

# INCENTIVE DESTINATION EXPERIENCES AS A REVISITATION INFLUENCE: A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

Incentive travel is motivational and used for rewarding achievement. This creates unforgettable memories but to revisit the same destination is an uncertainty because of influences and experiences. Understanding the influence of destination experiences is important for marketers who view repeat visitors as a stable source of revenue.

This qualitative study included three in-depth interviews with incentive travel organisers and two semi-structured focus groups with incentive travellers who enabled a deeper insight and understanding of the complexities in reselecting an incentive destination. It is concluded that there are experiences which will and which will not influence the decision to revisit an incentive destination.

**Keywords:** incentive travel, repeat visitation, experiences, incentive destination

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A tendency for some years now is the implementation of reward systems as a motivational tool by business enterprises. When comparing the various reward systems, it can be observed that traditional compensation strategies are augmented with non-financial incentives, such as travel. During an incentive travel trip, an employee gains first-hand knowledge of a destination through experiences which in turn have a direct influence on the intention to revisit the incentive destination. Many tourism destinations rely on repeat tourists, yet, it remains unclear why people undertake repeat visits and what characteristics repeat tourists share.

Several research studies have attempted to discover the reasons behind tourists' intentions to revisit a tourism destination such as those by Kozak (2001:784), Hong et al. (2009:268), Som and Badarneh (2011:1106), Marcussen (2011:203) and Som et al. (2012:39). Yet, destination managers and marketers are not knowledgeable about the experiences which influence incentive travellers' decisions to revisit incentive destinations.

Against this background, the main purpose of this study was to obtain deeper insight into the influences that destination experiences have on the decision to revisit incentive destinations.

The study also sought to investigate the most likely and the least likely factors that influence an incentive traveller's decision to revisit an incentive destination.

The findings of this research are expected to provide destination marketer with research-based insight into which experiences may possibly influence the decision to revisit incentive destinations, which could in turn contribute to achieving more effective incentive destination awareness strategies.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

As the value of tourism and incentive travel is realised, new destinations are increasingly entering the fearsome arena of competition and are becoming more replaceable, according to Matos, Mendes and Valle (2012:102). Thus, adding to the increasing number of destination choices available to tourists. It is therefore essential for any tourism destination to remain competitive. Dugulan et al. (2010:742) are of the opinion that tourism destination competitiveness is the ability to attract tourists, increase tourism expenditure and – most importantly – providing tourists with satisfying and memorable experiences. A tourism destination provides the input for these experiences and is in many instances the 'raison d'etre' for tourism, as described by Kozak and Baloglu (2011:61) and Morrison (2013:94).

An incentive tourism destination, in turn, should consist of a number of key components suitable for the incentive market, as explained by Kastenholz (2010:313). In the realm of travel incentive schemes, Alegre and Garau (2010:52) envision that an incentive destination may be an individual's life-long dream. Lubbe (2000:220) and Pike (2008:311) point out that an incentive destination should be well-known, have a highly developed infrastructure, a good mixture of accessible attractions, and preferably, be in the mature phase of the product's life cycle.

A tourism destination offering, as highlighted by Soteriades (2012:108), should however be viewed as a series of experiences covering the entire amalgam of the tourism product. Consequently, one needs to understand that no tourism destination can provide an experience; only the tourist can create the tourism experience, as Assaker, Vinzi and O'Connor (2012:892) concede. An understanding of the nature of the tourism experience is critical to the successful management of any tourism destination, asserts Jurowski (2009:1), and will be elaborated on next.

### **2.1 Nature of the tourism experience**

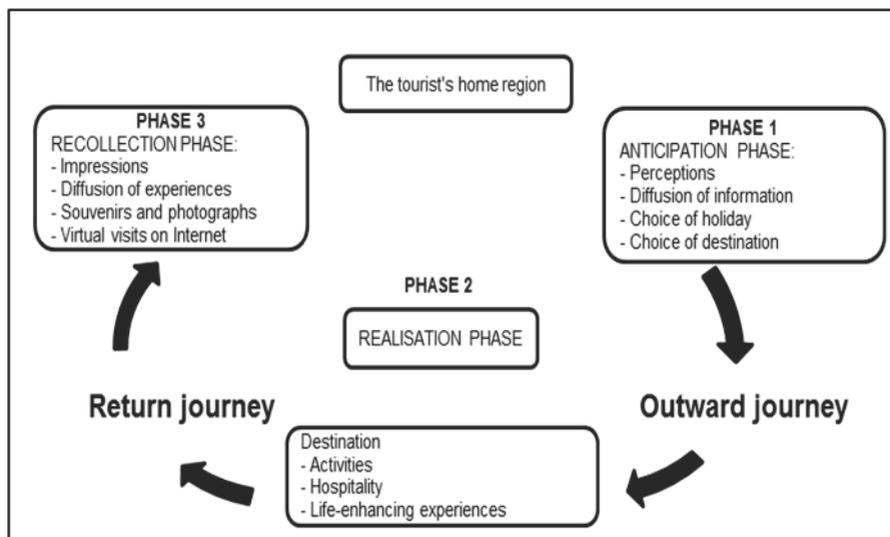
A tourism experience is internally produced by a tourist, based on the tourist's background, values, attitude and beliefs, as described by Jurowski (2009:2).



Manthiou, Lee and Tang (2011:3), Matos, Mendes and Valle (2012:109) and Lauring (2013:219) all agree that a tourist's physical, intellectual and emotional engagement are key ingredients in shaping the tourism experience. Jurowski (2009:1-2) maintains that the tourism experience is created through a process of visiting, learning and enjoying activities at the tourism destination. The tourism experience as indicated by Kozak and Baloglu (2011:16), should therefore take into account both the rational and emotional expectations a tourism destination provides.

Given the interactive nature of the tourism experience, Boniface and Cooper (2009:17) suggest that the tourism experience should be grouped into three phases, each with its own unique characteristics, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The first phase is the anticipation phase and generally occurs before a trip. During this phase, the perception or mental image of a destination will have a significant influence on the choice of a tourism destination. However, it should be noted that incentive travellers generally do not have any influence over the choice of an incentive destination, as this is the decision of the sponsoring company and/or incentive organiser.



**FIGURE 1: Phases of the tourism experience**

Source: Boniface & Cooper (2009:17)

The second phase – realisation – represents the goal of the trip and mainly includes the tourism experiences that occur at the destination. The impressions of the outward and return trip, as part of the overall travel experience, constitute very important parts of this phase.

Lastly, phase three is the recollection phase, which takes place after the trip. This phase is also the focus of this study: the incentive traveller now compares the extent to which the tourism experience at the destination meets the expectations that were set in phase one.

For the purpose of this study, an incentive traveller's sense of interest is awakened by the incentive during the pre-trip stage, which in turn strengthens interest in the incentive destination. The incentive traveller's actual visit or on-site experience, as well as the post-trip evaluation, are of the utmost importance because these experiences may directly influence the tourists' revisit intent (Li et al., 2008:280). In other words, the incentive traveller's decision to revisit an incentive destination is based on his/her experience during the trip and the post-trip phases where evaluation, memory storing, reflection and enrichment occur.

Ultimately, a desirable experience at a tourism destination has been found to influence tourists' revisit behaviour intention, as supported in studies by Rodriguez del Bosque et al. (2009:140), Assaker, Vinzi and O'Conner (2012:892), and Osti, Disegna and Brida (2012:18). With this in mind, a number of studies have also highlighted that the intention to revisit a destination has important competitive and economic advantages (Brunner, Stocklin & Opwis, 2008:1095; Page, 2009:365; Assaker, Vinzi & O'Connor, 2012:890; Som et al., 2012:39). These authors agree that the retention of previous customers is more cost-effective than procuring new ones. However, it remains unclear why people undertake repeat visits and which characteristics are shared by repeat tourists. A number of studies have focused on the factors that influence the destination revisit intention in an attempt to understand why tourists make repeat visits. As the primary objective of this study is to obtain an understanding of whether or not destination experiences influence the decision to revisit an incentive destination, and subsequently to determine which factors influence this decision, it is necessary to further explore the factors which influence revisitation.

## **2.2 Factors influencing revisitation**

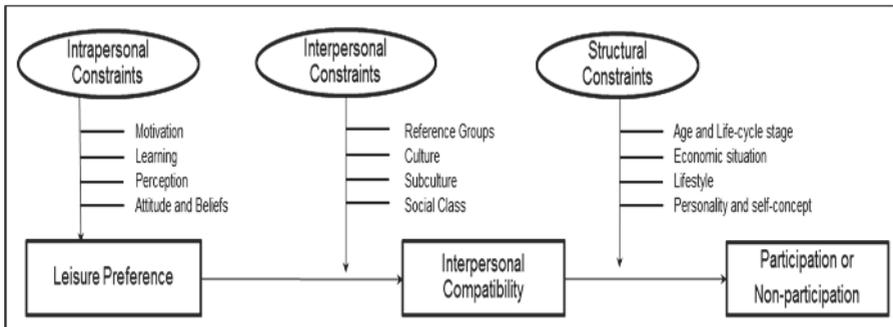
Generally, researchers are in agreement that repeat visitation is affected by factors such as perceived value, familiarity with the particular destination, as well as, the destination image. Most often, it seems that satisfaction with the destination is identified as a significant factor when evaluating the possibility of revisiting a destination. Overall satisfaction with a tourism destination is directly influenced by the quality of the experience at the tourism destination (Cole & Chancellor, 2009:325), which in turn could influence the tourist's revisit intention.



This is supported by Pantouvakis (2013:6) who states that satisfied tourists will lead to repeat visits, recommendations and a favourable tourism destination image. Shipway and Fyall (2012:129) describe satisfaction as a post-purchase evaluative judgement of the tourism experience where the expectations are compared to the actual experience. Jang and Feng (2007:582) further assert that satisfaction with the tourism destination is the result of the subjective evaluation of whether or not the chosen destination meets or exceeds expectations.

In addition, Hong et al. (2009:278) point out that there are numerous factors or limitations that have prompted barriers to travel. This is supported by Meng and Xu (2012:255). Chen and Wu (2009:303) refer to these barriers as travel constraints. These travel constraints comprise a subset of reasons that may prevent the decision maker from engaging in a particular behaviour, or may result in inhibited activity at a tourism destination or even limited satisfaction, as Kattiyapornpong and Miller (2009:249) explain. Hong et al. (2009:278) further maintain that these constraints have also been known to affect tourism destination selection.

For the purpose of this study, the hierarchical model proposed by Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991) is utilised in an attempt to identify the influences that travel constraints may have on an incentive traveller's return preferences. This model is still popular in many tourism studies (Chick & Dong, 2003:338; Silva & Correia, 2008:26; White, 2008:344; Chen & Wu, 2009:303; Marzo-Navarro & Pedraja-Inglesias, 2009:820; Hung & Petrick, 2012:857; Kimm, 2012:32) and categorises travel constraints into three dimensions: intrapersonal constraints, interpersonal constraints and structural constraints. These three dimensions are viewed as intervening, as illustrated in Figure 2.



**FIGURE 2: Hierarchical model of leisure constraints**

Source: Adapted from Crawford, Jackson & Godbey (1991:311); Kotler, Bowen & Makens (2010:151)

According to this model, intrapersonal constraints that affect leisure preference occurs first (Hung & Petrick, 2012:857). Interpersonal constraints then take place and influence interpersonal compatibility. Finally, participation or non-participation depends on the confluence of the intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints.

Based on the review of the literature, many factors could influence an incentive traveller's choice of revisiting an incentive destination. With this in mind, this study seeks to explore which positive or negative factors may have an influence on the decision to revisit an incentive destination.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study's research process – from identifying the research objectives to the collection and presentation of data – aimed at obtaining deeper insight and an understanding of the research topic. A qualitative method was therefore adopted for this study because this approach ensure richness of information, as Carreira et al. (2013:236) explains. This method also allowed the researcher to obtain intricate details about the complexities – feelings, thoughts and emotions – that led to the reselection of the incentive destination, which is generally difficult to extract or learn through quantitative methods.

Furthermore, this study also employed a multi-method explorative technique in an attempt to better understand the factors that could most likely or least likely influence the decision to return to the incentive destination. One-on-one in-depth interviews with incentive travel organisers, as well as semi-structured focus group sessions with incentive travellers, were used to obtain data.

Qualitative research sample selection, as stated by Teddlie and Yu (2007:77), has a profound effect on the ultimate quality of the research. Respondents played active roles in this research process and a clearer understanding of the research population and sampling is therefore required.

#### **3.1 Sampling**

While there are no clearly defined rules governing sample size, sampling in qualitative research usually relies on small numbers with a focus on seeking richness of data about a particular phenomenon. As Veal (2006:212) further explains, sampling can either be probability, where every person has an equal chance to participate in the study, or non-probability. Due to the costs involved in probability sampling and the impossibility of obtaining a list of all incentive travellers and/or incentive travel organisers, a non-probability sampling method was adopted.



Furthermore, this study implemented a purposeful multi-sampling method with selected incentive travel organisers, as well as incentive travellers as representatives of the sample. In addition, accessibility and willingness of participants meant that convenience sampling was also necessary.

A clarification of the multi-sampling method will now follow.

### **(1) Incentive travel organisers**

Incentive travel organisers residing in Gauteng were invited to participate in one-on-one in-depth interviews. As only one incentive travel organiser confirmed availability, an alternative method was implemented by approaching companies that offer incentive travel programmes for inclusion in the in-depth interviews. Two companies expressed their willingness to partake in the study, although only employees who are primarily involved in organising their company's incentive travel programmes, were invited to the interviews.

### **(2) Incentive travellers**

Focus groups with incentive travellers proved an effective way in trying to understand return visitation decisions, as well as the most and least likely influences on incentive travellers' intentions to revisit these destinations. For the purpose of this study, the selection process was entrusted to the incentive travel organisers. The incentive travel organisers from the two companies that were interviewed had allowed personnel who have been on an incentive trip, to participate in the focus groups. Two focus group sessions were conducted, each focus group comprising of four incentive travellers. Krueger (cited by Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009:3) has endorsed the use of very small focus groups and term them 'mini focus groups'. Generally, these 'mini focus-groups' (as Krueger calls it) consist of 3 to 4 participants, all of whom have expert knowledge or experience in the research topic and are deemed suitable for a study.

## **3.2 Data collection**

A deductive approach was firstly adopted, and dimensions of the broad factors that may influence revisitation of incentive destinations were identified by analysing the literature's thematic content. Based on these themes, two interview guides were developed to be used during primary data collection. The guides lead the interviewer to open with an exploratory phase, which examined the selection process of an incentive destination in a general way by means of the five tourism destination components identified in literature. Then followed interplay between the experiences derived during the realisation phase and the recollection phase of the actual incentive trip. Primary data collection for this study comprised a multi-method technique by way of in-depth interviews, as well as semi-structured focus groups. The next section will focus on details about the data collection process.

## **(1) In-depth interviews with incentive travel organisers**

Initially fieldwork focused on making contact by means of introductory emails to incentive travel organisers or company employees who are directly involved with incentive travel programmes. Then followed invitations to participate in in-depth, one-on-one interviews. During these one-on-one interviews, the researcher had more direct and intimate contact with the incentive travel organisers and subsequently developed good rapport with them. This rapport enabled the researcher to request the incentive travel organisers to contact company employees who have been on recent incentive trips and invite them to partake in focus groups.

The interview guide that was developed in advance of the interviews assisted the researcher in guiding the interviewing processes. The exploratory phase commenced with questions about how the incentive travel organisers select incentive destinations, with specific reference to key destination attributes which they consider to be influencers in the selection process. Following this, the incentive travel organisers were requested to elaborate on the type of experiences that are obtained at incentive destinations which may influence the incentive traveller to return to the incentive destination at some point in future. When necessary, the incentive travel organisers were asked to clarify, explain and elaborate on their responses by means of probing and/or follow-up questions to prompt greater detail. During the interview conclusion, the incentive travel organisers were requested to contact a number of their companies' employees who have been on recent incentive trips and to invite them to take part in a focus group. These focus groups will be discussed in the next section.

## **(2) Focus group with incentive travellers**

The researcher relied on the incentive travel organisers to request the incentive travellers to participate in the focus groups. Ultimately, participants had to meet the selection criteria, meaning, that they should have been on international incentive trips, were willing to share their experiences at these incentive destinations, as well as share their perspectives on which destination experiences could most likely and/or least likely influence their decision to return to an incentive destination.

Focus groups were conducted either in a boardroom or a meeting room at the company premises. The researcher (also the moderator during these focus groups) began the session by setting the tone and explained the agenda for the session. An atmosphere of trust and openness was created in each case by means of introductory comments from the incentive travel organisers as well as the moderator.

Direct questions were then asked to certain members of the group to encourage discussion about unique experiences they mentioned.



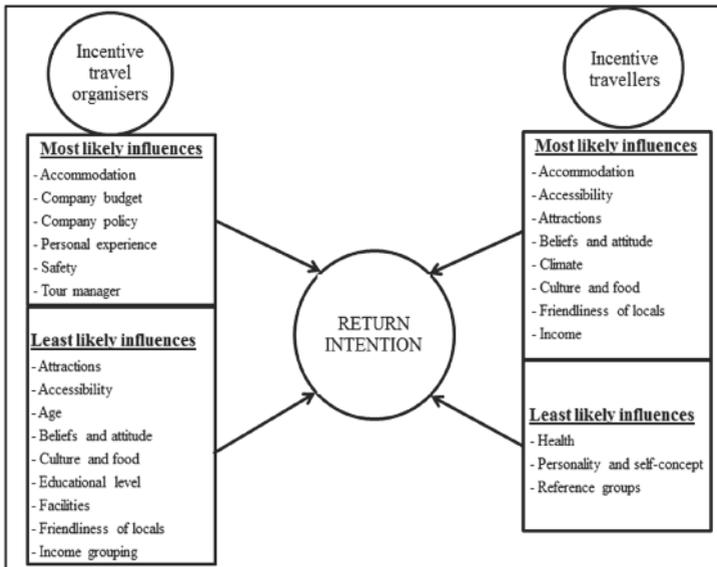
The purpose was to determine which experiences could most likely or least likely influence an incentive traveller's decision to return to a previously visited incentive destination. The moderator sometimes had to probe certain participants for more information, maintaining eye contact or directly asking for more information. In some instances the moderator had to direct a question to the entire group in an effort to obtain more detail.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The primary data collected for this study, which included the perspectives, opinions and experiences of the incentive travel organisers and incentive travellers, were then processed. Two methods of data analysis were implemented for the purpose of this study: A qualitative content analysis was used for the analysis of the data obtained from the in-depth incentive travel organiser interviews, whereas a framework analysis was used for the data that was obtained during the incentive travellers' focus groups. The following section provides more information regarding the inferences that emanated from the data analysis.

## 4. INFERENCES

This section summarises the most important influences on the decision to return to an incentive destination by incentive travel organisers and incentive travellers. Each group identified the most likely, as well as the least likely influences on decision making to revisit an incentive destination, as illustrated in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** Influences on return intention

From this inference is derived that incentive travel organisers are influenced by a number of destination experiences when deciding to return to a previously visited incentive destination. What is interesting is that company policy and budget still remains key catalysts when selecting an incentive destination or deciding to return to a previously visited incentive destination. As explained by all three incentive travel organisers:

*“Few things play a role...as well as the budget what the budget allows for.”*  
(ITO101)

*“Since the new management came into power it is very much budget focused.”*  
(ITO102)

*“...a short list of destinations where made and the next step involved finding the best quotes for the incentive trip.”*  
(ITO103)

Another stakeholder, forming part of an incentive trip, is the incentive traveller. The entire issue of how the incentive trip sparked initial interest in an incentive destination and how it may lead to possible further visits, surfaced during both focus group discussions. Most respondents agreed that the incentive trip 'opened their eyes' to a whole new world and, based on this life changing experience, they would want to return to some of the incentive destinations.

Respondent IW102 stated:

*“I am adamant that I must return to Israel. Yet, I don't know how and I don't know when but I know I must go back.”*

Remarkably, however, none of the incentive travellers who took part in this study have since returned to a previously visited incentive destination. This then gave rise to the question 'Why not?'. Respondent IW204 made a critical comment regarding one of the barriers that prevented revisitation:

*“On your own you will not be able to afford the luxury we received on our incentive trip.”*

It was further recognised that even if these barriers to return are alleviated, incentive travellers are still not likely to return. The reason for this is that in their minds, the experiences provided during an incentive trip not only fulfilled their travel needs but, more importantly, an incentive trip succours in strengthening their network strategy with like-minded business associates.

As explained by ITO303:

*“...even though our delegates are in the financial position to return [to] a destination; in their world they have an opportunity to visit a new destination every year.”*

*So, these incentive delegates question the reason why they should return to a destination on their own merit (paying for themselves) and then only the two of them (husband and wife) when they can work for a 'free' trip every year and go in a group which is more fun."*

## **5. DISCUSSION**

Travel, as a reward or incentive, has surfaced in this study as being a key motivational tool used by organisations to encourage and improve business performances. The purpose of an incentive travel program is thus to motivate, reward and/or recognise employees for meeting, achieving or exceeding specific organisational goals. At the heart of any incentive travel program lays the incentive destination which is envisioned by an incentive traveller to fulfil their life-long 'dream'. Hitherto, an incentive destination is not just made up of an amalgam of products and service but includes a series of experiences created solely by an incentive traveller. Literature reviewed for the purpose of this study further suggested that experiences gained at an incentive destination have a direct link to the influence on the revisitation decision. Return behavioural intention is not always rational and several researchers attempted to discover the reason behind tourists' revisit intention, which also forms the primary objective of this study; obtaining insight and deeper understanding into the influence of destination experiences on the decision making process to revisit an incentive destination.

The qualitative method adopted for this study assisted in unravelling the complexities of this phenomenon, as well as ensuring richness of data regarding the most and least likely influences on the decision to return to an incentive destination.

From the data analysis and inferences outlined in this study it can be concluded that:

- Destination experiences do have an influence on the decision to return to an incentive destination.
- Incentive travel organisers are influenced mainly by company policy and budget when selecting or deciding to return to a previously visited incentive destination.
- Incentive travellers are not likely to return to an incentive destination as the experiences provided during an incentive trip fulfils their travel needs, as well as strengthening their network strategy with like-minded business associates.

One method of gaining a competitive advantage in today's tourism market is through repeat visitation and from this study it can be concluded that destination marketing organisations (DMOs) should focus their awareness strategies on incentive houses or incentive travel organisers rather than incentive travellers, as the later would not consider revisiting an incentive

destination even if the experience gained at an incentive destination were exceptional. Further research could ultimately result in valuable information for incentive houses during product development, incentive destination awareness strategies or even when training prospective incentive travel organisers.

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