former Eastern bloc countries such as Lithuania, German tourists have long been a steady source of tourism income. Consequently, Lithuania businesses can learn from the experiences of German travel consumers as these businesses try to attract travelers from across the globe. This paper reports the results of a longitudinal research project focusing on German travel consumer's perceptions of Lithuania. Potential travel consumers were interviewed at ITB Berlin in 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006 to assess their views of Lithuania as a travel destination.

Lithuania

Since Lithuania's independence in the early 1990's, tourism has been an important part of the economy. Lithuania was the first country from the Baltic States to become a member of the World Tourism Organization, and significant public and private resources have been spent to ensure that Lithuania meets EU tourism standards. The number of businesses engaging in tourism activities has grown steadily. Currently, there are approximately 748 firms involved in tourism officially registered in Lithuania (Lithuania Department of Statistics,

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2007). The importance of this industry to Lithuania is reflected in the government's tracking of tourism statistics, which it now publishes through government websites. (See for example, (1) Lithuania State Department of Tourism statistics and (2) Lithuania Department of Statistics—main tourism indicators.)

As can be seen from Table 1, tourism income has almost tripled in just six years (2000-2006). During the same period, the Lithuanian economy, as evidenced by GDP, has grown at a similar rate, and tourism has consistently accounted for approximately 4% of the total GDP of the country. In comparison, tourism accounted for less than 3% of GDP in the United States during that same period (Mattingly, 2008).

Tab.1. Tourism Income as a percentage of GDP.(2000-2006)

Year	Tourism Income (in US\$M)	GDP (in US\$M)	Percentage of GDP
2000	391	11434	3.41
2001	569	12159	4.2
2002	695	14175	4.9
2003	722	18615	3.87
2004	804	22547	3.56
2005	951	25971	3.66
2006	1057	30092	3.51

Sources: Lithuania State Department of Tourism, 2008a and Lithuania State Department of Tourism, 2008b

While the tourism industry has remained a consistent percentage of GDP, the trend in the number of inbound visitors is less clear because of a change in the method of counting visitors. Since Lithuania became a member of the European Union on May 1, 2004, no statistics are kept on European Union visitors. However, it appears that the number of inbound visitors has been fairly steady and on an increasing trend since Lithuania joined the EU.

The significance of the German market to the Lithuanian tourism industry can be seen in a variety of ways. First of all, Lithuania's close proximity to Germany coupled with the low cost of travel makes Lithuania an inexpensive destination for German travelers. In addition, the size of the German tourist market

Tab. 2. Number of Inbound Visitors by Year (2000-2006)

Year	Visitors (in millions)
2000	4092.1
2001	4195.2
2002	3999.4
2003	3635.2
2004	2019.1*
2005	2080.4*
2006	2317.3*

*Sources: Lithuania Department of Statistics 2007, *Excluding EU and EFTA countries*

suggests that small changes in German travel consumers' perceptions of Lithuania as a travel destination may result in significant changes in tourism income. Germany provides Lithuania with the largest number of visitors by any country in Central Europe. For comparison purposes, in 2003 (the last year that separate statistics were kept on EU countries), German tourists constituted 9 times the number of visitors from France, 7 times the number of visitors from Italy, and 6 times the number of visitors from Denmark or Sweden (Lithuania State Department of Tourism, 2004b). When looking at accommodation statistics, Germany had the highest number of visitors in 2004, 2005 and 2006 and had 4% higher market share than the next highest country—Poland. This is especially interesting since Poland borders Lithuania, and tourists can easily drive across the border to Lithuania. German visitors staying in accommodations in Lithuania in 2006 had the largest market share of any country (see Tab. 3).

Tab. 3. Lithuania Distribution of Guests of Non-residents in all Accommodation Establishments Top Ten Countries (2006)

Country	Number of Guests (in thousands)	Market Share
Germany	116052	17.3 %
Poland	89308	13.3%
Latvia	48727	7.3%
Russia	43361	6.5%
United Kingdom	38928	5.8%
Finland	33546	5.0%
Estonia	28094	4.2%
Belarus	26689	4.0%
Italy	25910	3.9%
Sweden	22709	3.4%

Source: Lithuania State Department of Tourism, (2007)

Rationale

The authors conducted research on Lithuania tourism in 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006. The 2000 study investigated German travel consumers' perceptions toward Lithuania and provided the baseline for this longitudinal study. The original study included a question assessing the safety of travel in Lithuania. Even since the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001 and Spain in 2004, safety issues have been a major concern in the travel industry. In light of this, it is particularly interesting to see how perceptions of safety in Lithuania, a country where no terrorist attacks have occurred have changed over the study period. The data were gathered at ITB Berlin because this forum provided ready access to a cross-section of German travel consumers.

Survey Implementation

The researchers believed the most effective way to complete this research was to interview German travel consumers at the International Tourism Exchange-Berlin (ITB Berlin). ITB Berlin is known throughout the world as the leading trade fair for the global tourism industry. Its leading position as an international meeting place is evidenced by the fact that almost two-thirds of its exhibitors and just over 36% of trade visitors come from outside Germany. This makes ITB Berlin the main forum for communication and marketing for the worldwide tourism sector, attracting more exhibitors and trade visitors every year (International Tourism Exchange 2006a). In 2006, ITB recorded a total of 162,823 visitors, over 68,000 of which were consumer (versus trade) visitors. Of the 10,856 exhibitors at ITB, 8,727 were not German (International Tourism Exchange, 2006b).

The importance of ITB to travel consumers is readily apparent. With the diversity of exhibits at ITB, consumers can obtain information about most major countries in the world. More than three-quarters (76.6%) of those German travel consumers attending ITB reported that they plan to book travel following the trade fair on the basis of the information they received (International Tourism Exchange 2006a).

The Methodology

Questionnaire

The data were gathered through questionnaires which consisted of fifteen to seventeen questions. The consistency in questions and overall theme allowed us to assess changes in German consumers' perceptions of Lithuania. The questionnaire was developed in English, translated into German and then back translated into English. In order to assure there would be no errors, this whole process was done a second time, with completely different translators.

In addition, the questionnaire was then tested for relevancy and validity with a set of bilingual subjects. At each stage, corrections were made to the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedure

Because the researchers were interested in surveying German travel consumers with an interest in Lithuania, a convenience sampling technique was used to solicit survey participants. Interviewers were stationed near the general public desk of the Lithuania Tourist Board booth for varying periods of time over each of the three days in which consumers may attend ITB. German travel consumers leaving the Lithuania Tourist Board public desk were asked if they would be willing to participate in a short survey. Those who agreed were then asked to respond to the survey questions. While ITB-Berlin is designed around German travel consumers' needs, other nationalities may attend this travel fair. To ensure that we were gathering data only from German consumers, our demographic questions included a question asking the home country of the respondent. All of our respondents were from Germany.

Analysis and Results

A combined total of 462 questionnaires were analyzed for this study. In regards to the majority of the questions, a simple frequency distribution was very informative. The results illustrated some positive scenarios in regards to German consumer perceptions of Lithuania as a tourist destination over the last six years.

*Tab. 4. Impression of Lithuania as a travel destination
(listed as mean impression rating with 1 as Very Good who had visited Lithuania in
2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006)*

	2000	2002	2004	2006
Mean	3.06	2.5	2.21	2.1

Mean impression ratings: 1= very good; 2=good; 3=poor; 4=very poor; 5=no opinion

As can be seen in Tab. 4, the mean has been declining which indicates a more favorable impression of Lithuania as a travel destination during the study period. While the overall rating has improved from poor to good, there is still room for improvement. The LITB still needs to work on trying to improve the image of Lithuania on the part of the German travel consumer.

*Tab. 5. Perceived level of safety felt as a travel destination
(listed as mean impression rating with 1 as Very Good who had visited Lithuania in
2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006)*

	2000	2002	2004	2006
Mean	3.04	2.36	2.24	1.84

Mean impression ratings: 1= very good; 2=good; 3=poor; 4=very poor; 5=no opinion

In comparison to some other travel destinations, Lithuania's perceived level of safety has greatly improved during the study period. In fact, in 2006, it is perceived as being between very good and good. This is in great contrast to 2000, when it was perceived to be poor (see Tab. 5). This is very good news for the Lithuanian Tourist Board (LITB). The LITB appears to be making headway in regard to getting a positive message about safety across to the German travel consumer.

*Tab. 6. Frequency of information received by source
(listed as means with 1 as Very Often who had visited Lithuania in 2000, 2002, 2004
and 2006)*

	2000	2002	2004	2006
Mailings	0.52	0.52	3.41	1.83
LITB	0.74	2.18	1.82	1.32
Travel Office	1.36	2.63	3.21	2.09
Media	2.09	1.78	2.34	1.78
Friends	1.8	2.35	3	1.78
Other	2.18	2.22	0.89	1.11

Frequency: 1=very often; 2=often; 3 occasionally; 4=never; 5=don't know

In regards to the frequency of information received, (Tab. 6) there is little consistency in the ratings from year to year. However, it appears that German travel consumers rely heavily on the LITB as a source of information. German travel consumers received information from the LITB often or very often in each of the study years. In addition, respondents stated that they received information from the media often in each of the study years. Mailings were a frequent source of information in 2000 and 2002, but decreased in the last two study years. While still frequent sources of information, respondents tend

to receive less information from travel offices (agents) and friends than from the other sources discussed above. This would also be good news for the LITB because German travel consumers stated that they receive information very often from LITB. Therefore, the LITB has significant opportunities to help shape perceptions of German travel consumers about Lithuania.

Conclusions

The German travel consumer is very important to Lithuania. Overall the study provides good news for the LITB, as the perceptions of Lithuania are improving. However, there is still room for improvement by the LITB because the ratings still have not reached the highest level.

From a managerial point of view, it is recommended that part of the LITB's advertising budget be devoted to informing potential German travel consumers about Lithuania and what the LITB has to offer Lithuanian visitors. This could easily be accomplished through the use of the media. They could then have ads showing Germans having a good time as well as testimonial type ads from previous visitors. Additionally, the LITB should make sure that it provides timely and plentiful information to German travel agents who can then pass this information along to their clients. The LITB should also organize special low cost trips for German travel agents and should even consider providing free trips to Lithuania for representatives from the larger German travel offices.

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