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AMERICAN TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TOURIST GUIDES IN BELGRADE

Branislav Rabotic¹

Abstract:

Although it is not one of the popular city tourism destinations of Europe, the Serbian capital, Belgrade, is visited by a substantial number of foreign tourists. Most of them are independent travelers, predominantly youth, backpackers and businessmen, but there are also those who come within tourist groups. However, organized tourist arrivals are still pretty irregular, with the exception of the Danube river cruises which make call on Belgrade. Every year, from March to October, around 550 river ships sail into the port of Belgrade. These tour groups, mostly German or American, stay in the city for maximum twelve hours and, as a rule, have an organized city tour with a local guide. This paper analyzes the perception of and satisfaction with the guided sightseeing tour of Belgrade among the U.S. participants. The sample for the quantitative study was taken from the population of customers within one of the largest tour and cruise operators in the United States. The survey was carried out during the summer of 2008 and 2009.

Key words: city tours, tour guiding, Danube cruises, Belgrade.

INTRODUCTION

The beginnings of domicile tourist guiding in ex-Yugoslavia are associated with Dubrovnik (today: Croatia), where local authorities adopted a regulation, *The Code for the Tourist Guiding in the City*, prior to WWII, by which the conditions for obtaining a certificate in tourist guiding were proscribed, i.e. tourist licence.² In the postwar socialist Yugoslavia, tourist guiding was regulated by law in each republic. The first law on tourist guiding in Serbia was adopted in 1957.

In the past period over 1000 persons in Serbia have obtained the tourist guide licence. However, the actual number of active guides today is not always possible to detect precisely. The peculiar problem is the fact that in Serbia, which is largely a travel generating region, a number of persons with the tourist guide licence actually work as escort of organized tours abroad.

Tourist guides in Belgrade provide sightseeing services as well as half-day or whole-day tours, primarily to the passengers of the Danube river cruises, mostly in English, German, French and Italian language as well as Serbian to the groups from

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² <http://www.vodici-dubrovnik.hr/povijest.php>

Slovenia. The services are also provided in some other language (for instance Greek, Bulgarian, Polish etc.) to *ad hoc* tourist groups, and there are specialized *driver-guides* who mostly work with independent visitors. Although travel agencies mostly engage local guides, some of them also offer their services to potential tourists through their official website or other tourist sites.

The term “guided tour” in this paper entails the so-called daily tour, and not a multiday package tour. The characteristic example of the „microtour“ (Schmidt 1979) in the conditions of urban tourism is the sightseeing of certain local sites or attractions in the city, on foot or by an appropriate vehicle. Nevertheless, the inevitable part and parcel of such a tour is the tourist guide's service. Accordingly, the notion “guided tour” reflects the way of how tourist guiding operates and represents its “product”. Apart from a city sightseeing, other types of tours are also offered at a destination, such as life-seeing, nature-based, special interest, By-Night, shopping etc. (Rabotic 2010). This research is focused on the standard Belgrade sightseeing organized for the tourist group by a domicile travel agency (so-called ground operator) which is hired by a foreign tour operator.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Tourist guide services are usually treated as supporting or ancillary in tourism (Foster 1985, 95). Although it is one of the oldest human activities, tourist guiding is still “unknown”, depreciated and undervalued profession, which is why Pond named its subjects (1983, 47) as “orphans of the industry”.

In the academic literature on this topic, there are many works whose authors tried to elucidate the role of tourist guides from different perspectives (Schmidt 1979; Holloway 1981; Pearce 1984; Cohen 1985; Katz 1985; Pond 1993; Fine and Speer 1985; McDonnell 2000; Bras 2000; Dahles 2002; Salazar 2005; Jensen 2010; Rabotic 2011). The researchers mostly acknowledge that the role is complex and multifaceted. In the analysis of published studies, Zhang and Chow (2004) detected more than 16 separate roles ascribed to guides by various authors, whereas Black and Weiler (2005) marked ten. Nevertheless, Quiroga (1990) believes that the role of tourist guide is neither precisely determined nor clearly described in literature, although the practice shows that the multifaceted role is in question.

A series of papers have been published on the customer perception and satisfaction within guided tours, with a special emphasis on the guide's or escort's (tour leader) performance (Whipple and Thach 1988; Quiroga 1990; Geva and Goldman 1991; Dun Ross and Iso-Ahola 1991; Mossberg 1995; Black, Ham, and Weiler 2001; Wang, Hsieh, and Huan 2000; Zhang and Chow 2004; Bowie and Chang 2005). In the study which Hughes completed in 1994 (Black, in Pastorelli 2003), tourists evaluated the guide on the basis of provided information, relation with the group and organizational skills. As for the information, it was concluded that satisfaction is at the highest level when the commentary linked the previous tourist experience of group members, interests and knowledge with the features of the area which is interpreted, defined as a “conceptual link” by Pearce (1984). In McDonnell's research (2001), foreign tourists - visitors of Sidney guided tours evaluated the contents of local guides' commentaries as well as the information delivered. On the one hand, tourists' evaluation differed substantially in terms of information on local sites and history, and shopping and

recreation, on the other. In evaluating the information quality on “current events” guides were given generally low marks. It is indicative that Australian tourists (justly assumed to be better informed in this sense) as the entire sample, perceived their guide's commentary as insufficient. Hsu's research (2000) on the perception of elderly visitors on US coach tours proves that an “interesting” tour guide is the crucial factor for being satisfied with a tour. Such a guide makes tourist experience more enjoyable for the audience, having the vital role in creating a friendly atmosphere among companions. The results of Dun Ross and Iso-Ahola's study (1991) also proved that social interaction represents a significant motivation for choosing the group tour, which means that customers are not only satisfied with presenting and interpreting attractions, but also expectant about facilitated group interaction. In the study on cruise passengers (Ham; Wailer 2005), it was noticed that tourists thought of a quality on-site guide as the one who is passionate, disseminating information in an engaging way, giving insight into local phenomena, making information relevant for tourists by presenting them clearly and appealingly. In one of the rare research on tourist satisfaction with local guides' services, Zhang and Chow (2004) applied IP (Importance-Performance) analysis and noticed that Chinese tourists in Hong Kong consider all of the 20 offered quality guides' attributes important or extremely important. The most important ones are being “Punctual”, “Able to solve problems” and “Knowledge of destination”, whereas the highest marks guides received for the following attributes: “Inform safety regulations”, “Briefing visitors on daily itinerary” and “Polite.”

Whipple and Thach (1988) point out that there are open issues related to tourist guiding and satisfaction, such as: whether a single experience is relevant or multidimensional nature of experience, and whether customers should be satisfied with all, some or selected aspects of the tour. Moreover, the mentioned authors think that the high-quality service can limit the level of possible dissatisfaction with the destination if it is not particularly attractive.

METHODOLOGY

Looking into the attitudes of foreign tourists on the domicile tourist guides' service meant applying survey methodology. It is a customer-oriented survey whose task is to determine “customers' behaviour in consuming products or services” (Vukonic and Cavlek 2001, 20), or create a full impression on customers' perception and experiences. Given the fact that the organized tourist influx in Belgrade is still unstable, it was possible to get in contact only with the tourists arriving within the international river cruises.

The questionnaire was drawn up according to the tourist satisfaction research on local tours that McDonnell (2001) used. Compared to the Australian questionnaire, the question about the contents of the guide's commentary was modified in accordance with the local circumstances, and two other questions were added: the surveyor was interested in tourists' main concern about locally guided tours as well as tourist opinion of the most important role of the tourist guide.

The sample was taken from the population of American tourists – the clients of the tour operator *Grand Circle Travel*. The company seated in Boston is known in the American market for its “old age” orientation. The survey was arranged with a Belgrade travel agency being a *ground operator* of GCT company. The travel agent

had previously informed the tour operator on the subject, aim and survey methodology. It was agreed to survey three groups of tourists with the identical cruise itinerary ("Eastern Europe and the Black Sea") visiting Belgrade on May 6th, 16th and 24th, 2009. Each had the same three-hour sightseeing city tour visiting "Josip Broz Tito" Memorial Centre (today: The Museum of Yugoslav History), St. Sava Temple and the Belgrade Fortress at Kalemegdan, the three most popular city attractions.

There were 153 passengers in the first group and 135 in the second as well as the third group. All groups had licenced guides: four for the first group and three for each of the remaining two groups. Before the tour began, the aim of the survey was first explained to the guides, and then to the tour leaders (PD, *Program directors*) disembarking the boat with tourists. The PDs were told that the survey is not connected with their service and they were asked to distribute questionnaires in the bus and inform tourists over the microphone about the research. For the convenience, the surveyed were given the opportunity to fill in the questionnaire upon their return on the ship. The completed questionnaires were collected the same afternoon and submitted to the surveyor through the local travel agent. Out of the total number (423), 176 completed questionnaires were submitted, i.e. 40.2%. Given the population of respondents and nature of research, this sample can be considered as relevant. Most of the cruise visitors were spouses who filled in one questionnaire together. Besides, there were customers (although not entirely dissatisfied with the service) who saw the survey as tedious, especially on vacation. The fewest number of completed questionnaires (27.3%) was in the second tour: due to the hot weather, which is why the group escort decided to start earlier and, being in a hurry of departure, probably did not inform tourists about the research in more detail.

In order to process data, the techniques of descriptive statistics were applied. Also, it was examined how relevant is the difference in arithmetic means. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tested the significance of difference between arithmetic means (of dependent variables) and subcategories, each of the independent variables (F coefficient). Also, regression and correlation analysis was applied in order to establish the existence and nature of correlation between certain variables. In this paper, the correlation was established by Pearson's correlation coefficient. The survey data were processed by statistical software SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) version 13.0.

Men accounted for 43%, and women for 57% of the sample. The vast majority of the surveyed (92%) is in the category of persons older than 60 (61+), which is logical, given the tour operator's orientation. In terms of educational level, surprising and evidently improbable data were collected: somewhat more than 70% of tourists argue to have obtained a graduate or postgraduate education. It is particularly unusual that almost half of the surveyed (47,6%) said to have obtained a postgraduate degree (master or PhD). Undoubtedly, respondents artificially overstated their educational status, which was also noticed in the Australian study done by McDonnell (2001).³ Although all the respondents were Americans, most of them put down data referring to the state of permanent residence: 23% is from the US West, 19% from the American South, 9% from the Midwest and 15% from the US Northeast.⁴

³ In that research, 65% of all respondents (different nationalities) allegedly took a university or postgraduate education, whereas among Americans and Canadians there were even 75% of those who said to have taken a postgraduate degree (Ibid., 5-6).

⁴ Grouping was done according to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Census_Regions_and_Divisions.PNG (05/2009).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The answer to the first question should relate to the main tourist concern about the local tour at a destination, i.e. which aspect is especially important in opting for the tour. Two dominant tourist concerns are “Program and itinerary” (49%) and “Presentation of the tour guide” (38%). Other aspects of the tour, stated as possible answers (“Walking and accessibility”, “Price”, and “Weather conditions”) account for the much smaller percentage, whereas no one chose “Quality of transportation”.

Table 1. Main Tourist Concern about the Local Tour

	Frequency (N = 170)	% of respondents
Program and itinerary	86	49.4
Presentation of the tour guide	66	37.9
Walking and accessibility	12	6.9
Other	5	2.9
Price	4	2.3
Weather conditions	1	0.6

With the reference to these data, it is natural that 90% of tourists believe the main role of tour guide is to be an information-giver (Table 2). The result corresponds to the general image on the role of domicile tourist guides at a destination. In percentage terms, the small number of respondents (only few), think the main role is to be “Culture 'broker' and mediator” (2%) or “Leader and organizer” (2%). The respondents could circle only one of the offered answers, which might have affected their opting for the “standard” and well-known role. However, such a choice is not directed against denying the importance of other roles, especially since they are interrelated in practice: from the foreign tourist's point of view, giving information is not the same as listing mere facts, but adapting them to the interest and cultural origin of customers.

Table 2. Main Role of Domicile Tourist Guide

	Frequency (N = 170)	% of respondents
Information-giver and ‘educator’	153	90.0
Interpreter and translator	1	0.6
Culture ‘broker’ and mediator	4	2.4
Leader and organizer	4	2.4
Escort and caretaker of visitors	4	2.4
Ambassador, PR and ‘protector’ of the destination	4	2.4

As for the estimation of local tour quality they were involved in, respondents could give marks on a 1-10 rating scale. Almost 70% of respondents think the tour quality exceeded their expectations, being more than satisfactory, around 30% satisfactory and only 3% unsatisfactory. The mean rating was no less than 8.8 (SD=1.6)⁵, which can be interpreted as an excellent result.

⁵ SD, Standard deviation

It is indicative that apart from good evaluation, some had a need to add comments (“excellent“, “good history lesson“, “thank you for the stories and anecdotes“, “appreciate sense of humor“ etc.), confirming their deep satisfaction. A very small number of tourists evaluated the tour quality as low. Interestingly, those questionnaires also contained justified reasons for dissatisfaction (“the guide rushed“, “the guide crossed the street without waiting for me to walk with him“, “microphone occasionally stopped“). Thus, the research confirmed that tourist satisfaction with a guided tour, even a brief one, is influenced by certain practical aspects (pace, microphone, toilet facilities), also noticed by Dunn Ross and Iso-Ahola (1991).

Data processing also served to establish if the mean rating of the tour quality differs among the surveyed of different demographic features. It was confirmed that there was only a statistically significant difference in respondents' residence (USA regions). This difference is statistically significant at 0.05, meaning that it could be argued with 95% certainty that the differences detected in this sample really exist with the population of American passengers on river cruises. It is well noticed that the marks given by respondents from US South and Northeast are higher than the ones from respondents living in the US West and Midwest. The difference in evaluation is not possible to explain, but it is most probably linked with the customers' features from certain regions (“southern mentality“ and manners). The lowest marks were given by respondents who only mentioned USA as their residence (8.3). The fact they did not mention the state they lived in might imply they did not care much about completing the questionnaire. It might have been the expression of “conceited“ attitudes of the few, which could affect the tour rating. Their marks were statistically much lower than the ones given by those who as their residence mentioned US South or Northeast. Detecting statistical significance in difference of mean rating was presented by univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA).

As for the evaluation of tour quality, it was examined which of the variables mostly affected rating. One can conclude that tourists gave higher marks for the tour quality if it had been easier for them to understand the guide and information presented, if they were satisfied with information and when, after the tour, they were confident about exploring the city on their own. These three variables well predicted the evaluation of the tour quality with significance level of 0.01 (99% certainty).

Apart from assessing the tour quality, respondents also evaluated the tourist guide's effect on tourist experience. Almost all of the respondents estimated that the guide's influence had been a positive one: up to 70% think that it was extremely positive, and 30% positive. For only 2% of respondents the tourist guide's influence was negative. The mean rating of 4.6 implies that the influence was very positive. Interestingly, fewer negative marks were given to tour guides than to the very tour.

Previously, it had been pointed out that the easiness with which tourists comprehended presented information well affected the evaluation of the tour quality: 80% of respondents estimated that it had been easy for them to understand the guide's talk. The mean rating is 4.8, indicating that guides were good at languages, speaking at an appropriate pace, clearly and articulately, avoiding too many technical or academic terms, toponyms and other local names.

More than a half of the American tourists responded that they are pretty confident (17% extremely confident and 40% confident) when asked “*How confident are you in your ability to explore the city after completing the tour?*“. One third of the respondents felt neither confident nor unconfident and the mean rating of confidence was 3.6. These data could imply that guides were not very successful in delivering information on the

orientation in space. Still, in this case, these must be the result of the respondents' age (elderly people generally feel insecure in a new environment), and personal mental picture on Belgrade as a "complicated" Balkan city.

In respondents' answers to the question "*How effective were the tour guide's attempts to encourage your interaction with local people and the local environment?*", guides received the lowest mean rating: 3.5. More than 40% of respondents gave neutral mark, i.e. they evaluated their guide as neither efficient nor inefficient. Guides were characterized as extremely successful mediators in making interaction by 13% of the tourists, and by 3% as unsuccessful. The high percentage of respondents who opted for the neutral answer indicate that they were not particularly interested in making contact with the local environment, especially on transit routes, when the stay is short. In this case, more important is the percentage of respondents giving high marks, which means that guides encouraged guest-host interaction. However, six respondents, who were dissatisfied (3.6%) with this aspect, might have expected such encouragement without getting it or they thought that no one could persuade them to make contact with the local environment.

The data on tourist satisfaction with the particular types of received information (Table 3) show that the guide's commentary, even on a short tour, should be diversified. This research proves that visitors are interested in everyday life at a destination and local community tradition apart from history and attractions. When the stay is brief, the local tour is the only contact with a destination (on a round trip and cruise), so it is natural that tourists want to receive as diverse information as possible. As in the similar research, respondents were most pleased with information on certain places during sightseeing (included in the itinerary), as well as the history presentation.⁶ Besides the information on shopping options and possible free time activities, other types of information got mean rating of 4.0 or more.

Obviously, the guides also included information on contemporary life, current events and local etiquette into their presentation. Tourist satisfaction with the information upon visiting attractions is influenced by the specific features of a walking tour affecting tourist guide methodology (the art of guiding) and tourist experience: direct contact with visitors, domination of visual information, keeping attention more easily, the use of interpretative means (plan, model), possible guide-tourist interaction etc. However, the walking tour can give reasons for dissatisfaction, either because of pace or visitors' not being able to hear the guide well within a large group.

⁶ In the Australian research (McDonnell 2001:7) there was also a clear difference between the marks respondents gave for the information on special places, history and orientation and the ones referring to shopping. McDonnell assumes that information on the local sites help tourists understand Australian culture, whereas the shopping information is probably seen as imposed upon them, in the interest of the tour organizer to make them spend money buying undesired goods or services.

Table 3. Tourist satisfaction with specific types of information in the Guide's Commentary

	Exceeded expectations (5)	Above satisfac- tory (4)	Satis- fac- tory (3)	Less than satisfac- tory (2)	Below expect- ation (1)	Mean rating	SD
	%	%	%	%	%		
Special sites (eg. the Fortress)	51.4	38.7	9.2	0.6	0.0	4.4	0.7
History	43.4	46.3	9.7	0.6	0.0	4.3	0.7
Geography (eg. pattern of city development)	37.3	45.6	16.6	0.6	0.0	4.2	0.7
Landmarks (eg. National Theatre)	38.5	42.9	18.0	0.6	0.0	4.2	0.8
Contemporary life and current events	36.5	41.2	18.8	2.4	1.2	4.1	0.9
Serbian customs and local rules	34.1	39.6	22.0	3.0	1.2	4.0	0.9
Shopping and free time activity	28.2	31.3	26.7	8.4	5.3	3.7	1.1

Interestingly, the level of satisfaction with the information on “Special sites” statistically varies much with regards to the tour date. These differences in mean satisfaction with such information are statistically important and have significance level of 0.01). Thus, mean satisfaction with the information on special sites was the highest on the tour of May, 16th (4.7), and the lowest on May, 6th (4.3). It could also be explained by conditions in which this information is presented, i.e. the influence of various external factors stated above.

Data processing gave results which show that total tourist satisfaction with the received information (commentary), based on calculating the mean satisfaction in relation to all seven types of information. With this in mind, the mean satisfaction is then 4.2, i.e. the information quality was somewhat above the respondents' expectation. Interestingly, the results obtained are statistically much different in terms of mean rating depending on the respondents' residence.

As in the case of evaluating tour quality, the respondents who stated to live in the US South and Northeast gave higher marks as well, i.e. they were more satisfied with the received information than their companions who stated US West or Midwest as their residence, or simply – USA.

In order to determine what type of information largely affected total satisfaction with the information in the guide's commentary, the linear regression analysis was applied revealing that it was the information about contemporary life and current events, Serbian customs and local etiquette as well as shopping and free time activities which deeply influence the total tourist satisfaction with the received information. Given the fact that such types of information are poorly assessed by the respondents, it should be necessary for guides to pay more attention to these aspects.

Through bivariate correlation analysis it has been concluded that there is statistically significant correlation between dependent variables, such as “information satisfaction”, “information comprehension” and “tour quality evaluation”. All acquired correlation coefficients are positive, implying that higher marks in one variable indicate the increase in marks of the second variable. Pearson's correlation coefficient between

the tour quality assessment and information satisfaction is 0.56, which proves modest positive association (significance level of 0.01). Pearson's correlation coefficient between the tour quality evaluation and information comprehension level is 0.42, also indicating the modest positive association between these two variables (significance level of 0.01). Pearson's correlation coefficient between information understanding and satisfaction is 0.51, which means that these two variables are also in modest positive association (significance level of 0.01). Intercorrelation coefficients of satisfaction with certain types of information show statistically significant correlation between the marks (at the significance level of 0.01). Intercorrelation coefficients range from 0.5 to 0.8.

CONCLUSION

The research of the American tourists' stances on the domicile tourist guiding gave positive results: tourists are satisfied both with the local tour (city sightseeing) and the selected tourist guides. High mean rating for the tour (8.8 on the 1-10 scale) shows that, being very important for customers, two aspects ("Program and itinerary" and "Presentation of the tour guide") received high marks. Such results should be associated with the adequate concept of itinerary as well as the good practice of the local agency to continuously engage professional and experienced tourist guides. Unlike other agencies which also provide services to the cruise organizers in Belgrade, the policy of relying on a limited number of renowned guides evidently gives positive results.

Tourist guides were evaluated as extremely meritorious for tourist experience (4.6 on the 1-5 scale). Certain dependent variables connected with the tourist guides' performance particularly affected the tour quality assessment: "the easiness of information comprehension" (mean rating: 4.8) and "confidence about being able to explore the city on your own after the tour" (mean rating: 3.6). The latter mean rating for the guide's performance as a pathfinder shows that more than 42.1% of respondents gave a neutral or lower mark. Having in mind that American tourists generally tend to give flattering marks and positive comments, guides should naturally pay more attention to topographic and orientation information, especially since the familiarization with the destination area is one of the presupposed reasons for enticing tourists to choose local tours.

It is indicative that tour guides got a lower rating for "being efficient in encouraging host-guest interaction" which, as explained in the discussion, does not mean they did not invest their effort.

Satisfaction with the information provided by the guide's commentary is confirmed by respondents' high marks for almost all types of information, particularly "special sites" they saw on a tour (mean rating: 4.4), and "history" information (4.3). Excellent rating in the second case is undoubtedly the result of the good presentation about communist Yugoslavia upon visiting the Memorial Centre "Josip Broz Tito", as an interesting topic for elderly American tourists. The types of information the guides did not receive mean rating above 4.0, referred to the "Serbian customs and local rules" as well as "shopping and free-time activities." The fact is that for many tourists shopping at a destination represents one of the most appealing and attractive activities as well as a sort of leisure, i.e. tourist experience, which is why the commentary should contain information on the options of the appropriate purchase of souvenirs and the like.

The empirical research had its limitations, mostly due to the population this sample was taken from: namely, only American tourists were surveyed – clientele of a tour operator, i.e. cruise organizer. Regrettably, it was impossible to conduct a survey on a sample representing more diversified – local tour inbound visitors. The author has tried to obtain approval for surveying clients of tour operators whose local tours are organized by another Belgrade travel agency, but with no success.

The small number of tourist guides whose services were the subject of research could also be considered as a limitation. Since experienced professionals are in question, the results related to their performance do not reflect a real picture on domicile guides at large.

Despite the limitations, obtained results could primarily serve as recommendation for active professional guides, organizers of city tours and excursions in Belgrade as well as those who should be involved in training of new candidates for this specific tourism activity in the future.

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