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Northern Lights Chase Tours

Experiences from Northern Norway

ABSTRACT This study is focused on the development of northern lights chase tourism, a particular type of northern lights tourism consisting in guided tours that have the goal to find good views of the northern lights.

The theoretical approach is based on the understanding of the northern lights experience as a visual experience, and on the recognition of the tourism practitioners as the driving force to new product development. The empirical case concerns the recent development of northern lights chase tourism in the Tromsø area, in Northern Norway.

The aim of this study is to investigate the tourism practitioners' understanding of the northern lights chase tourism, with a particular focus on the development of such a form of tourism as a source of positive memorable experiences. The research questions are: How is the northern lights chase tourism experience described by the tourism practitioners involved in its development? What are the recognized potentials, critical factors and challenges in terms of memorability?

On the basis of the empirical results, this study indicates actions directed at fully exploiting the identified potentials, and meeting the relative challenges, and considers critically the adopted theoretical approach proposing directions for future research.

KEYWORDS northern lights, guided tours, designing tourism experiences, Tromsø, Norway

Introduction

Although the northern lights have been objects of study as a natural phenomenon and a potential and powerful national icon since the eighteenth century, it is only recently that their tourist appeal has been recognized (Fara 1996; Friedman 2010). To the researcher's knowledge, there are few scientific contributions concerning northern lights tourism.

This study is focused on the development of northern lights chase tourism, a particular type of northern lights tourism consisting in guided tours that have the goal to find good views of the northern lights. Because of this focus, this study's underlying understanding of the tourism experience is connected with the tourism experience as an essentially visual experience (Urry 2002).

According to the classification advanced by Hjalager (2010) of the different categories of tourism innovation, northern lights chase tourism can be viewed as a case of product innovation that is directly observable by the tourists. The empirical case investigated in this study concerns the recent development of northern lights chase tourism in the Tromsø area, in Northern Norway. Still following the classification by Hjalager (2010), the investigated case can be regarded as a case of the development of a product that is new to the specific destination.

This study is influenced by the practice-based perspective on strategy (Corradi *et al.* 2010), and the related recognition of the practitioners as those who elaborate new products in response to external trends and on the basis of their creativity, values and competence (Hjalager 2010). The aim of this study is to investigate the tourism practitioners' understanding of the northern lights chase tourism, with a particular focus on the development of such a form of tourism as a source of positive memorable experiences. The research questions are: How is the northern lights chase tourism experience described by the tourism practitioners involved in its development? What are the recognized potentials, critical factors and challenges in terms of memorability?

On the basis of the empirical results, this study aims to indicate actions directed at fully exploiting the identified potentials, and meeting the relative challenges. On the basis of the empirical case, this study aims also to consider critically the adopted theoretical approach, and indicate relevant complementary and/or alternative theoretical approaches that might be used in the future study of such an under-investigated form of tourism.

In the next section this study's theoretical background is presented. The third section describes the research method applied to investigate the empirical case of northern lights chase tourism in the Tromsø area. The re-

sults are then presented and discussed in the fourth section. The last section presents the conclusions, outlining the main findings and indicating some directions for further research.

Theoretical Background

This section presents the study's underlying understanding of the northern lights chase experience as a visual experience, and its perspective based on the central role recognized to the tourism practitioners. In addition, the elements that are identified in the tourism literature as being particularly relevant in relation to the creation of positive memorable tourism experiences are presented as the basis of the discussion of the empirical case. The section concludes summarizing the main ideas behind this study.

Northern Lights Chase Tours as Visual Experiences

This study has its underlying understanding of tourism in its conceptualization as a visual form of consumption (Urry 2002). During their holidays tourists search those images that are associated to the destination they are visiting, often trying to re-create a set of photographic images of what they have seen in tourist guides, brochures and documentaries (Jenkins 2003; Moir 2010).

Such an understanding of the tourism experience that privileges the visual aspect seems to be particularly suitable for the study of northern lights tourism. Northern lights chase tours in particular can have a significant relevance in the Arctic tourism experience, because they assist the tourists in their search for the image of what can be qualified as the icon of the Arctic.

On the other hand, it can be noted that this focus on the visual aspect of the tourism experience has been subject to criticism by several scholars. Some scholars have argued that such a view excludes the tourists' intellectual activities, bodily performances and their substantial interrelation (Perkins & Thorns 2001; Obrador Pons 2003; Rakić & Chambers 2012).

Another type of criticism concerns its neglect of the social dimension of the tourism experience. This aspect can be seen in relation to the recently new approach to the tourism experience as a co-created experience where the tourists have a central active role, also in their interactions with the other people with whom they come in contact in a sort of tourism experience network (Binkhorst & Dekker 2009).

The Perspective of the Northern Lights Chase Tourism Practitioners

As mentioned in the introduction, this study is influenced by the practice-based perspective on strategy, sometimes referred to as strategy-as-practice. Such a perspective has its basis in the acknowledgment of the situated aspect of knowledge and the view of practice as reflective doing (Chia 2004; Corradi *et al.* 2010).

According to such a perspective, the core of a strategy consists essentially in the actual activities of the practitioners and in their knowledge at work (Jarzabkowski & Spee 2009; Corradi *et al.* 2010). The practitioners are viewed as those who “do the work of making, shaping and executing strategies” (Whittington 2006: 620).

Following such a view, it can be said that the tourism practitioners are the ones who make, shape and execute the strategies involved in tourism development. Such an approach directs the focus at the practice itself. This aspect is evident in some studies concerning tourism experiences in natural environments, with the guides viewed as “reflective doers” (Rantala 2010; Rantala *et al.* 2011).

In terms of tourism product innovation, the position of the strategy-as-practice perspective can be related to the recognition of the practitioners as the actors, who develop innovative products, individually, as entrepreneurs, and/or in groups, as part of local networks (Hjalager 2010).

Such considerations can be related to the case of the tourism practitioners operating in northern lights chase tourism. Adopting the strategy-as-practice perspective to the study of the development of the northern lights chase tourism implies then an understanding of such a development as the result of the practitioners’ activities based on their creativity, values and competence, stimulated, acquired and renewed through their experience, and on their working alone, as entrepreneurs, or in groups, as members of formal and informal local networks. According to this view, it is their doing that is the prime motor of the development of northern lights chase tourism as a new form of tourism. As a consequence, the practitioners’ experiences and reflections are viewed as being among the main driving forces of the development of northern lights chase tours as an innovative tourism product, and, therefore, their investigation is considered particularly relevant and is chosen as the focus of this study.

Northern Lights Chase Tours as Potential Memorable Tourism Experiences

Due to a lack of studies about northern lights tourism, concepts and find-

ings from studies about other forms of tourism, especially nature-based tourism, are adopted to identify the potentials of the northern lights chase experience. The following sections present such concepts and findings as relevant factors in relation to the memorability of the tourism experience. These factors will then be used in the discussion of the empirical case.

The tourism experience

The recognition of different types of tourists and tourism experiences (Cohen 1979) can be a starting point for the identification of the central aspects of the tourism experience.

Tourism experiences can be perceived as pure recreational activities, while in other cases they can satisfy the tourists' desire of experiencing something different and/or something particularly meaningful. In the latter case, the literature adopts the concept of *existential authenticity*. It has been noted that the modern tourist tends to view nature as being capable of offering experiences comparable to escapes from the bounds of the normal every-day life of the mundane society (MacCannell 1973; Fredrickson & Anderson 1999; Wang 1999; Reynolds & Braithwaite 2001; Curtin 2005; Reisinger & Steiner 2006). An example of this is offered by a study about wildlife tourism that compares nature-based experiences to the North American Indian rituals of "vision quests," travels undertaken by people at a critical moment of their lives and characterized by dream-visions interpreted as a sort of guardian spirits (Almagor 1985).

Also in the case in which the tourism experience is perceived as a recreational experience, it still has the potentials for being a particularly profound experience. Two concepts adopted in the wildlife tourism literature can be relevant in this regard: the concept of *intensity*, the excitement generated by the experience, and the concept of *uniqueness*, the sense of experiencing something special and unusual (Reynolds & Braithwaite 2001). A concept from the tourism literature that is related to the concept of *uniqueness* and to the mentioned aspect of escaping everyday life is the concept of *contrast*, the extraordinary aspect of the experience (Tarssanen & Kylanen 2007).

Other aspects indicated in the literature as relevant for positive tourism experiences are: *story* and *interaction* (Tarssanen & Kylanen 2007). The term *story* indicates the thematisation of the experience. This includes all the types of narratives that can be used by the tourism actors in their interactions with the tourists, especially before and during the tourism experience (Mossberg 2008; Bryon 2012).

The element of *interaction* refers to the relation between the tourist and the guides, and can be relevant in regard to the mentioned aspects of *story* and also to the concept of *individuality*, the tourist's perception of the ex-

perience as being tailor-made and the consequent sense of privilege (Tarssanen & Kylanen 2007). The role of the guides has been the object of study in nature-based tourism, especially in relation to the required skills and training needs and their responsibility in challenging situations (Ballantyne & Hughes 2001; Markwell 2001; Haig & McIntyre 2002; Beedie 2003; Reisinger & Steiner 2006; Rantala *et al.* 2011). The studies by Holloway (1981) and Cohen (1985) identify different roles the guides are expected to play. A guide can play the role of a *pathfinder*, a person who leads the way in an unfamiliar environment, the role of a *mentor*, a person who directs the tourists into their travel understood here as a sort of spiritual pilgrimage, and also the sub-roles of *information-giver*, *entertainer*, and *disciplinarian*. More recently, the role of the guides has also been studied in terms of their performative competence involving their interpretations through verbal and bodily communication and their ability to create intense moments through narratives and creative affordances (Jonasson & Scherle 2012)

The concept of *interaction* can also be referred to the interaction among the tourists. In this context, some findings about wildlife tourism show that the minimization of *the size of the tourist group* can have positive effects (Schanzel & McIntosh 2000; Smith *et al.* 2011).

The concept of *interaction* can have a further application with regard to the possible positive effects of the *interaction with the objects/subjects of interest*. This factor has been studied in wildlife tourism and related to the interactions of the tourists with the animals (Schanzel & McIntosh 2000; Smith *et al.* 2011).

Designing memorable experiences

Tourism design can be seen as a process of constant shaping of an event within a distinct span of time and in a clearly circumscribed place (Ek *et al.* 2008). According to such a view, the tourism actors, during their practice, assist the tourists in their experiencing a particular event and they do so designing the experience, from the pre-visit to the post-visit phase.

The creation of memorable experiences is an important aspect of tourism (Pizam 2010) and the literature has identified some elements that can be taken into consideration when designing experiences in order to create favourable conditions for memorability.

In the pre-visit phase, the tourists' *expectations* are considered particularly important in regard to the memorability of the tourism experiences. It has been suggested that it is important to establish expectations that are realistic and achievable (Tung & Ritchie 2011).

During the experience, the *delivery of pleasant surprises* is suggested as one of the design principles for memorable experiences (Tung & Ritchie 2011).

Another process that is considered to be relevant in terms of memorability is *recollection*, remembering the experience in the post-experience phase (Tung & Ritchie 2011). In this context, photographs and souvenirs play an important role, encouraging the memory of the experience and representing tangible evidence of it (Gordon 1986; Markwell 1997; Tung & Ritchie 2011; Wilkins 2011). The tourists' photographs are considered to be an essential part of the so-called "circle of representation," the process through which marketers and tourists develop the image of a tourist destination (Jenkins 2003).

Another element that is considered to be relevant for the memorability of the experience in the post-visit phase is *encouraging repeated visits* (Tung & Ritchie 2011).

This Study's Position

The research questions that are posed in this study are based on the concepts exposed above and here summarized.

As an underestimated form of tourism and a relatively new product, northern lights chase tours can be studied focusing on the elements that, according to the literature, contribute to the memorability of a tourism experience and the possibilities to influence such elements while designing the tours. At the same time, due to the novelty of the case, the exploitation of such possibilities are thought to be heavily influenced by the practitioners' conceptualization of the northern lights experience and by their experience as tourism providers and managers. As a consequence, this study adopts the practitioners' perspective and the research questions are developed and investigated as described in the following section dedicated to the method.

Method

The investigated empirical case concerns the northern lights chase tourism in the Tromsø area, in Northern Norway. Although northern lights tourism has been present in such an area for a relatively long time, it is just recently that it has begun to be on the agenda of the regional and national Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). The Tromsø case was selected because northern lights chase tours have been recently discussed in several forums among the local tourism actors. This is assumed to have stimulated reflections and considerations on its conceptualization as a tourism experience, its potentials and the critical factors pertaining to its development.

Secondary data was collected through the consultation of the local newspapers, marketing material about Tromsø, and statistical material elaborated by the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO).

Primary data was collected in the period February–April 2012. Two

Table 1. Information about the interviews

Type of respondents	Specification of the role	Number of respondents
Providers	manager and guide	1
	manager, driver and guide	5
	guide	1
	driver	1
DMOs	manager	2

semi-structured interviews were conducted: one with a manager of Visit Tromsø (VT), the tourist destination management organization of Tromsø, and the other with a manager of Northern Norway Hospitality (NordNorsk Reiseliv, NNR), the tourist destination management organization for Northern Norway. One informal interview with a bus driver was conducted during an observation. The rest of the interviews were conducted with the managers and the guides of the firms offering northern lights chase tours. Table 1 shows the information concerning the type and the number of respondents.

Three observations were performed. Two were conducted while participating in two northern lights chase tours: one with one of the most experienced northern lights chase tours providers, and the other one with the biggest local tourism actor offering such tours. The third observation was performed while participating in a meeting entitled “Northern Lights Guide Course” organized by Profitable Winter Experiences (Lønsomme Vinteropplevelse, LV), a regional project network for the development of winter tourism.

Except for the mentioned informal interview, data from the interviews was based on interview guides, recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed. The data from the observations was registered in the form of notes just after the observations in the case of the northern lights chase tours, and during the observation in the case of the “Northern Lights Guide Course.”

The primary data of this study is about 6 of the 10 providers identified in the Tromsø area (see below). Three have between 12 and 5 years of experience of northern lights chase tours, and the others have started more recently.

Results and Discussion

This section starts by presenting those results that can assist the reader in contextualizing the phenomenon subject to the study, the development of northern lights chase tourism. The section continues relating the results to

the research questions and discussing them on the basis of the ideas presented in the theoretical background.

The Context

Northern lights tourism in Tromsø

Tromsø is a Norwegian city counting approximately 68,000 inhabitants and located above the Arctic Circle. Its location in relation to the so-called northern lights belt, an area shaped as an oval strip around the North Pole, is favourable for viewing the northern lights.

The northern lights have been used by the tourism actors operating in Tromsø for a long time, but only recently have more efforts been directed towards its exploitation to market Tromsø as an attractive and unique winter destination. Such efforts have taken place together with an increased international attention that Tromsø has received since 2008. As reported by all the respondents during the interviews, two episodes were decisive. The first one is the NASA's statement in regard to the particularly active northern lights season in the years 2011–2013. Such a statement was followed by the publications on the Internet of a picture and a film about the northern lights in Northern Norway. The second episode concerns a documentary by the BBC: *In the Land of the Northern Lights*. Such a documentary was filmed in 2007 and broadcast on British television for the first time in 2008.

The NASA's statement and the BBC documentary have directed much attention to Northern Norway as a tourist destination and, possibly as a consequence of this, the area has been internationally qualified by the international press as among the best places to view the northern lights. In such a context, Tromsø was reported as being the most easily reachable city that can be used as a base camp for northern lights tours.

An increase in the number of the Tromsø hotel stays and the relative revenues was observed in the winter season 2011/2012 and, according to the interviewees and to the information reported by the local newspaper, such an increase may be related to northern lights tourism.

Northern lights chase tours

The northern lights chase tours offered in the Tromsø area differ according to the means of transport, the inclusion of additional services, the duration and the price.

Most of the companies use buses, and two companies use boats. All the tours include some form of refreshments: warm drinks, snacks and light meals. Some tours include warm clothes that can be used by the tourists during the trip. Two companies offer a digital picture taken during their

tours, and, during some tours of one of these companies, a professional photographer takes portraits of the tourists with the northern lights in the background and sells them through his private firm. In the case of two companies, tourists are given some gadgets, a badge and a glowing band with the firms' logotypes respectively. The duration of the tours varies from four and a half hours to eight hours, for a maximum of 300 kilometres. The price varies from 700 to 1,325 NOK, with some variations according to the season.

The providers of northern lights chase tours and the destination management operators

According to the secondary and primary data, and adopting the definition of northern lights chase tours in accordance with several of the comments made by the respondents (see below), the number of the northern lights chase tours providers is ten.

Five providers are one-person firms. In these cases the owner-manager also acts as the driver and the guide. Two providers employ helpers during the busiest period. The interviews revealed that these actors consider it difficult to find good employees, especially when the company's profile is characterized by and built around the person of the owner. This is for example the case of a company whose owner-manager is very active on the Internet, both on Facebook and on TripAdvisor.

One company, consisting of one person, provides tours and is also an incoming tour-operator.

Three companies are run by couples. Two of them conduct the chase tours by boat and they employ several people to perform all the needed tasks. Such companies have a large capacity, around 40 persons.

One provider is a company with three regional managers, of whom one works exclusively with northern lights chase tours during the winter, together with 12 trained guides and several professional drivers. This company can serve large groups of tourists. On one occasion it arranged a tour for 685 participants. With groups of approximately 50 people, this company usually uses three employees, one driver and two guides. In addition, two or three people are employed during the sale of the tickets and the boarding. According to this provider, the possibility to rely on such a broad spectrum of employees guarantees good service as it allows each employee to concentrate on one specific task. During the interview, it was said that the idea to offer chase tours was initiated by one of the managers, who had the personal experience of having difficulties in showing the northern lights to some private guests. With cloudy weather in town and all the chase tours by the small providers fully booked, he realized that tourists have very little chance

to view the northern lights. He concluded thinking that a large company could have been able to offer such tours every evening to a varying number of tourists, satisfying then a need that the present structure of the supply did not satisfy.

The other tours are conducted with minibuses, with a capacity that varies from 7 to 12 persons.

In regard to the relation between the providers, the data shows that the three most experienced providers tend to have a particular open dialogue. A fourth provider seems also to be integrated within such a group. Three of these actors share a sales office in town, and, during an observation, it was noted that two of them were in contact by phone in order to help each other to find good weather conditions. During the interviews such behaviour was indicated by several providers as happening relatively often, within this group of four and also with other providers.

When asked about their relation with VT, three providers reported the episode of a conflict at the beginning of the northern lights season concerning the use of the car parks along the road that is used during the tours. The providers reported how this conflict was positively solved thanks to the open communication among the providers and also the intermediation of VT.

In regard to the relations with the regional tourism organization NNR, almost all the providers described their relation with NNR as positive, although not so close as with VT. The latter aspect is in accordance with the role of NNR, which, as pointed out by the manager during the interview, works mainly through the local tourism organizations.

Secondary data showed that a two-day seminar was arranged by LV in March and, although there was a section dedicated to the northern lights experience, none of the Tromsø northern lights chase tours providers participated. Interviews showed that the providers thought that the invitation came too late and that the seminar was arranged in the busiest period of the year, in the middle of the northern lights season. A provider seemed to be particularly frustrated when reporting his/her feeling of being excluded. At the second seminar arranged in May, the “Northern Lights Guide Course,” two of the northern lights chase tour providers were already operating and one who was planning to start in the season 2012/2013 participated.

The Experience

What is a northern lights chase tour?

Although there is a relatively homogenous understanding of what a northern lights chase tour is, there is no full agreement on the classification of the tourism products that can be related to the view of the northern lights. The

interviews revealed that not all the providers agree about the classification of the local products presented by VT based on the identification of two types of tourist products: northern lights chase tours and northern lights experiences. Several northern lights chase tours providers commented on the fact that some tours are described as chase tours, while, in their opinion, they do not have the characteristics that a chase tour has to have in order to be qualified as such.

Still in regard to the understanding of northern lights chase tourism as a distinct form of tourism, the data suggests that the most experienced providers are particularly concerned about this aspect. This can be illustrated by the following comment by one of these providers:

We can't oversell the northern lights! Lately, everything has something to do with the northern lights and the northern lights chase! Just as an example: northern lights chase tour using a kick-sled ... this can't be qualified as a chase! Such differences should be made clear to the tourists.

During two interviews the researcher had the impression that the experienced providers feel a form of ownership in relation to the typology of chase tours. This feeling seemed not to be related to any desire to be the only providers offering such tours or any fear of newcomers, but to the concern for the way the northern lights are exploited in the broader tourism context.

The data from the interviews show also a concern by the tourism actors about some unofficial and rather improvised tours arranged by the local taxi drivers. This is a source of worry for the tourism actors, who point out the risk of low quality tourism experiences that might affect the companies operating within northern lights tourism and also the image of Tromsø as a tourist destination.

Existential or recreational experience?

Secondary data shows that there is a broad understanding about the potentials of the northern lights experience and the relative individual differences. Several local newspaper articles report the tourists' perspective on northern lights after participating in chase tours. An article dedicated to the northern lights chase tours arranged by one of the interviewed providers reports the guide's words: "Someone cheers, others cry, others are completely silent."

Several providers reported of having being in contact with tourists that viewed the experience as pure recreation and also with tourists who attached to it a much deeper meaning. During an interview, a provider commented on such differences. He/she reported the case of a couple who told

him/her that the choice to participate in a northern lights chase tour had a special meaning for them, because the wife had recently been diagnosed with cancer and that was probably their last holiday together. The possible deep meaning the tourist might attach to the tour is viewed as something private by the tourism providers and out of their control.

All the interviewed guides turned out to reflect on the role they have in such tours and made comments that can be related to the role of the northern lights chase guide as a combination of pathfinder, information-giver, disciplinarian and entertainer. The tasks they reported to be important for being a good guide were the ones concerning the information the tourists receive about the phenomenon and the local area, including the invitation to come back during the summer, the care and attention in order to keep the tourists safe, in relation to the street traffic, and comfortable, in relation to the low temperatures, and the ability to create a nice and relaxed “holiday atmosphere.”

Using the terms introduced in the previous section, the empirical data shows that, in their relation with the tourists, the guides tend to stress the aspects of contrast, uniqueness and intensity. An aspect that was observed during the tours in which the researcher participated, was that when the northern lights were visible, the guides had a very explicit reaction showing wonder and also surprise. While these reactions seemed to be sincere, it could be suggested that they were somehow exaggerated, in an attempt to influence the tourists in a positive way.

Relevant aspects during the visit

Among the aspects reported by the providers as important for offering a good tourism experience, the size of the group was mentioned by all the small actors.

The interviewed providers that offer tours for small groups consider the limited size of the group a better condition for a good northern lights experience. One provider was particularly clear in this respect. The informant reported the following episode:

Once I was with my group of tourists, driving out from town looking for good conditions to view the northern lights ... and suddenly I see two big busses parked and all the people out with their glowing vests on. I didn't stop. I drove on to find a quieter and not crowded place. I don't like this kind of tourism, it's not what I regard as quality tourism.

The same person added that he/she prefers to work in small-scale tourism but, at the same time, recognizes that it would be impossible to serve all the

tourists coming to Tromsø to view the northern lights without facilities and activities for mass-tourism.

The manager of one of the companies with large capacity commented on the aspect of experiencing the northern lights in large groups as follows:

Many people think that the northern lights experience must be something to be experienced when you are on your own ... but to be completely alone in the Arctic wilderness ... how is this possible? For most of the tourists it's not realistic. But joining a tour, also with many other tourists, it can also be amazing! I'd compare it to being at a stadium, during a football match; you have hundreds of people around you ... and your team scores ... isn't that fantastic? A strong emotion, no matter how many people you have around, is still strong! With northern lights it can also be the same.

The aspect of the importance of the limited size of the groups and the relative effects, dealt with in the literature, is not confirmed by the data from the observations. During the tours the researcher participated in, the way the tourists behaved and reacted to the view of the northern lights was similar. During the drive the tourists seemed to be in a waiting mood, silent, looking through the windows and listening to the information the guides were giving. When the busses stopped, they went out and most of them reacted with surprise and wonder. Some of the tourists were visibly enthusiastic, commenting aloud and pointing at the sky. A comment that was reported by four respondents and that well describes the tourists' reactions was about tourists acting like children, meaning with this the cheerful reaction of surprise in seeing something new. Some of the tourists who seemed to travel on their own had a less explicit reaction. It was observed that after a while they tended to approach someone, the guide or another tourist, and comment about the northern lights. Such behaviour was particularly evident in one case when a light meal was served around a campfire.

The latter element, the tourist's desire to share the experience with someone else and, more in general, the interaction between the participants, can be interpreted as an indication of the importance of the social dimension of the experience. Such an aspect was ignored by almost all the providers during the interviews. Only one provider commented in this regard, saying that for him/her it is important to create an atmosphere that facilitates the conversation among the tourists, and ideally, the beginning of friendships across borders. Another provider commented in regard to the interaction among the tourists, but limiting his/her comment to the difficult cases when few tourists with a negative attitude can influence the rest of the group.

In terms of interaction between the guides and the tourists, no significant differences between the observed small-group tour and the large-group

tour were observed. It was noted that the tourists received as much attention by the two guides during the tour in a large group, as the tourists by the guide/driver during the tour with a small group. This can be explained by the fact that during the small-group tour the guide-driver tended to be very busy with several tasks.

In many cases the tourists are interested in taking pictures of the northern lights and, although to a different degree, all the tours include some kind of assistance by the guides in order to set their camera. The guides' skills in photography were identified as particularly relevant by the participants in the "Northern Lights Guide Course" arranged by LV. As mentioned before, in one case, an additional service of photographic portraits is available during the tours. During the observation of one of these tours, an informal interview with the bus driver, who had been working with the company during many tours with several different guides, revealed that the tours where the photographic portraits are taken are particularly appreciated. In regard to this, the manager of the specific company commented:

When the guides take these portraits it's like they bring the northern lights down from the sky, making them accessible to us ...suddenly the tourists are in touch with something extraordinary, that is usually out there ... in space ... it's powerful!

In addition, the manager expressed his/her interest in using the pictures taken during the tours on the company's Facebook page, as an effective way to create positive word-of-mouth communication. In regard to the role of the pictures within the tours, the photographer agrees with such a view, although he/she is more focused on the significance that the pictures can have in the post-experience phase for the individual tourist, as a kind of support to reflect and re-elaborate his/her memories.

The pre- and post-experience phases

All the respondents commented on the importance of the expectations tourists have before arriving in Tromsø. In particular, the respondents expressed concern about the not controllable sources of information. Such a concern was evident during the discussion at the seminar arranged by LV. The data from the observation shows that there is a general misunderstanding of the information by the international press about the cycles of the northern lights. The tourism actors said that the recent focus on the phenomenon has contributed to presenting only the next two years as favourable for viewing the northern lights. This is not entirely true as, due to its location in relation to the northern lights belt, Tromsø is only slightly

influenced by the peaks of the period 2011–2013.

The providers stressed the responsibility the DMOs have in shaping the tourists' expectations. The use of the northern lights in the marketing of Tromsø and Northern Norway is viewed as positive by most of the providers. Such an activity is viewed as contributing to attracting tourists that might be interested in participating in northern light chase tours. At the course arranged by LV it was pointed out that such promotional activities should also contribute to spreading correct information and form realistic expectations. The more experienced providers commented that, although viewing the organizations' task in this sense as important, their businesses are not directly influenced by it, as they have already been active in northern lights tourism for a while and have their own communication channels to reach potential tourists.

The contact with the tourists in the pre-experience phase was described by a provider as an important part of his/her job that is relatively easily conducted through the Internet, especially email and Facebook. In regard to this aspect, two providers had a different opinion, commenting on their inability to spend time on being active on the Internet.

The data shows that the post-experience phase is relatively neglected by several providers. Only three of the contacted providers use photographs and souvenirs. On the other hand, all the providers reported that they stimulate tourists to come back to Tromsø in the summer, telling them about what the area and their company can offer them.

Challenges

During the interviews, the tourism actors were asked about the challenges facing northern lights tourism and northern lights chase tourism in particular. Some factors were mentioned by all the respondents: the weather, the safety and the contact and interaction between the guides and the tourists. The challenge in regard to the weather concerns the necessity of clear skies in order to view the northern lights. All the providers said that they check the local weather broadcast, some also during the tour through mobile phones, but that they rely mostly on their own knowledge about the local areas and on tips by colleagues.

Safety is understood in relation to difficult driving conditions in case of bad weather. In this regard all the providers said that in some cases the tours might be cancelled for safety reasons. The providers who use the buses commented also about the risks pertaining to the only available option to park close to the main road. VT indicated the need to have more and broader parking facilities. The municipality was described as having the responsibility for preparing such car parks already when the first snow comes

in autumn.

The element of the contact with the tourists was mentioned mainly in connection with the role of the guide. According to three of the interviewed providers such a relation has to be nurtured already in the booking phase. These providers mentioned their contact on the Internet before the tourists' arrival as being essential for giving accurate information about the tour, especially in regard to the low temperatures that the tourists might experience. For all the providers the contact during the tour can be summarized with the idea of being good hosts. A provider said that he/she always gives 100 per cent of himself/herself during the tours, and another provider commented similarly saying that:

Your performance as a guide makes the difference. You have to perform: if there is any chance to view the northern lights also at the end of the tour, you have to be out there longer ... so they can see them! And you have to smile of course, and be nice no matter what ... after all they are here to have a good time!

Another challenge that is related to the role of the guide and that was mentioned during the interviews and discussed during the course arranged by LV has to do with knowledge. Relevant knowledge is considered to be competence in terms of scientific understanding of the northern lights as a natural phenomenon and also the capacity to explain it and also tell the related myths and stories. Other relevant knowledge is considered to be generic tourist information about the local area. The training of the guides is viewed as essential, especially in those cases where the northern lights are not visible. All the interviewed guides were asked about their experience in such situations. The answers were relatively homogenous, referring to the habit of warning the tourists from the very beginning about such an eventuality, and the attempt to focus on other aspects of the tours, such as the beauty of the landscape and the culture-historical presentation of the local area.

Conclusions

The empirical data shows that the tourism practitioners involved in the development of the northern lights chase tourism describe the relative tourism experience as a complex and memorable experience. Many of the elements identified in the tourism literature as relevant for positive memorable experiences are broadly recognized by the tourism actors.

At the same time, it can be noted that some elements, although recognized, are not fully exploited. In particular, the possible existential aspect of such tours and their social dimension are elements that could be better

exploited and are therefore identified as critical factors for the future development of northern lights chase tourism.

On the practical level, it seems correct to say that the inclusion of the identified critical factors in the design of the tourism experience could gain from a more market- and tourist-based approach to tourism product development. A segmentation of the tourist market could be particularly important as the starting point for developing northern lights chase tours as recreational activities and/or existential experiences. As the results show, the tourism actors recognize the existence of different types of tourists, but at present such recognition is basically intuitive. Research is necessary to gain a better understanding of the different types of tourists so that distinct and relevant market segments can be identified. Considering the challenges implicit in the investigation of the identified critical factors, in particular the potentials in terms of existential experience, it can be suggested that the research could be performed applying both unobtrusive methods, such as observations, and introspective methods, such as analyses of the tourists' spontaneous annotations in diaries, as done for example in Volo (2009). It can be added that it seems unrealistic to think that the individual small actors have the resources to plan, perform and evaluate such research, so that in this context the local DMOs can be considered to play a decisive role, possibly in collaboration with academia.

In regard to the social dimension of the tourism experience and the related issue of the group size, it seems correct to say that, as commented above on the aspect of the northern lights chase tours as a recreational and/or existential experience, a better understanding of the different segments is necessary.

The empirical data shows also that the practitioners identify in the information concerning the northern lights to which the tourists are exposed before their visit as a particularly challenging aspect of such a form of tourism. They think that such information can be inaccurate and can influence the tourists' expectations and, consequently, the memorability of the experience. Such a possible negative influence can be met through the training of the involved actors that are in contact with tourists and a focused communication campaign by the DMOs.

Still in regard to the critical factors for northern lights chase tourism development that emerged from the data, it seems correct to say that a clearer differentiation by the DMOs of the chase tours from other tourism products that include the view of the northern light is needed, together with a broader attention by the practitioners to the pre- and post-experience phases. The latter could be done for example through a more strategic use of the different Internet-based communication channels, which at pres-

ent is done by only a few providers.

In addition to the mentioned practical implications, the above considerations can be significant in relation to the theoretical approach that can be adopted in future studies about the northern lights tourism. The findings of the investigated case suggest that focusing on the visual aspect of such a tourism experience might be limiting. The underlying understanding of the northern lights chase tourism experience as an essentially visual experience could be integrated with concepts and perspectives from other approaches. An example is the mentioned co-creation approach that might contribute to the inclusion of the social dimension of the experience. Such an approach could also contribute to giving to the tourists a more active role in the tourism experience. The latter element could be particularly relevant when related to the tourists' creative activity of taking pictures of the northern lights.

The aspect of the active role played by the tourists can be also related to the role of subjectivity in the tourism experience. This implies a shift of focus from the objects of observation to the subjective negotiations of meaning as the determinants of the tourism experience. Such a shift is one of the main dimensions along the post-modern understanding of the tourism experience (Uriely 2005), and can be related to the mentioned critical factor of the potential existential aspect of the northern lights experience. In this context some insights could be gained through the inclusion of contributions from the study of ephemeral phenomena and seasonality in landscape research (Brassley 1998; Palang *et al.* 2005). The inclusion of contributions from such a field of study seems also to be in accord with some of the comments reported by all the tours providers concerning the contrasting views of the Arctic natural landscape.

Still on a theoretical level, the empirical results show how the development of the northern lights chase tourism as a new form of tourism depends on and requires initiatives and actions by the individual practitioners as well as by the local DMOs. Such an aspect indicates the complementary role of the two theoretical schools of entrepreneurship and innovation systems identified in Hjalager (2010) as being usually adopted in the study of tourism innovation.

On the basis of the empirical data and in addition to the elements mentioned above, the following issues are identified as potentially relevant for the development of northern lights chase tours, and northern lights tourism in general, and are suggested as objects for further research: The role of photography, from the pre- to the post-experience phase; The challenges in regard to the broad spectrum of competence required for northern light guides, from scientific dissemination to storytelling.

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