

TRAVELLING TO FRANCE

Outlines of a predicting model for flows of foreign tourists in cultural sites

SYNTHESIS

Knowing the world tourism flows and their geographic distribution is such an important economic issue that many governments and international organisations are highly interested in the subject. Tourism is, at least for two reasons, a strategical matter. First, because of the real or potential economic importance it represents. The annual publication of the visitor figures in every country, both in terms of numbers and value, is a good example of this interest. But tourism is not only a matter of figures, it is also a major issue in terms of cultural influence, being one of its representation. Having a cultural influence mainly relies on the so called «primary touristic resources», which means the inherited cultural heritage. This aspect has been very important since the 1990s thanks to the UNESCO and its action in favour of the oral and immaterial world heritage. Nowadays, the cultural influence relies more and more on the intellectual creation capacity of the place (cultural industries, design, fashion...). Using some trendy words as commonly done recently, we could speak of «soft power».

Considering how important these issues are, both from an economic and a geopolitical point of view, various and reliable data on tourism are available to think over the subject. The UNWTO (World Tourism Organisation) has ensured that these data are reliable and easily accessible. Therefore, considering the adequate technical conditions provided and the importance of tourism, we could think that many tourism flow models have been established. And yet, the comprehensive research on this subject has shown that it's not the case. Indeed, whereas some theoretical studies have been published, very few have actually been really implemented by developers or public institutions. A telling fact is that among the numerous reports and data published by the UNWTO, none of them deals with flow planning which could be implemented in different regions. In the so called «World tourism indicators» documents, the «experts planning method» has been preferred to a possible flow model to outline the coming trends.

This research has shown that it is technically possible to model the tourism flows to France and even more precisely the flows of urban cultural tourism to Île de France (Paris metropolitan area) getting satisfactory results from a statistical point of view. Thanks to this approach, the tourism flows to France can be planned. The data gathered through the EVE poll system, implemented by the Ministry of Economy, show that some countries, such as the USA or Italy, are very important as far as urban cultural tourism is concerned. Contrary to other kinds of tourism, such as seaside or entertainment, the urban cultural tourism is not linked to the distance or to the population of the countries of origin. This thriving tourism is based on some basic cultural affinity factors. For instance, why isn't India a major country of origin for tourists visiting France whereas Japan and China are? When studying the cultural tourism, it is really important to make the difference between first-time visitors and other tourists. Visitors coming from «traditional countries of origin» of the world tourism, such as Western Europe, Northern America and Japan represent the highest proportion of second-time (or more) visitors to France. On the contrary, first-time visitors come mostly from emerging countries or far away countries like Australia or New Zealand, which have recently opened to long distance tourism. Yet these visitors represent a major part of foreign tourists visiting the French cultural sites, and more specifically the Parisian ones. The available data show that the interest in «cultural» tourism decreases

with second-time visitors which are more interested in varied touristic options such as shopping, entertainment, shows...

The link between the tourists' profile (country of origin, previous knowledge of the country) and the choice they make is obvious and should enable the improvement of the planning model for cultural sites cross checking the foreign visitors flow model with the cultural sites they decide to visit. However, the decisions made by tourists in terms of which places to visit have not really been taken into account by cultural sites managers or developers whereas the cultural offer in various regions of the world is significantly increasing and a growing population has now access to foreign tourism. The principle of «choice among several places» is therefore the core of any reflexion on a country attractiveness. So, when the Louvre management authority wants to plan its visitor reception amenities for 2030, it cannot rely on the professional planning of foreign visitor flows to Paris. It is not only important to understand the elements leading to choose the Paris metropolitan area instead of other regions, but also to know the reasons why visitors should choose the Louvre instead of many other cultural sites in the same region.

The last part of this study consists in a research work on the existing theoretical frameworks about the tourists' choices among several sites. It appears that, while many studies already exist, especially about the establishment of models for cultural preferences, they are not accurate from a sociological point of view. Indeed, these studies are more marketing-oriented and are used to define products or holiday packages but are not sufficient to be used for a specific site and its own representation system which needs to be identified so as to analyse its potential and real attractiveness. Moreover, an accurate analysis grid of the visitors' choice should take into account the whole offer and prescription scheme which is a strong element in terms of decision making process, much further than the neoclassical theory of utility could account for.

Finally, this study has outlined three tools, a reference grid for choices among several sites which takes into account the various values of these sites, the different tourism flows and their specific features, and the various visiting possibilities (coordination pattern) linking a potential visitor to the cultural offer. At the crossroads of all these elements, the prescriber system becomes indicators of potential visits. This analytical grid doesn't aim at outlining a planning model of tourism flows for sites as it considers a visit to a site as the mix between several offers and prescribing systems generated by professionals and visitors themselves. Actually, the major contribution of economic sociology to the understanding of the site attractiveness doesn't consist in improving the econometric pattern methods built on the bases of the neoclassical theory but in enhancing the reflection framework taking specifically into account what it cannot consider. In order to feed the operational reflection of the site managers, analysing the prescribing mechanisms seems as important as implementing the classical modelling patterns.