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Making Domestic Destinations Attractive; An Empirical Study from Mountainous Greece

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Abstract
Domestic Tourism has not been researched as much as international tourism has. In addition, mountain tourism tends to be associated with skiing and other snow or winter related activities mostly. This field of tourism becomes even less researched when the country is considered a popular sea and sun summer destination where international and domestic tourist arrivals peak during the summer months.
The purpose of this paper is to highlight the value of domestic mountain tourism at a popular domestic destination which is primarily accessible by surface means of transport, therefore international tourists find it harder to reach. From a regional perspective, the paper addresses the impact the financial crisis had on domestic tourism length of stay and discusses how these destinations can adapt their tourism offering to become more attractive and competitive.
The empirical part of the paper consists of primary data randomly selected by questionnaire during the holiday period between Christmas and New Year, a period where the destination is experiencing high occupancy rates and visitor numbers. The analysis of the data indicates that there are some dominant source markets followed by a high proportion of day visitors who could potentially convert to tourists.
The findings of this paper contribute to the literature regarding domestic and mountain destinations, not necessarily linked to snow activities. Conclusions can be applied to other popular domestic destinations not only in Greece but other countries too and applied accordingly for their benefit.

Keywords: mountain tourism, winter resorts, domestic tourism, Greece.

JEL Classification:R4, R5, Z3

1. Introduction

Domestic Tourism is an area that is not being researched to the extent international tourism is, due to the complexity of the calculation of the impact and measurement, let alone that the emphasis globally is on international tourists and international tourist arrivals. This has traditionally been the case since this led to foreign generated income to be spent in the country and boost the economy as well as the exports balance. On the other hand, domestic tourism in several cases precedes the development of international tourism at destination level. In other instances, accessibility might be limiting the attractiveness of a destination for international tourists, making it more accessible to the domestic market or less appealing to the international mass tourism market.

According to the United Nations and UNWTO (2007) a domestic trip is one in which the main destination is within the country of residence of the traveller. Although this approach is straight forward, there are significant differences amongst countries in terms of the interpretation and measurement of domestic tourism (Chadwick 1994; Lennon 2003). As Hall et al (2014) state, international tourism did not “take off” until the late 1960s with the launch of international flights and mass international tourism. On a similar note, Pearce (1995:67) states that ‘domestic tourism, which is often more informal and less structured than international tourism, [involves] a consequent tendency by many government agencies, researchers and others to regard it as less significant’. In countries like Greece that rely heavily on incoming international tourism, domestic tourism is under researched, however in challenging times like the 9/11 events or the international financial crisis, the country had to turn back to its domestic market to support the tourism industry. Moreover, domestic tourism tends to facilitate a certain degree of redistribution of wealth between metropolitan and peripheral regions (Buhalis, 2001).Similar cases occurred in the UK in 2016 following the dramatic drop in the exchange rate between the pound and the Euro, resulting in a sheer drop on international trips originating from the UK to Euro zone destinations and at the same time an increase for domestic destinations, atrend that remained the following year too, although not to such a high extent. It is widely accepted that all forms of domestic tourism tend to redistribute national income from large urban centres to the periphery, including mountainous destinations, therefore domestic tourism tends not to be a high priority when it comes to tourism planning and strategic priorities setting.

Mountains provide the spatial framework for the conception and implementation of a series of tourist and recreational activities (Varvaressos and Soteriades, 2007). The increased popularity of skiing and snow related activities has led to the development of various mountain resorts around the world. Starting from the French Alps, there is a tendency to develop village resorts which focus on preserving the traditional architecture and adapt sustainable tourism principles (Schnell, 1981; Zimmermann, 1992). On that note, there are significant differences between the Alpic winter resorts and the equivalent in Greece, since the latter lack the scope and sphere of the Alpic ones, lacking the recreational, spatial and economic framework, let alone the mountain tourism planning policy (Varvaressos and Soteriades, 2007). The above-mentioned challenges, are intensified in Greece, given the short winter and skiing season which is being reduced constantly over the last years due to the climate change. Although the growth of tourist flows at mountainous destinations has been influenced by the popularity of snow related activities and the development of skiing centres, as a result of imitation practices by the private and public sector and the increased middle class around the world, the mountainous destinations in Greece do not follow this pattern. The literature defines mountain resorts those that are closely located to a ski centre, where in Greece there are numerous popular mountain resorts and destinations which are not linked or located close to ski centres.

When it comes to national or regional tourism development, mountains have not been part on the top of the agenda since the dominant tourism development model was based on the sea and sun approach and emphasis has been given to incoming international tourists (Varvaressos and Soteriades, 2007). However rural areas, including mountainous ones, were given incentives to convert farmhouses to guesthouses so that the residents could supplement their income and on the other the tourists could experience a different tourism product.

This paper consists of four parts. In the first part there is reference in Domestic tourism in Greece with emphasis on mountainous areas, followed by the methodological approach which is presented in the second part. The third part is the findings and discussion, followed by the final fourth part, conclusions.

2. Domestic Tourism in Greece on mountain areas

Greeks tend not to travel abroad to the degree that other European nationals travel during their holidays for various reasons, including the weaker exchange rate, in particular prior to joining the Euro, the high second home ownership, and the weak purchase power which is in line with the lower salaries and wages. However, the period between 2000-2010 experienced a significant shift in the above-mentioned trends and there was a significant increase in domestic tourism as well as accommodation establishments. These changeddramatically since the Global Financial Crisis which had a severe impact to domestic tourism, apart from international. According to the 2019 World Economic Forum Travel and Tourism Competitiveness

Report, Greece is ranked 25th out of 140 countries listed in the report one position lower from the 2017 one. In the first issue of this report in 2007 Greece was ranked 24th and during the 2011-2019 period it was ranked under the top 30 countries. However, the report does not distinguish between domestic or international tourism it refers to the whole of the sector.
Domestic tourism in Greece is high at popular island destinations, particularly in the summer months, however domestic tourism is prominent on mainland destinations outside the summer season making it less acute compared to inbound tourism (Papatheodorou and Arvanitis, 2014).

Table 1: Accommodation Supply in Magnesia and Thessaly

		5 star hotels	4star hotels	3 star hotels	2 star hotels	1 star hotels	Total
Magnesia	Units	20	110	85	193	75	483
(NUTS3)	Rooms	838	2291	2133	3952	1220	10434
	Beds	1844	4800	4409	8110	2466	21629
Thessaly	Units	27	129	148	266	98	668
(NUTS2)	Rooms	1200	3192	3884	5351	1636	15263
	Beds	2587	6610	7804	10791	3277	31069

Source: INSETE (2019)

Table 2: Accommodation Supply in Magnesia Prefecture and Thessaly Region

		4 key rooms	3 key rooms	2 key rooms	1 key rooms	Total
Magnesia	Units	37	310	751	284	1382
(NUTS3)	Rooms	322	1805	4983	1774	8884
	Beds	868	4539	11559	3969	20935
Thessaly	Units	56	390	954	361	1761
(NUTS2)	Rooms	465	2364	6320	2257	11406
	Beds	1253	5836	14433	4971	26493

Source: INSETE (2019)

In the region of Thessaly (NUTS2) there are over 31000 hotel beds accounting for 3.6% of the country's hotel beds supply when Crete (NUTS2) alone offers 21.25% and South Aegean (NUTS2) 25.35%. Within the Thessaly region, Magnesia (NUTS3) offers 68% of hotel beds and rooms. A similar pattern is followed with rooms to let where Magnesia offers 78% of the total rooms and beds in the region (Table1 and Table 2).

According to the INSETE (2019) report, there was an 11% increase in the domestic arrivals at hotels in Magnesia between 2013 and 2018 from 239798 to 266159 when at the same time the international arrivals experienced an increase of 53%. These figures might look promising but when examining the actual hotel nights, the increase of domestic hotel nights for the same period was only 1% from 575,609 to 578,878. The occupancy rate at the islands remained in the region of 45% for the 2013-2018 period when in mainland Magnesia increased from 22%to 25%.

Domestic tourism in Greece since the financial crisis and the bailout of the country was severely affected resulting to a decrease of over 65%. Destinations that have been predominantly popular amongst the domestic market have been the ones affected the most and they had to show resilience to adapt to the challenges that occurred. These destinations tried to differentiate their product offering and expand their target markets but this was not achievable for destinations which are popular in the domestic market outside the summer season. Such a destination is mountain Pelion, a peninsula near the city of Volos 300kms north of Athens.

Although several researchers have referred to mountain tourism (André, 1998; Godde et al 2000; Tsiaras, 2015) there is limited research on domestic mountain tourism, let alone domestic mountain tourism in Greece. There is limited research on domestic mountain tourism in Greece related to skiing, especially since the development of ski centres and resorts around the country (Tsiaras, 2015). Mountain tourism in Greece though is popular outside the summer months and not necessarily related to skiing since there are numerous places of natural beauty or protected traditional architecture which are popular tourism destinations. The shortening of the snow season has resulted in several areas which were relying on providing accommodation and other activities has led several destinations to change their approach and enhance their activities offering in order to accommodate for the shortening of the snow and skiing season.

Tourism flows in many countries indicate that the international to domestic arrivals ratio is between 1:5 and 1:6 (to one arrival in international tourism there are five to six arrivals in domestic tourism) (UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2014 edition, 2015, 2). In Greece, this has not always been the case since international arrivals compared to domestic ones, were 2.7 times more in 2012, 4.3 in 2013, 4.5 in 2014, 5.4 in 2015 and 6.12 in 2016. The gap is not so great when comparing the number of international and domestic nights with the international ones ranging from 3.15 to 4.17 times more compared to the domestic ones. It is worth noting though that out of all domestic nights, over 86% of them are spent in private accommodation. This finding is in line with the findings of other scholars who suggest that increased second home ownership and VFR market is high in Greece, especially during the years of the financial crisis (Papatheodorou and Arvanitis, 2014).

Figure 1: Magnesia Prefecture (NUTS3) in red, Thessaly Region (NUTS2) in darker yellow

Source: Wikiwand.com

The Prefecture of Magnesia (NUTS3 administrative region) is 45% mountainous, 25% semi mountainous (under 1000 ft) and the remaining 30% plains. There are two mountains, one of which is widely populated with a peak at 1547m a ski centre (INSETE, 2019). The GDP of the district declined by 17% between 2010-2016 from 3,122m to 2,599m. The per capita GDP for the same period declined by 16% from €15,065 to €12,676 for the same period. There are 483 hotels with capacity of 21629 beds and 1832 rooms to let businesses with 20935 beds (INSETE, 2019) and 155 villas for hire with 1164 beds. There are 65 traditional settlements with protected architectural characteristics, 18 hiking routes and three natural climbing areas. Due to the high number of settlements there have been several stone paved paths since that has been the main means of transport on the mountain over centuries. These paths are still in use today not only for recreational purposes but also form a means of connectivity between these settlements to the fruit bearing trees on the mountain slopes.

Table 3: Accommodation supply (hotels only) within the NUTS3 region

	Mainland	Skiathos	Skopelos	Alonissos	Total	Thessaly (NUTS2)	Country (NUTS1)
Hotels	256	86	43	20	405	555	9971
Rooms	4624	3489	1356	671	10140	14753	433689
Beds	9206	6908	2699	1314	20127	29193	856347

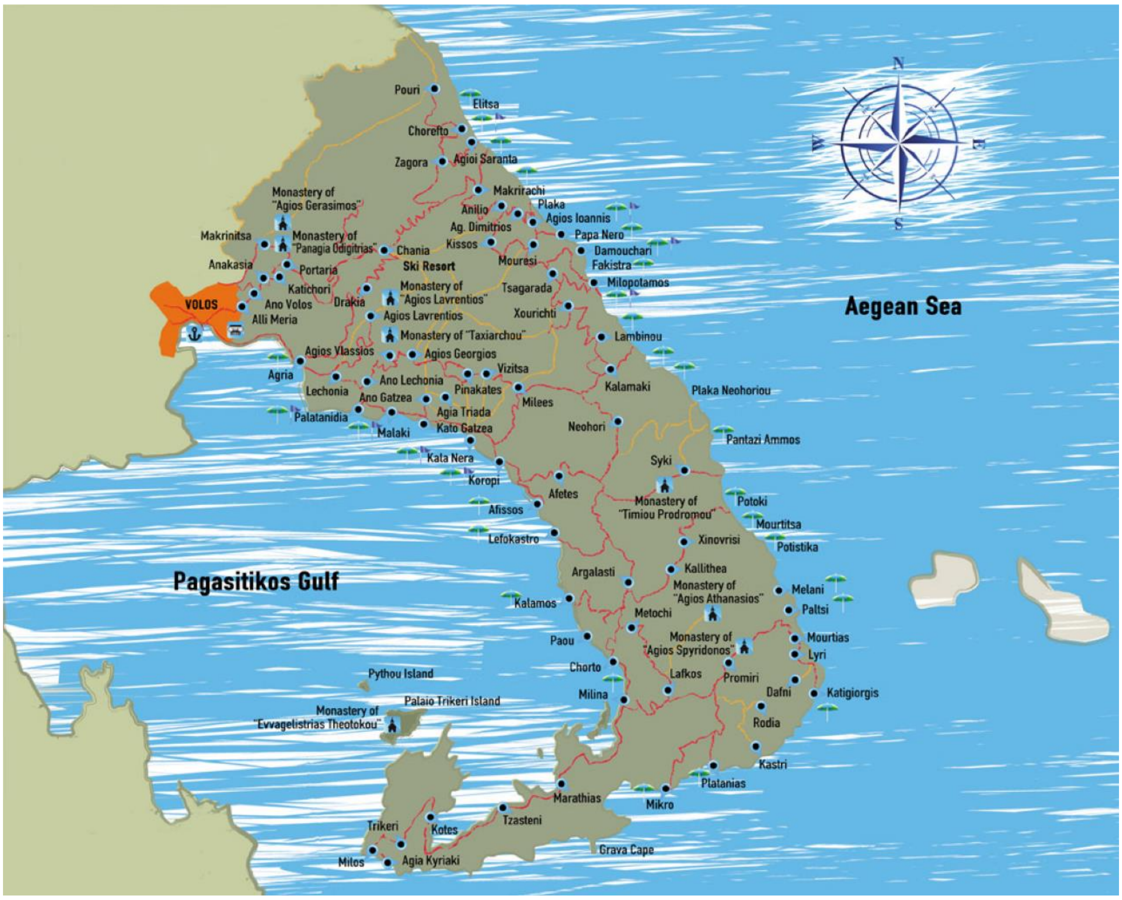
Source: Chamber of Hotels, 2019

As listed on Table 3 the size of hotels varies significantly between the mainland and the islands at that region which reflects the different type of tourism product on offer in each part of the Prefecture. In addition, the NUTS3 region might offer over 20000 beds out of the 29000 available in the NUTS2 region but when comparing this figure to the national supply at county level it is less than 2.4% of the available hotel bed supply of the country.

On another note, the Greek authorities in cooperation with several businesses have tried hard to preserve and standardise Greek traditional recipes by incentivising companies to certify their breakfast or cuisine in general when they offer traditional recipes and their products are sourced locally. The relationship between gastronomy is complex but forms part of the trip and the experience (Velissariou and Vasilaki, 2014). The region of this study is known for its traditional recipes and cuisine and there is an increasing trend to promote local dishes and cuisine.

At the same time, the region is characterised by its insular and mainland areas. The islands on the Aegean Sea are a popular tourism destination, Skiathos which has an international airport receiving international charter flights during the summer months from various European destinations. The hotel bed supply between the mainland and the islands within the prefecture is significantly different, in favour of the islands, reflecting the dependency of these insular destinations on international tourism.

Figure 2: Map of Pelion Peninsula



Source: pilion web – edited by the author

3. Methodological Approach

Questionnaire based site surveys are the typical means for researching demographic and group composition data (Veal, 2018). One of the limitations of this type of data collection is that the questionnaires are brief and might miss vital features of the characteristics of the users (Veal, 2018). There is a combination of free text questions to obtain qualitative characteristics like the place of permanent stay, the place of temporary stay, as well as quantitative questions related to the demographics of the respondents, the duration of stay and the number of times the respondents have visited the destination.

The study consists of self-administered questionnaires consisting of thirteen questions, four of which are related to sociodemographic characteristics. The remaining nine were asking how many times they had visited the destination, which season, how many nights they would stay at the destination and the group size. The questionnaire also asked which is the place of their main residence, what is the size of their travelling group and which activities they have or intend to participate at, during their stay.

The data collection took place at random locations across the mountain destination during the winter break holiday, a period which is particularly busy, and the destination experiences a high number of tourists and visitors. During the data collection period there was no snow and the nearby ski centre was closed. A total of 183 responses were collected which can all be used since the respondents were assisted by the researcher if they had any queries on the questions.

The data have been analysed using descriptive statistics in order to determine what the destination offers to the visitors and what activities the visitors engage with during their stay. Moreover, the qualitative responses were analysed using the stated preference analysis method.

4. Findings andDiscussion

One of the first questions was to establish whether the tourists are repeat visitors or not and the responses can be interpreted in either way, although the repeat visitors (those having visited the destination for more than one time) are just under 55%. This finding does not allow to draw a safe conclusion which clearly suggests that the majority of visitors are repeat, however one could argue that the fact that over half of the visitors have been to the area before, it is a strong indication that the destination is popular and attracts a significant number of repeat visitors.

Table 4: Respondents' frequency of visits at the destination

1st visit	2-4 visits	5-8 visits	9-10 visits	More than 10 visits
45.16%	22.58%	9.68%	3.23%	19.35%

Source: compiled by the author

Another interesting finding is related to the place of stay and it turns out that just under 39% chose Volos to stay which is the closest urban destination and they were visiting the area for an activity or as an excursion. The average length of stay was 2.52 days which reflects the impact of the financial crisis in relation to the ability of domestic tourists to travel, even during a holiday period like Christmas and New Year. It must be added that almost 13% of the respondents were day visitors which is a significant percentage. If this figure of day visitors is excluded from the length of stay calculation, the average length of stay increases to 3.12 days.

There were two questions which aimed to identify the purpose of the trip, what was the main reason that they chose this destination and what activities they engaged with during their stay. Surprisingly enough, most of the respondents did not identify a specific reason for their choice of destination. Only 12% of the respondents identified a reason other than holiday, leisure, winter break which was mentioned by the rest of the respondents. This is a cause for concern for the local authorities and businesses as it seems that the area does not have a specific characteristic that attracts the visitors and the domestic tourists.

The other question was asking the respondents in which activities they engaged with or intended to participate during their stay. Almost 40% of the respondents stated that they have or will participate in a hiking activity and those are split at 40/60 between up to one hour of hiking and up to 2 hours of hiking. None of the respondents stated that they will of have hiked for over two hours. At the same time, almost 50% of the respondents did not answer this question at all without even adding an activity that was not listed in the questionnaire reflecting that either they do not engages in these activities at all or they were not aware of these activities that were on offer at the destination.

At the same time, it is worth noting that hiking is the only activity in which one can engage without having to pay a fee of have any special equipment to participate in that activity, especially when it is a short hike. Conversely, the winter period might not be the best period of the year to engage in outdoor activities on a mountain, when the weather conditions can be adverse and the temperature relatively low, around zero degrees Celsius.

Table 5: Respondents' age group

Age Group	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54
Percentage	9.68%	35.48%	32.26%	22.58%

Source: compiled by the author

The age group of the respondents suggests that they are in age groups suitable for physical activity. There were no respondents over the age of 54 in the sample that was questioned. This is an interesting finding since the respondents did not seem to engage in physical activities other than hiking.

To identify where the tourists come from, 13% of the respondents stated that their main residence is in Thessaloniki, the second largest city in the country when 45% stated that their main residence is Athens. The remaining 33% came from various parts of Greece, without any standing out. The findings of the study reflect the population distribution of the country since Athens is the hometown of over 40% of the country, followed by Thessaloniki. Athens has a population of under 4 million (Statistics, 2011), home of 40% of the population of the country.

5. Conclusion

Pelion is known for its extensive network of walking paths which according to unverified sources exceeds 500kms. Some of these paths are well maintained and signposted, some are more popular than others. There are some volunteer groups which offer support and guidance to hikers and they preserve the paths on a regular basis, however nothing is centrally coordinated. The age of the respondents suggests that they are capable of participating in light to moderate physical activities such as hiking or mountain bike, especially when the inclination is not extremely challenging. According to the 2019 INSETE report there are 18 hiking routes on mountain Pelion but as stated, there are more paths which are not clearly signposted or listed in official catalogues.

The findings of this study contradict the Moira and Drivas (2017) who argue that 47% of the respondents in their study choose a mountain destination for its scenery. On the other hand, Massida and Etzo (2012) argue that domestic tourism is important for the Italian regions and it seems that this is the case for that region too. The increasing popular trend for non-traditional destinations, increases the competition amongst the mature international and domestic destinations who have to differentiate their tourism product in order to remain competitive. The area of the study has experienced a much slower rate of increase in terms of tourism arrivals (domestic and international) compared to the leading regions of the country, namely Crete and South Aegean (both NUTS2).

There is limited academic research on domestic tourism and this study is not exhaustive, let alone mountainous tourism especially not related to skiing or snow related activities. There are several regions in Greece which rely heavily on domestic tourism for various reasons and these areas need to be researched, in order to explore the characteristics, the preferences of the tourists and improve their tourism supply which can potentially increase international tourists too, which is the case for several countries and regions.

The length of the trip is not in line with the findings of Tsartas and Manologlou (2001) who state that the length of the domestic trip can be as long as fifteen days. This might had been the case twenty years ago, but the developments of the Greek Domestic Tourism and market might have significantly affected the duration of the trip. On the other hand, like Tsartas and Manologlou (2001) argue that the motive of holiday and relax is predominant amongst domestic tourists, is confirmed in this study since this is what the majority of respondents stated in the free text question on the reason that made them choose this destination. In addition, Tsartas and Manologlou (2001) state that the majority of the respondents in the study they compiled usually take short trips which do not exceed three days, and this is confirmed in this study too in both cases (with and without calculating the day visitors). Moreover, both studies (2001 and 2020) find that most of the respondents reside at the two largest urban centres of the country, Athens and Thessaloniki.

The characteristics of the tourists might differ significantly over different times of the year, including their age group, length of stay, type of activities and their preferences in general. The destination can attract domestic tourists throughout the year; however the length of stay is significantly affected by the working patterns and the family commitments like school attendance. This results in several businesses, including catering facilities to remain closed during the weekdays and operate during weekends or prolonged holiday periods or public holidays. The findings of the study suggest that the vast majority of the respondents do not have a clear motive when visiting this particular region which can be a significant threat in one case and a significant opportunity in another since the local authorities as well as the businesses can work towards this direction to create a clear message of the direction they want to follow and offer specific range of activities which will allow the domestic market to choose this destination over others.

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