

LIFE-CYCLE STAGES IN RELIGIOUS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A COMPARISON OF CASE STUDIES

Genoveva Millán Vázquez de la Torre

Leonor M Pérez Naranjo

Universidad de Córdoba

gmillan@etea.com, lperez@uco.es

Rogelio Martínez Cárdenas

Universidad de Guadalajara, México

The religious tourism is a strategic development option for many destinations. The World Tourism Organization (2008) estimates that between 300 and 330 million people travel annually for religious purposes, creating an economic impact of around 13,000 million euros. And these numbers kept rising in the last few years.

However, although there is a growing body of literature relating to religious tourism, few studies have compared religious destinations for purposes of benchmarking or developing life-cycle theory. The examination of religious tourism development in four Catholic sanctuary towns, founded after the apparitions of the Virgin Mary, in Europe, by Ambrosio and Pereira (2007) provided a starting point. These authors analyzed Banneux (Belgium), Fatima (Portugal), Knock (Ireland) and Lourdes (France). The variables that help understand the ways in which these towns have developed are: (i) the seers' level of consecration; (ii) the construction of a basilica to celebrate the centenary of the apparitions; and (iii) the facilities for overnight visitors. Finally, the authors propose a life-cycle model that adds two variables to the Butler's model: (i) construction of religious structures; and (ii) accommodation and commercial facilities.

The aim of this paper is to examine the development of Catholic tourism in different Mexican and European regions and assess related life-cycle implications. In addition, recommendations are made for developing the potential of the Mexican religious regions, and for advancement of the religious tourism destination life-cycle concept.

First, the development of religious tourism in three Mexican Catholic destinations (*San Juan de los Lagos*, *Santa Ana de Guadalupe* and *Talpa de Allende*, in Jalisco) was analysed, based on in-depth document reviews, field visits and interviews with key informants. Specifically, semi-structured interviews with representatives of ecclesiastical institutions, local politicians and the business sector, all related to the religious tourism sector, were conducted in 2009. In total, 45 interviews, which were contrasted with documents, published and unpublished, and supplemented by statistical data of the Mexico's Tourism Ministry (*SECTUR*), the Jalisco Estate Information System (*SEIJAL*) and the Jalisco's Tourism Department (*SETUJAL*).

Second, the Mexican Catholic destinations were compared with the four European destinations analyzed by Ambrosio y Pereira (2007). Case studies and cross-case comparisons add strength to the analysis by revealing similarities and differences within and between New and Old World religious regions.

By comparing the religious destinations, critical success factors for Catholic tourism were identified and a life-cycle model was proposed.

The critical success factors for the development of Catholic destinations are: (i) the construction of religious buildings; (ii) the clerical support of the religious uniqueness of the destination; (iii) promote the development of accommodation and commercial facilities (for example, establishing religious activities, especially at night, and promoting the destination in other countries); and (iv) the localization and improvement of the accessibility of the destination compared with other religious tourism generators.

The life-cycle model for Catholic destinations should include: (i) the construction of religious structures (from a chapel to a large basilica); and (ii) the clerical recognition of the religious facts related to the destination (from an initial recognition to the canonization of a religious figure, a Papal visit and the Jubilee Year celebration). Both variables show, on the one hand, the temporary progression and, on other, the response to the Eucharistic demands. In any sacred destination, the religious phenomenon is revitalized when it is supported in one way or another by religious institutions.

Lourdes and Fatima have most favoured the development of the key factors and confirm the proposed life cycle model.

In *San Juan de los Lagos* religious tourism has progressed into a mature stage but not a fully mature stage. This religious destination has great potential for continued growth, but with important challenges such as the coordination between religious and secular institutions, the participation of local population in the development of the hospitality industry and the construction of a large basilica.

In *Talpa de Allende* there is a set of conditions that have obstructed the development of religious tourism. The main challenges include the coordination between religious and secular institutions, the participation of local population in the development of the hospitality industry and the improvement of accessibility.

Santa Ana de Guadalupe is at a developing stage. The local population is increasingly involved in the development of religious tourism and a medium-sized basilica is under construction. The development of the hospitality industry is an important challenge.

Finally, a hypothetical Catholic tourism destination life cycle is established differentiating four stages (incipient, developing, maturity and declining). However, more comparisons across many regions will be required to advance this model and determine how it can be applied to religious tourism development and sustainability.

The life-cycle model is not intended to be predictive or explanatory, it is a generalization based on observation that holds value for strategic tourism planning. Religious tourism destinations have to set their own course, but benchmarking against more developed regions and consideration of the life cycle will help them formulate vision and strategic planning.