

Tourists' perceptions of **world heritage** destinations: The case of **Guimarães**

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Objectives | Tourism is seen as one of the main drivers of socio-economic progress in both developed and developing regions. Although the evolution of tourism over recent years has been somewhat irregular, domestic and international tourism industries continue to expand in response to growing markets, stimulated by consumers' increased leisure time and relative wealth (UNWTO, 2011).

The competition among tourist destinations is fierce due to the increasing number of cities that envisage attracting international travellers. In this context, destination images are important as they influence people's perceptions of place and can affect their choices and behaviour.

The city of Guimarães, in the northwest of Portugal, is a world heritage site (UNESCO) since December 2001, and is preparing to host the European capital of culture (ECOC) in 2012. Taking the opportunity of this important event the Portuguese organisers of ECOC elicit as one of their main goals to enlarge and reinforce the city image. This exploratory study examines the image of Guimarães as a world heritage destination and the motivations underlying the selection of the city by tourists. Another research objective is to investigate the tourists' satisfaction on destination.

Methodology | The methodology was quantitative in nature and used a survey research design. A self-administered structured questionnaire was designed to obtain information on motivations and attitudes of tourists visiting Guimarães between December 2010 and August 2011. The first part of the questionnaire dealt with cities visited before or after being in Guimarães and tourists' motivations using 9 items that asked why they choose this specific heritage destination (such as touring, business, culture, sports). The second part explored tourists' perceptions using 21 attributes (such as monuments, gastronomy, historical centre, accessibility) measure by a Likert scale and at what level the city could be recommended by tourists (low, medium, high). The third part covered the demographic characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, education). Given the seasonality of tourism in the city under study, which also occurs elsewhere in the country, it was decided to apply the questionnaire in three different periods: December 2010 (corresponding to low season

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- 90 questionnaires); April 2011 (corresponding to mid season - 90 questionnaires); and, July and August (corresponding to high season - 96 questionnaires). A total of 300 questionnaires were received, of which 276 were properly completed and provided usable data.

Main results and contributions | The main cities of origin for tourists that visit Guimarães seem to be Porto and Braga. The preliminary results also suggest that being a heritage site and touring around the region have a significant effect on tourists' choice of Guimarães. Other motivations have little impact on tourists behaviour. The most relevant attributes of Guimarães as a destination image are artistic and monumental heritage, historical centre and residents' sympathy. In order to understand whether perceptions about the heritage destination (whether positive or negative) were influenced by the demographic background of tourists, the results are analysed by gender, age, education, marital status and season. The levels of tourists recommendation are extremely high denoting satisfaction regarding the visit and could attract more tourists to the city in the future due to the word of mouth effect.

Limitations | The sample size ($N = 256$) does not provide enough basis to extrapolate the major findings to other heritage cities both domestic or international. The present study is a snapshot, assessing tourist perceptions in a particular time (December 2010, April 2011, July/August 2011) and location (Guimarães). More studies are needed to cover more points in time and other locations to compare for differences and similarities between the images of heritage destination sites.

Conclusions | The survey results indicate that most tourists visiting Guimarães are aware of the city status as world heritage site. Another important reason is touring around the region which denotes problems in maintain the tourists for a long time in the city. However, the visitors highly recommend the city to friends and relatives. Previous expectations are confirmed regarding the relevant perceptions of Guimarães as a heritage destination, that is, the importance of the historical background (monuments, historic centre) and sympathy by residents.

The understanding of tourist's perceptions of a heritage destination is important for developing successful marketing strategies in promoting and positioning a destination. In the case of Guimarães the results are even more important, due to the organization of European capital of culture 2012; they could suggest actions and tools to reshape some weak and/or negative dimensions of Guimarães' image or to reinforce/reinvent a positive one.

It is expected that the current study will provide guidance for heritage tourist destination management in attracting/maintaining both domestic and international tourists.

References |

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