

Hot Spring Goers: A Case Study of Raksawarin Hot Spring, Ranong Province, Thailand

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Abstract

This research focuses on the benefits sought by hot spring goers who visited Raksawarin hot spring in Ranong province, Thailand. It investigates their characteristics and identifies the set of benefits they sought, classifying hot spring goers based on these benefits. The data was collected from a set of questionnaires distributed to 384 domestic and international tourists at Raksawarin hot spring. The findings show significant differences as well as similarities in the benefits (social, relaxation, health, rejuvenation, and tourism) sought by hot spring goers in terms of nationality, frequency of visit, and type of travel party. Recommendations were made for hot spring goers seeking to improve their health and for the local municipality to better meet the needs of these tourists when they visit the hot spring.

Key words: *benefits sought, nationality, frequency of visit, type of travel party*

Introduction

In the past decade, the attempt to achieve better health while on holiday through relaxation, exercise or visits to spas has been taken to a new level with the emergence of a new and distinct niche in the tourist industry: medical tourism.

Some of the earliest forms of this specific kind of tourism were directly aimed at increasing the health and well being of the spa goers. When by the 18th century, 'taking the waters' became common, the numerous spas, which still remain in many parts of Europe and elsewhere, marked the effective start of local tourism (Connell, 2005). Since medicine was not well developed, hot springs represented a main alternative for medical treatment.

Goodrich & Uysal (1994) noted that many people in ancient times traveled to nearby rivers and mineral springs for the alleged curative properties and for relaxation. For example, we hear of such people dipping and bathing in the Nile River, in the Ganges River in India, and in the Yangtze River in China, to be Romans and English visited Bath in England to bathe in the warm springs and mineral waters and drink some of the water for its supposed health benefits

(Hembry, 1990).

Today, even though medicine has dramatically improved, many people still use hot springs for their medical treatment. Bathing in hot springs is known to be effective in improving blood circulation and the discharge of wastes, as well as relieving muscle pain, arthritis, and skin diseases (Pictorial Korea, 2005).

Thailand has many hot springs, the most famous ones being located in Northern Thailand, in places such as in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, and Lam Pang. Another prime hot spring location in Thailand is the Ranong province in Southern Thailand.

This hot spring will be the subject of this study. Located in Raksawarin Arboretum, it is ranked as one of the best three in the world because the water from this hot spring is pure, without the smell of sulphur. It is also considered the best in Thailand and is a popular family holiday destination for local people as it is surrounded by mountains and forest and has clean fresh air.. Raksawarin Arboretum and the hot spring are under the supervision of Ranong municipality and this location

More specifically, this research has the following two objectives: (1) to profile and identify the set of benefits sought by hot spring goers; and (2) to classify hot spring goers based on the benefits sought. The expectation is that this research can help the local municipality

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understand the diverse benefits seek by hot spring goers.

Literature Review

In all industries that provide goods and services to consumers, it is very difficult to satisfy all the needs of consumers. Consumers differ greatly in terms of their requirements. Consumers may desire different benefits from the same product, service or market offering. Benefit segmentation is a technique used to differentiate and group customers on the basis of the benefits they desire or seek. Benefit segmentation is the best way to group customers because the marketers will understand customer behavior and know the need and wants of customers (Koh, Yoo & Boger, 2009).

Backman (1994) stated that segmenting heterogeneous customers into homogeneous sub-groups on the basis of similar characteristics enables marketers to identify the similarities and differences among the customer groups. Grouping customers allow the marketers know the needs of customers in each group and then they can offer products and services to meet customer needs.

Lewis (1981) emphasized that the combination of sensory, rational, and emotional benefits that are expected from a product or service. All of these are the factors that support the needs of customer. If the customers get benefit from a product or service as they expected or more than they expected, they will feel good about that product or service and they will be a loyal customer of the organization. Bonn (1984) also grouped the market using a combination of the social aspects of benefits (e.g., to be with friends; to be with others who enjoy the same things) and other sensory experiences (e.g., to be in nature).

Frochot & Morrison (2000) noted that benefit segmentation is most helpful in designing and modifying facilities and attractions, vacation packages, and service quality management in tourism markets. When the marketers know the needs of a customer they can provide the

products and services to meet customer needs. Moreover, they also identified the instability of benefit segments over time, since trends and other situational factors may influence the benefits sought from a destination. Therefore benefits that customers need from a product or service may differ, depending on time and trends.

Nationality

Nationality is a widely used demographic descriptor in tourism studies. It is sometimes an observable characteristic with physical appearance, clothing styles, and tour party characteristics providing identifiable markers of nationality (Pearce, 2005). Each nationality has different needs, behavior, traditions, and culture, therefore the leisure pattern may be the same or different. Preferences for leisure activities, travel destinations, and entertainment are also nationality related.

Thai people nowadays have more stress due to their work, so muscle relaxation programs and stress-reduction programs can help them relax more (Ungsinan, 2009). The Taiwanese people are becoming more aware of the need to maintain good health by participating in tourism and recreational activities (Lee & King, 2008). Sheldon & Fox (1988) found that for Japanese, as compared with Canadian and American tourists, food service had a stronger influence on their destination choice. Ritter (1987) noted that Japanese prefer to travel in groups and take short holidays only, while Europeans are more of individualists.

Frequency of Visits

In business markets, people who stay away from home on business travel for five or more trips per annum are a highly attractive segment because their lifetime value is high. Given the lower frequency of leisure trips, a regular customer might return to a favorite leisure hotel infrequently. The long haul guest might only return once per year, if that. Indeed a highly satisfied customer may only return once every

five years, whereas the short break leisure guest might return to a favorite hotel three or four times per year (Bowie & Buttle, 2004).

Potential tourists have limited knowledge about the attributes of a particular destination with which they have no previous experience (Um & Crompton, 1990), while previous visits affect the familiarity with the destination, which in turn can result in accepting or rejecting a destination in a choice set (Crompton, 1992; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Furthermore, Gitelson & Crompton (1984) noted that past experiences reduce the risk of an unsatisfactory experience occurring. When tourists have a more enjoyable experience than expected they are more likely to return than otherwise (Petrick, Morais & Norman, 2001, & Ross, 1993).

Travel Party Types

The type of travel party has an influence on the needs and wants of hospitality consumers. Groups of travelers have different check-in, check-out, dining, drinking, meeting, and entertainment requirements compared to individual travelers (Bowie & Buttle, 2004). Many travel parties are however composed not of individuals but of couples, friends, and assorted family groupings. Senior couples dominate long-distance car touring in Australia (Pearce, 1999), small shifting friendship groups characterize backpacker travel (Buchanan & Rossetto, 1997), and family groups are common in zoos and attractions (Turley, 2001).

For family travelers requirements are becomes obvious. The travel and tourism industry has developed products and services including family suites, grand travel activities, and vacation packages for family reunions and weddings, to target this particular segment (Blum, 1996, Feder, 1996, Ira, 1991, Wong, Ap, & Li, 2001).

Research Framework

This research examines the relationship between each component of the independent variables including nationality, frequency of

visit, and type of travel party. These factors could influence the dependent variables which are the (social, relaxation, health, rejuvenation, and tourism) benefits sought by hot spring goers.

Methodology

This research used the descriptive research method to describe the results of this research. The quantitative method was used in this research. The researcher selected domestic and international tourists who visited Raksawarin hot spring, Ranong, Thailand as the respondents. The convenience sampling was adopted to conduct the survey in this research.

The research instrument in this research is a structured questionnaire. The two sections carrying questions in close-ended form constitute the questionnaire. The first section is about tourists' characteristics and the second section determines the benefit variables for the Raksawarin hot spring goers. The questionnaire is comprised of thirty-seven questions. The first section is tourists' characteristics and used the ticking of multiple-choice. The second section used Likert scale to measure the level of importance for visiting Raksawarin hot spring where 5 – extremely important, 4 – fairly important, 3 – neither important nor unimportant, 2 – not so important and 1 – not at all important.

In this research fifteen hypotheses have been constructed in order to investigate the differences in the benefits sought by Raksawarin hot spring goers based on tourists' characteristics such as nationality, frequency of visit, and type of travel party.

H₀1,2,3,4,5: *There is no difference in (social, relaxation, health, rejuvenation, tourism) benefits sought by hot spring goers in terms of nationality.*

H_a1,2,3,4,5: *There is difference in (social, relaxation, health, rejuvenation, tourism) benefits sought by hot spring goers in terms of nationality.*

H₀6,7,8,9,10: *There is no difference in (social, relaxation, health, rejuvenation, tourism)*

benefits sought by hot spring goers in terms of frequency of visit.

H_{a6,7,8,9,10}: There is difference in (social, relaxation, health, rejuvenation, tourism) benefits sought by hot spring goers in terms of frequency of visit.

H_{011,12,13,14,15}: There is no difference in (social, relaxation, health, rejuvenation, tourism) benefits sought by hot spring goers in terms of type of travel party.

H_{a11,12,13,14,15}: There is difference in (social, relaxation, health, rejuvenation, tourism) benefits sought by hot spring goers in terms of type of travel party.

A total of 30 questionnaires were distributed at Raksawarin hot spring to pre-test the reliability of the questionnaire design. The reliability analysis indicated that this questionnaire design is sufficient and comprehensive for examining the fifteen hypotheses. In the second stage, the 384 questionnaires were distributed at Raksawarin hot spring, Ranong, Thailand between the 5th and 21st of September, 2010. All of the questionnaires were filled by the target respondents to achieve the research objectives. The questionnaires were assessed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program to analyze and interpret the data. The One-way ANOVA was used to test the hypotheses to find out the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The significance level used at 0.05 determine, based on acceptance or rejection of null hypothesis in this research.

Findings and Discussion

As Table 1 shows (see Appendix A), the majority of respondents were 'Thais' (59.9%), followed by 'other' nationalities such as English, Australians, Dutch, and so on (20.8%), 'Germans' (13.5%), 'Americans' (2.9%). 'Chinese' (1.6%) and 'Japanese' (1.3%) account for small percentages. Most of the respondents visited Raksawarin hot spring 'less than once a week' (27.3%), followed by 'never' (21.6%),

'once or twice a week' (20.3%), 'several times a week' (17.4%), and 'everyday' (13.3%) respectively. 39.1% of the respondents travelled to Raksawarin hot spring with 'friends', 37.5% with 'family', and 23.4% travelled 'alone.'

The results displayed in Table 2 (see Appendix B) show the top five items to be fairly to extremely important benefits sought by hot spring goers. These are: (1) 'Relieve muscle pain' (94.5%), (2) 'Raksawarin hot spring water contains minerals that can improve blood circulation' (93.2%), (3) 'Bathing can be enjoyed along with mountains, a canal and green trees' (90.1%), (4) 'My body feels lighter' (88.8%) and (5) 'To feel refreshed' (86.2%).

Table 3 which shows the results from the hypotheses testing (see Appendix C) reveals that there is no difference in the rejuvenation benefits sought by hot spring goers in terms of nationality, frequency of visit and type of travel party. There were, however, differences in terms of social, relaxation, health, and tourism benefits sought by hot spring goers in respect of nationality, frequency of visit and type of travel party.

Nationality

This research found that Thai, Chinese, and tourists of all nationalities thought this place was suitable for family members. They they had fun when they were at Raksawarin hot spring because, at the hot spring, they could do many activities. Thai tourists like to visit Raksawarin hot spring because this is a suitable place to enjoy bathing. Moreover, they can get many benefits from soaking and bathing in the hot water. Thai tourists thought that when they visited Raksawarin hot spring, they felt relaxed and their stress decreased. They thought the bathing instructions were very important because they showed them how to use the hot spring. It also listed prohibited activities which made them feel safe.

Frequency of Visit

The tourists who visited this hot spring frequently thought that it was a famous family holiday destination suitable for a picnic especially on the weekend. They thought that soaking and bathing in the hot spring could become the trend because this place was suitable for children and adults, and it had no entrance fee so everybody could come. They felt that this hot spring was a place which could help them reduce stress and strain and relax. The tourists visited Raksawarin hot spring everyday or several times a week because they had muscle pains and the minerals in the hot water could help to relieve their pains. In addition, they thought that the hot minerals water could improve the discharge of waste, improve their health, and make their skin look younger.

Travel Party Type

The tourists who traveled with friends enjoyed themselves because they traveled as part of a big group. Tourists traveling to Raksawarin hot spring alone or with family enjoyed the landscape and scenery of this hot spring as it is surrounded by numerous beautiful things. They thought that hot spring tourism could become one of the most important recreational alternatives because in the hot spring area there were many things to do; tourists could exercise, bathe and enjoy eating local foods. Tourists traveling to Raksawarin hot spring either with family or individually paid much attention to the rejuvenation and relaxation of the body. Individual travelers believed that the hot mineral water at Raksawarin hot spring could help to abate the muscle pains.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Most of the respondents pay much attention to the health benefits of the hot spring. The two most popular benefits sought after are health benefits, specifically, 'relieving muscle pain' and 'improving blood circulation'. The third and the fourth are relaxation benefits of the hot spring, namely 'bathing can be enjoyed along with mountains, a canal and green trees' and 'my

body feels lighter'. The fifth was a rejuvenation benefit: 'feeling refreshed'.

Recommendations for Tourists Based on Nationality

Thais, especially local tourists, are very familiar with Raksawarin hot spring. They also know how to use the services at this hot spring whereas foreign tourists do not know much about them. They may have visited other hot springs in their countries but the bathing instructions of each hot spring tend to differ. So, foreign tourists should make sure to read the bathing instructions at Raksawarin hot spring before availing themselves of the services there. In the case of tourists who are not local people or who come from different regions or different countries, they can stay in hotels or guesthouses near the hot spring because it saves time going there and avoids having to pay for transportation.

Recommendations for Tourists Based on Frequency of Visit

The tourists who visited this hot spring frequently focus on the benefits from the mineral water. They should tell tourists who have rarely or never visited the place about the healing benefits of hot mineral water. They also should recommend that other people come to visit Raksawarin hot spring. First time comers should read the bathing instructions before using the hot spring pools. They have to know what they should and should not do while they are in the hot spring area.

Recommendations for Tourists Based on Travel Party Type

Raksawarin hot spring is a family destination. Tourists who enjoy travelling with their family should not miss visiting this place. They can do many activities together particularly on weekends. They should come for a picnic. For those with friends, there are a variety of activities to do together such as eating boiling eggs in the hot spring pool, taking photographs, and so on.

Recommendations for the Local Municipality

The local municipality should focus on service personnel and set up a training program every three months. In addition, the local municipality should train service personnel thoroughly and educate them to cultivate their abilities to solve the tourists' problems efficiently and provide knowledge about the benefits of the hot spring. Moreover, the local municipality should focus on the hot spring's facilities and add more hot spring pools to support the increasing number of tourists. It should also add other facilities such as an exercise gym, beauty center, etc. The local municipality should also maintain every facility in the hot spring area.

Further Studies

This research focuses on benefits sought by Raksawarin hot spring goers. Due to time constraints, the survey was carried out in September, 2010 only. So the results do not cover tourists who visit the place in the summer or winter. Thus, for further studies, a questionnaire on the same topics should be sent out to respondents coming in other seasons as tourists in each season may have a variety of specific characteristics and expectations in terms of the benefits sought from the hot spring. A qualitative research should also be conducted. Further studies of Raksawarin hot spring could be conducted regarding tourists' satisfaction and attitudes toward the place to find out which factors influence them most. Finally, a further study could be conducted as how best to promote Raksawarin hot spring to be widely known internationally.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1: Descriptive characteristics of respondents (N=384)

Tourists' characteristics	The majority group of respondents (%)
Nationality	Thai (59.9%)
Frequency of visit	Less than once a week (27.3%)

Type of travel party	Travel with friends (39.1%)
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APPENDIX B

Table 2: Benefits sought by hot spring goers (N=384)

Attributes	Fairly to extremely important (%)	Not important to not at all important (%)
Bathing can be enjoyed with mountains	90.1	1.6
Body feels lighter	88.8	2.4
Sitting outdoor the pool and looking over landscape is a novel experience	69.5	8.1
Raksawarin hot spring is simply a place to soak and bathe	74.8	7.3
Raksawarin hot spring is a great way to beat stress	77.6	5.8
To be pampered	76.8	4.7
Improve blood circulation	93.2	1.3
Relieve muscle pain	94.5	0.8
Minimize arthritis pains	79.9	4.5
Get rid of skin diseases	74.5	8.3
Medical treatment is not enough	72.1	6.5
Prevent aging of the skin	68.7	8.4
Improve my health	83.6	3.9
Improve discharge of wastes and lower blood pressure	83.6	2.3
The best known hot spring in region and has a long history	80.7	8.6
Hot spring tourism could become one of the most important recreational alternatives	75.3	7.5
Modern and convenient facilities	62.5	11
High quality of the water	83.1	2.6
Bathing instructions	75.5	7.0
Friendly service personnel	53.1	15.9
Popular family destination	85.7	2.3
Experiencing hot spring could become the trend	85.2	4.1
Enjoy oneself with friends	79.7	4.2

Enjoy oneself with family	79.7	2.9
Have fun	73.7	4.7
Meet other health-conscious people	83.9	3.1
Improve appearance	48.2	23.7
Feel refreshed	86.2	3.6
Enjoy	73.2	9.6

	4.49*	4.05*	0.47
	3.46*	2.35	0.13
	1.37	3.05*	0.77

Note: *p < 0.05

**p < 0.001

APPENDIX C

Table 3: Benefits and Tourists' Characteristics (F-value)

Benefits	Nationality	Frequency of visit	Type of travel party
Social	1.52	7.05**	0.17
	1.86	4.46*	0.01
	1.38	0.94	10.70**
	5.12**	1.00	1.34
	5.56**	0.88	0.58
Relaxation	3.19*	2.40	0.65
	3.24**	2.28	3.96*
	6.62**	5.37**	4.48*
	0.44	0.28	1.03
	3.71**	4.80*	2.53
Health	5.18**	4.92*	1.53
	2.86*	3.67*	1.92
	6.01**	6.09**	2.27
	0.65	4.14*	3.22*
	0.85	1.54	0.01
Rejuvenation	1.09	1.20	0.09
	0.53	3.35*	2.58
	0.96	3.27*	3.86*
	1.18	3.01*	0.75
	1.44	3.88*	0.50
Tourism	1.83	0.49	0.23
	1.18	0.60	2.00
	0.78	0.63	0.36
	12.24**	8.09**	0.63
	1.81	1.04	5.19*
	0.27	0.96	0.75