

The religious beliefs as parameter of food choices at tourist destination

The case of Mykonos

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Abstract

Religious beliefs are a basic parameter of culture that affects all aspects of a person's life and consequently his eating habits. The diet of tourists at destination is an essential and unique component of the overall tourism product and the momentum of the modern dietary concept is enormous. Eating habits determined by the religious beliefs of tourists and followed during their journey and their stay in the selected destination is an important and emerging sector in tourism industry. The case study and the research concern the island of Mykonos, Greece. It is characterized as a "cosmopolitan" tourist destination, known for its "night life" and the opportunity of "getting away from every day's routine life), that attracts tourists mainly from Europe and the rest of the world.

The research was conducted from August 24th to October 10th 2014. This primary and quantitative survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire distributed to tourists with different religious beliefs in six different areas of the island. The questionnaire consisted of 30 different questions was distributed to 140 tourists, but finally 122 of them responded to the survey. The results of the survey show that the island of Mykonos attracts a "special" type of tourists, who do not want to follow the specific diet of their religion. According to the results, the overwhelming majority of tourists choose traditional recipes and the Greek cuisine regardless of religious beliefs and dietary restrictions or particularities, giving the impression that during their holidays want to escape from their daily eating habits and enjoy the Greek gastronomy. Most of them stated, that the religion does not play any role in the selection of Mykonos as a journey destination and do not associate the religion with holidays and eating habits.

Introduction

Over the centuries, many different factors shaped the dietary habits of the people all over the world, which even today affect their diet in their place of residence, but also during their holidays. The most important factors are the culture and the religion. According to UNESCO

(1982), culture includes all those elements that distinguish societies and various groups within them, such as human rights, human values, lifestyle, manners, customs, arts and traditions, religion and cultural heritage. All of the above elements affect human behavior and define activities and behaviors in everyday life and all its aspects. Therefore, they shape the eating behaviors and habits.

Whatever the base and the core of the religious ideologies, it seems to affect not only the spiritual world of believers, but also their daily lives. Their diet is not an exception and in the context of religious rules and rituals there are strict or flexible rules that believers should abide (Moirá, 2009: 76; Moirá et al. 2012). The degree of compliance with the above rules depends on the general rules of every religion, the specific religion branch, the local religion society with its culture and, of course, the wider social and family environment of each believer independently. Religious dietary rules provide two parameters through which two dietary precepts are applied: a) Fasting that is expressed by the deliberate and planned abstention from certain foods or from all foods and products of modern dietary and b) Specific and fully delimited eating habits that are different from or against the daily habits of the society. Certainly, the dietary rules of each religion are provided in either a strictly compelling way or in a more flexible and loose one leaving them to the discretion and disposal of the believers to follow (Moirá, 2009: 76).

The selection of food during the journey and the stay at destination and during tours and excursions to various points of interest is considered by tourists themselves important and an integral part of tourist activity (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Long, 2004). The expense of tourists for their diet and in general for food including drinks is a large part of total tourism expenditure that reaches or exceeds one third of it (Hall and Sharples, 2003). That expenditure represents half of the income earned by food companies annually (Tasty Greece, 2015).

On the other hand, the gastronomy and the eating habits of each destination may affect the food preferences of visitors. This relationship, as Kivela and Crofts (2006) argue, plays a leading role in the way that tourists experience their stay at destination stressing that some travelers would like to return to this destination to taste the unique local specialties.

Religious beliefs and diet of tourists

The culture and the religion are responsible for the food choices of tourists, as their religious beliefs affect the consumption of food during holidays. Particularly, Jews mostly choose Kosher foods during their holidays and avoid non-allowable foods, but do not hesitate to try non-Kosher dishes (Cohen and Avieli, 2004: 760). Islam is a code of life that defines the social behavior and the dietary habits of Muslims and significantly affects their food choices when traveling. A large percentage reaching 70% follows their religion rules strictly and consumes only Halal food (Minkus McKenna, 2007). However, the choice of food for tourists abroad and in particular in non-Muslim countries can be transformed from an enjoyable process to a risky wandering, because in many cases it becomes difficult to find Halal food (Henderson, 2009).

The food choices of tourists during their holidays have triggered the tourism industry, which creates and forms new products and services. These trends include the Halal and the Kosher tourism.

Methodology

Mykonos is one of the most popular islands of the Cyclades and is located 94 nautical miles southeast of Piraeus (Δήμος Μυκόνου, 2010a). The island and its economy are entirely based on tourism which thrived after 1960 and today is one of the most popular world tourist destinations. Mykonos is the first destination for foreign tourists and the sixth for Greeks in Trivago searches for 2014 (Μαλλάς, 2014). According to ΣΕΤΕ (2015), in 2014 the international tourist arrivals at the island's airport were 246.791 increased by 39% since 2013. The island has more than 170 hotels of all classes with over 9,200 rooms, and more than 300 rent a room and apartment businesses with over 4,700 rooms (ΞΕΕ 2015; Δήμος Μυκόνου, 2010b; Ελληνική Στατιστική Αρχή, 2009). Furthermore, according to Hellenic Port Association (Ένωση Λιμένων Ελλάδας, 2013), in 2012 585 cruise ships carrying about 658,000 tourists reached the island, making Mykonos the third most popular cruise destination in Greece after Piraeus and Santorini. The dining options vary and the list includes more than 170 restaurants and taverns, as recorded on the popular review website “tripadvisor”.

According to a research (Kamenidou, Mamalis & Priporas, 2009: 70), Mykonos attractions include the "night life", the luxury hotels, the opportunities for shopping, sightseeing and additionally the sandy beaches, the famous bars and restaurants and the presence of stars of Hollywood and generally the international show biz.

Mykonos is a cosmopolitan island with a great tourist infrastructure that can handle the special dietary habits arising from the religious beliefs of tourists. Simultaneously, the island is a haven of fun, party and extravagance making many tourists to stay awake all night "parting" and consuming large quantities of alcohol. The question is whether tourists want to follow the eating habits imposed by their religious beliefs during their holiday in Mykonos and whether the local food industry can meet such habits.

The main purpose of the survey is to record the degree of influence of religious food traditions in the food business selection process, in the search of a special menu and generally in the holiday destination selection process. Additionally, the survey aims to record the tourists' choices regarding their diet during their stay on the island, and to present the degree of satisfaction of their specific dietary needs that can be achieved by the local tourism industry.

The research limitations lie mainly at the disposal and the willingness of tourists to answer survey questions. It is widely known, that during holidays the majority of tourists would prefer to relax and stay calm rather than engage in something not related to their holidays. Some other restrictions are related to the fact that religion and traditions are personal data, which tourists may wish to conceal or not to give honest answers for various reasons. Another limitation is seasonality, as the island is full of tourists from different parts of Europe and the world within certain periods every season. (Sarchosis, 2015).

To achieve the survey objectives, a primary quantitative research was conducted using a questionnaire (Middleton, Fyall and Morgan, 2009: 165-166). The survey questionnaire contained 27 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions (Kotler and Keller, 2006). The survey lasted between August 24th and October 10th, 2014 and questionnaires were distributed in 6 different areas of the island. Apart from English, the questionnaire was distributed in Greek language. Totally 140 questionnaires were distributed and 122 were finally completed.

Results

The majority of the surveyed tourists are European including Greeks (58.2%). The rest are Asians (20.49%), Americans (14.75%) and them from Oceania (6.56%). Regarding religious beliefs, 18 different religions/faiths were declared totally. Christianity with all its doctrines is the dominant religion of the survey with 46.81%, which is explained by the fact that 58.2% of the surveyed are Europeans. Hindus follow by 10.66%, Buddhists by 3.28%, Jews by 2.46% and Islamists by 1.64%. Impressively big is the 10.66% of atheists and those who said they are not characterized by any religious doctrine that reaches 4.10%. The religious beliefs of tourists is one of the most important elements of the research, because they affect in a social and mental-spiritual way the human nature and determine many options related generally to eating and the consumption of food and beverages.

As far as dining is concerned, 49.18% (60 persons) chose restaurants, 33.61% (41 persons) chose taverns, 14.75% (18 persons) picked the residence/hotel restaurant, and 2.46% (3 persons) preferred fast food. The most preferred cuisines were the Greek by 55.73% (68 persons) and the Mediterranean by 29.51% (36 persons). The Italian cuisine were selected by 5.74% (7 persons), the Indian by 4.10% (5 persons) and the Japanese by 1.64% (2 persons). Other cuisine options (Arabian, French, Chinese) noted by 4 people.

When asked if there were any special dietary needs related to their religious beliefs, the majority i.e. 111 persons (90.98%) marked "no" and only 11 persons (9.02%) marked "yes".

In the next question, tourists, who previously stated that there are special dietary needs related to their religious beliefs, asked whether they follow those special dietary regulations during their holidays. Only 18.2% (2 persons) replied that they strictly follow them, 72.7% (8 persons) stated that they follow loose and 9.1% (1 person) follows them depending on whether there are options and possibilities.

Further to the above question, it was investigated how the specific dietary needs arising from any religion were met. People, who satisfied those needs, picked a restaurant with a specific type of

cuisine/menu (27.3%), prepared themselves their food (9.1%), or carefully chose dishes and delicacies from the menu of a restaurant company that comply with those dietary habits rejecting prohibited ingredients and food (63.6%).

Apart from religious beliefs, a question about special dietary needs during the stay of tourists on the island was posed. The findings reveal the absence of such needs at least during their stay on the island, as 76.23% of surveyed answered negatively. Vegetarianism was chosen by 13.11%, while 6.56% chose the local cuisine. Also 1.64% chose Hindu food, 1.64% chose to fast occasionally and only one person (0.82%) chose Kosher food. None of the remaining four options (national cuisine of the country of permanent residence of tourists, Vegan, Halal and Other) were chosen at all.

Lastly, about Mykonos as chosen destination by tourists with special dietary habits or needs, *75% of them did not reply as this connection seemed contradictory and did not know what to answer.*

Conclusion and Discussion

The island is characterized as a cosmopolitan tourist destination that attracts tourists mainly from Europe but also from all over the world. Referring to the survey on Mykonos, the results of the primary research are of particular interest. According to them, most of the visitors choose traditional recipes and the Greek cuisine regardless of religion and dietary restrictions or particularities giving the impression that during their holidays they need to escape from their everyday eating habits and experience the delightful journey of Greek and traditional flavors. Most of the surveyed (90.98%) stated that religion plays no role in selecting destination and diet and do not associate religion with holidays and eating habits. Simultaneously, the island service capabilities in offering special dishes and satisfying Halal and Kosher eating habits is between nonexistent and substandard and catering/food business and hotel/apartment owners do not see it as a factor of promotion and development of the local tourism product, as it is abroad. Another important finding is also the fact that the majority of tourists do not want restaurants that would offer such dishes giving the impression that they seek to experience the local authentic character of the island in all its forms including, of course, dining.

In conclusion, it is highlighted that the food choices of tourists and availability/offer of food services on the island need further investigation and attention. The tourism market trends and preferences change rapidly and constantly and Mykonos is proven to be a destination that follows the current trends and preferences and also is capable of creating and offering new and original tourist and culinary products and services.

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