

COASTAL CITIES AS HEALTH TOURISM DESTINATIONS: PROMOTING ACTIVITIES IN PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The coast offers numerous health benefits, not only for its residents but also for its visitors. In terms of coastal city tourism, an offer of healthy activities allows visitors to not interrupt their daily healthy habits and instead enjoy the benefits of the destination while promoting a better health condition. Some people still share the view that when they travel, they simply want to relax and do not care that much about their health in terms of nutrition and exercising. Vlissingen, being a small coastal city by the sea within the Netherlands, especially attracts visitors with its long south-facing promenade and city beach. It is unknown to what extent health aspects are of importance to its visitors. For this reason, this study explores the city's visitors on this issue as well as searching for ideas on how to promote health activities if showing potential and desires. The study addresses to what extent the visitors are interested in their health and if they are aware of the health benefits of the coast and possible coastal activities promoting their health. Destination management, policies and supply-side stakeholders are also investigated following earlier consumer-demand exploration findings. By interviews and desk research, potential improvements for the city to integrate health benefits into its existing tourism product are unravelled. The practice-based nature of this study emphasizes how health activities could be fostered in associated practices as visiting, branding, co-creation, and entrepreneurship in this Dutch city by the sea.

Keywords: health tourism, city branding, coastal activities, practice-based studies.

1 INTRODUCTION

A lot of European destinations have experienced fast growth and stagnation, which had an enormous effect on the local economies, job vacancies and the destination development. Health is one the most important aspects of people's lives. Some sources even say that it is one of the main drives in human's consumption patterns [1]. Some people are even nearly obsessed about health and relate everything good in life to it [2]. Therefore, one can understand why people also travel for health. Health tourism was one of the first forms of tourism [3]. Many people imagine health tourism only as a medical tourism, however, health tourism can be defined as a leisure activity performed away from home, which has the purpose to improve one's health. This could be achieved through sports activities, relaxation, but also with help of the environment. Especially, coastal environment has a very positive effect on human's health, not only physically but also mentally [4]. Relaxing by the beach was found out to be one of the most popular activities for calming one's mind. Generally, seaside visits prove to improve people's mood and strengthen their awareness about the environment of the shore. Therefore, combining these benefits could be beneficial not only for the future visitors, but also for the destination. Activities promoting people's health, as walking, cycling, but also yoga or some water sports, could be a solution to combine destination management, improve health levels of the visitors and use the benefits of the coast. The Dutch coastal region of Zeeland is developing into a health region. Elaborating on this, there seems to be a need for more promotion of health activities in those places in the region that are not directly related to health. There are two seaside resorts in the region that are emphasising coastal health tourism but other places could benefit from becoming a health region destination as well. The city of Vlissingen is known for its long boulevard and city beach, but is not clear to what extent healthy tourist activities are evident. By having the



conditions of the coast, which has many positive benefits on people's health, a combination with the right offer of health stimulating activities, Vlissingen might improve its marketing strategies and become a more attractive coastal city. The main objective of this explorative study is to create a preliminary answer to how the coastal city of Vlissingen could better promote health stimulating activities that are suitable for tourists. This practice-based study allows to include several angles, as it not only concentrates on theory shows is the best for destination development, but also from what the tourist experience and what is really offered and possible in Vlissingen as a health stimulating coastal tourist product.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to promote a destination such as Vlissingen as an attractive tourist location and bring more visitors, one has to understand the importance of destination management. Successful destination managers have to consider other industries and global drivers, which are intertwined with tourism, but also to differentiate themselves and follow the current trends [5]. Every destination, which tried to attract more visitors, can be seen as a company trying compete with others by selling the best products, defining their markets and setting the right marketing strategies [6]. Therefore, a successful tourist destination has to maximize its sales objectives and efforts in order to survive in the endless amount of competition – both national and international. This method can be explained as an entrepreneurial model of city governance [7]. Its main aspects involve: advertising and promotion, large-scale physical redevelopment, public art and civic statuary, mega-events, cultural regeneration and public-private partnerships. Before discussing about healthy activities or healthy destination, it is important to define what "health" means according to the current theories and guidelines. Health was defined by World Health Organization as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity [8]. However, since then times have changed. Many various illnesses and diseases evolved and scientists have been trying to reformulate the definition. As Huber [9] argues, the current WHO definition of health as complete wellbeing is no longer fit for purpose given the rise of chronic disease. Together with her team she created a new concept called "positive health", which considers six different dimensions having an impact on people's health. The proposal for a new definition is: "Health is the ability to adapt and self-manage in the face of social, physical, and emotional challenges" [10, p. 217]. The six pillars are as follows: bodily functions, mental functions and perceptions, spiritual/existential dimension, quality of life, social and societal participation, and daily functioning. This research will focus specifically on the physical aspect of health, however, all other aspects are linked to it so are not ignored. Therefore, every physical activity, which will be offered as an improvement into the city promotional activities, should be also at least partly beneficial for people's mental health or social health. An example of this could be yoga at the beach, where one can practice not only their strength and flexibility of the body, but also do some meditation and relax the mind, and meet some new people in the group.

There are many studies proving that health is one of the most important aspects of human's life. The desire of individuals (especially in the modern society) for health is the main drive behind their patterns of consumption [1]. Some even talk about 'healthism' and consider it as everything good what life offers [2]. Therefore, it is understandable that travelling for the purpose of health was one of the first forms of tourism [3], exemplified by ancient Greeks travelling to Epidaurus for healing baths. Health tourism can be seen as a category for two sub-categories: wellness tourism and medical tourism [11], where 'wellness' is about wellbeing or prevention and 'medical' about illness or curing. In this study, especially opportunities of 'wellness health tourism' for Vlissingen as a way of destination management



marketing are addressed. Health tourism could be defined as a leisure activity taken away from home for the purpose of improving one's state of health [12]. Others explain it as provision of health facilities utilizing the natural resources of a country, in a particular climate [13] or a meta-category that captures both medical (e.g., surgical, diagnostic) and nonmedical (e.g., spa therapies, holistic care) health-related care accessed abroad [14].

Many studies prove that coastal visits are beneficial for our bodies, not only physically but also mentally [4]. Overall, seaside visits highly improve people's mood and strengthen their awareness about the biology and ecology of the shore. Another study reveals that the coast proximity has a positive influence on health and decreases deprivation [15]. Lastly, geographical proximity to the coast increases physical activity participation levels of the residents [16]. The concept of health promoting activities is discussed very frequently. Some claim that more sports support better health and some say that too much of physical activity can damage our bodies. Therefore, it is pivotal to specify what activities are according to scientific-based sources truly promoting people's health condition and what activities are considered as unhealthy. Based on research findings [17], sedentary behaviour is considered as significantly unhealthy and a risk factor for health problems. Unfortunately, one third of the work time in average is spent by sitting. On the other hand, a health promoting activity for the age group of 18–55 years is defined as a half hour at least moderately intense physical activity ($> = 4$ METs) at least five, but preferably all days of the week; the example of moderate intensity physical activity in adults are walking with 5–6 km/h (brisk walking) and cycling with 15 km/h, but also practicing yoga or some water sports [18]. Intense physical activity could be such as aerobic, dancing, jogging, but also some more intense water sports, which increase the body's heart rate. According to research from Hildebrandt, Ooijendijk and Hopman-Rock [19] about quality of life of Dutch population in relation to physical activity and health, results show that Dutch people started realizing the importance physical activity having an effect on health and more people try to follow the Fit-guideline. For this reason, health activities taking place in the coastal context of Vlissingen could attract tourists. It is, however, not known to what extent health is integrated in current existing activities and coastal city branding efforts evident in Vlissingen.

3 METHODS

The objective of this study is to explore how and which activities could be better promoted to stimulate health tourism in the coastal city of Vlissingen. Its practical nature shifts emphasis on consumer demands only to the preliminary understanding of practices related to visiting Vlissingen, the activities offered and the addressing of health in branding and promoting the city. This practice-based study allowed to explore what Vlissingen offers for the tourists in order to stimulate health-tourism at this destination. The focus is on activities that are generally believed to promote one's health, e.g. sports, walking and wellness activities, could be undertaken in the close surrounding of the city's beach and the sea. The methods combined in this study entail desk research, own observations, five semi-structured interviews and one in-depth expert interview.

The first step was carry out desk research, which helped to find out which local organisations could be visited to study practices in health activity promotion: it also allowed to have a general sense of what Vlissingen offers. This information was analysed in its own regard but also used for support in the conducting of interviews with tourists at the boulevard. Question lists included open questions, allowing for extra questions during the interview to obtain detailed answers from the respondents. Topics followed the concepts discussed in theory and related to destination branding, the view on health and health tourism, perceptions of benefits of the coast, and activities that promote health. The respondents of the qualitative



semi-structured interviews were randomly chosen tourists at the boulevard in Vlissingen, who had the time and wanted to cooperate. In several days at different moments in time of data collection, five tourists wanted to share their thoughts. Since the purpose of the research was to grasp some ideas for an improvement and together with desk research, own observations and an interview with an expert, the low number of interviewees is not seen as too problematic. The interviews were recorded with the agreement of the respondents and stored in separate files for later processing. The tourist office was visited in person to find out how much efficient information is provided and what is the staff's knowledge about water-sport activities in Vlissingen and nearby. Furthermore, two largest hotels in Vlissingen were visited for finding more information about their promotion of health and exercising and their cooperation with local organisations that for instance provide sports lessons. The interviewed expert was a staff member of the life-guards' team in Vlissingen, which helped to acquire more practical information, rules and limitations for sport activities on the beach and gave useful recommendations. Other respondents, such as staff members of hotels and a staff member of the local tourist office, were asked a few questions as a part of this practice-based study, however, they were not recorded; the brief information was written down immediately as field notes. At one moment, the point of saturation in exploring health activity promotion for tourists was being met. In analysis, the answers were generally coded using earlier concepts from theory and the research instrument. Afterwards, a more detailed coding process took place for better data categorizing and leading to explorative insights. The practice-based nature of this study addresses implicitly how health activities could be fostered in associated practices as visiting, branding, co-creation, and entrepreneurship in this Dutch city by the sea. Due to the explorative nature of this practice-based study, the results only reflect the researchers' opinions and are by no means intended to generalize about coastal health tourism demands nor offers and promotion in Vlissingen.

4 RESULTS

The resulting explorative insights that could eventually foster coastal health tourism in the city of Vlissingen are divided into five subjects, namely branding, health tourism, coastal benefits, health promoting activities, and possibilities for water activities.

4.1 Branding coastal activities

When it comes to promotion of Vlissingen as a part of its city branding, there is not much to be found on the internet or media. Although, there are several websites providing information about accommodation, restaurants, beaches, activities and alike, it seems to be somewhat confusing which website should the tourists use. There are three main websites providing similar information, however, it would be more efficient to unify the information into one proper website and to cooperate with other towns, organization or private companies in order to increase the promotion of Vlissingen as a tourist destination. There are plenty of activities and day trips one could undertake in Vlissingen. These range from visiting museums, taking hikes, horseback riding, go sports fishing, relax at a wellness centre or experience particular events and bars. However, there are not that many health-related activities as there could potentially be. Moreover, a lot of activities offered at the websites or at the tourist office, are situated outside of Vlissingen, which moves the economic benefits away from Vlissingen. In order to find out whether there is any effective promotion of Vlissingen as a tourist destination, the interviewees were asked about the reason they decided to come for a visit to Vlissingen and how did they hear about the city. According to the answers, most people already knew Vlissingen either because they live nearby or their friends travel there



sometimes for holiday. The convenient proximity from the tourists' homes to Vlissingen was the most common reason to visit Vlissingen, together with the fact that money-wise it is cheap compare to other coastal destinations such as Koksijde in Belgium. Besides that, the tourists chose Vlissingen for its coast, because it is quite and beautiful. Moreover, the interviewees shared their views at the amount and quality of leisure activities available in Vlissingen. It was discovered that majority of visitors are satisfied about this factor, but nobody showed too much of excitement and when it came to suggestions for improvement, almost everyone suggested something, such as more bars, especially at the beach and more diversity in bars so that people can choose the bar according to their favourite music. Another advice was to offer more activities for children or elderly.

4.2 Health and health tourism

There is not much found on the topic of health tourism when it comes to promotion of Vlissingen. There is a wellness centre and spa called Thermen and Beauty Zeeland. They are members of a national wellness group SWG (Select Wellness Group). There is Yoga by the Sea, hiking, cycling and riding trails, the tourists have a chance to rent a bicycle at several places or to go swimming at the Badstrand and Nollestrand. However, Yoga by the Sea is offered only by Golden Tulip and not by the tourist office. When the interviewees were asked about health tourism, many of them were not completely familiar with the meaning and what precisely it involves. After a brief explanation, it was firstly measured to what extent respondents were interested about healthy lifestyle. Most respondents admitted that they are not highly involved in healthy lifestyle, but they try a bit, for instance to eat healthy or to exercise sometimes, go for walks. On the other hand, one respondent said that their family tries to eat healthy, but not when they are on holiday.

In order to see whether the visitors engage in activities linked to health tourism, the interviewees were asked, which health tourism activities available in Vlissingen draw their attention. Some people were not aware of any activity or perhaps were not sure what is considered as a 'health-tourism activity', even after a brief explanation. Some do not consider Vlissingen as a health-tourism destination. Some people said the local spa draw their attention or they visited it.

4.3 Benefits of the coast

Despite the fact that nearly all pictures placed on the websites of Vlissingen include the coast, there is no information found for the visitors of Vlissingen emphasizing the health benefits of the coast. All hotels or the wellness centre Thermen and Beauty focus on the relaxation aspect, when mentioning Vlissingen and the sea. Much more information about the health benefits could be used as an advantage and a promotion tool for Vlissingen. This topic was aiming to examine the extent to which the visitors of Vlissingen appreciate the coast, whether it had an influence on their decision about their holiday destination and if they are aware of the health benefits of spending time by the coast. Every respondent agreed on the fact that the coast was the main or one of the main reasons to visit Vlissingen; some people specifically mentioned the long beaches. However, when the respondents were asked whether one of the reasons to visit Vlissingen was because of the health benefits associated with the coast, most people were not sure what to say, at first, because they never thought about it. Therefore, most of the responses were admitting that it is good to know that visiting the coast brings a lot of health benefits, but they were not consciously choosing to come for their holiday to Vlissingen for this specific reason.



4.4 Activities promoting health

Based on the findings from exploring the promotion of sports, their variety and accessibility for the visitors, it seems that there are a few sports, which could be used for promotion of Vlissingen as a healthy destination, but they are not promoted properly and therefore many tourists have no chance to even find out there are such sports. For example, Yoga by the Sea offers yoga classes, however, there is no information of flier found at the tourist office. Only the hotel Golden Tulip cooperates with Yoga by the Sea and offers their lessons by the beach nearby the hotel. Also, Bootcamp Vlissingen offers lessons outdoors, mostly at the beach, however, no promotion is found either by the tourist office or the websites of Vlissingen or elsewhere and therefore it is difficult to find it, when coming for a few days visit. Swimming pool Vrijburg has some promotion by the tourist office and the websites; same for cycling and renting bicycles. Board water-sports are not available in Vlissingen and when asking at the tourist office, one is advised to travel to Domburg or Schouwen-Douveland or Kamperland. It is a pity to send the tourists immediately away when they visit Vlissingen and therefore, it would be more efficient to find those activities, which can be performed in Vlissingen and take advantage of the coast, so that more tourists stay in Vlissingen and contribute to the local economy. Firstly, the interviews were used to explore to what extent the visitors engaged in sport activities in Vlissingen. Most people have the feeling that Vlissingen does not offer many sport activities are the respondents do not engage in sports in Vlissingen, but elsewhere, for instance in Domburg or Kamperland. Some respondents mentioned that while visiting Vlissingen, they engage in walking, swimming, cycling, and other similar elderly feasible sport activities. Secondly, the interviewees were asked how important it is for them whether the sport activities improve their health. Some people said that it is somewhat important for them. For some people it is not the main reason to do sports but only a benefit, for someone it is not important and someone is not consciously thinking about the health benefits of doing sports or exercising, but does it for other reasons.

4.5 Possibilities for water activities

There are several rules and limitations for the visitors of the two beaches Badstrand or Nollestrand, that does influence the possibilities for activities in the water. Visitors of both beaches in Vlissingen are required to swim only in the area between the beach and the smaller red buoys. Besides recreational swimming, the visitors can also join occasional swimming competitions. In 2014 there was a contest to swim to Breskens, which had a lot of success among participants and visitors, however, it is very costly. When organizing such an event, the commercial ships must be stopped from passing by, which delays them from delivering goods and therefore the companies must be paid off for this inconvenience. Therefore, this event does not occur every year, even though the organizers would like to repeat it again in the future. Moreover, there is a swimming organization called Zwemmen Langs Walcheren, which organizes around four swimming competitions per year. It usually takes place along the coast and it is around 4 km long. The area between the smaller red buoys and larger red buoys is the recreational section. This area is designated for visitors using smaller boats, SUP and other water sports. Lastly, the area between the large red buoys and large green buoys is a commercial section. This space is assigned for large commercial ships and no visitors are allowed to swim or do sports in this area. Therefore, despite the fact there is potentially a designated area for water sports, most water sports require wind and large waves, which are very rare to see in Vlissingen. Water-sports requiring large waves and strong wind are usually not feasible in Vlissingen. Only during extreme weather conditions when the wind is very



strong and therefore also the waves are higher, it is possible to do for instance surfing or windsurfing. Usually, the visitors are recommended to go to Domburg or even further, where the coast is facing the North Sea and therefore the waves are much bigger and the wind conditions are also more suitable for doing water sports there. Moreover, the equipment is not available to rent in Vlissingen. The nearest place to rent is also in Domburg. Perhaps, the only board water-sport, which can be performed in Vlissingen, is SUP, swimming and similar water sports not requiring high waves. SUP can be performed without high waves and strong wind. However, if the visitors want to cross around the corner dividing Badstrand and Nollestrand, it is not allowed to do so due to the strong currents at this area, which can be very dangerous. To conclude, from this it can be seen that there are many limitation for performing water-sports in Vlissingen. However, those sports not requiring strong wind and high waves could be organized either at Badstrand, where it is closer to the centre, or Nollestrand, which is a bit further, but on the other hand it is longer.

5 DISCUSSION

This chapter emphasizes differences and similarities of the results with the theory. Concerning destination management, Kavaratzis [7] explains city branding should be operated as running a business. Its main aspects involve: advertising and promotion, large-scale physical redevelopment, public art and civic statuary, mega-events, cultural regeneration and public-private partnerships. Branding in Vlissingen does not follow those steps completely. Promotion, as an important part of the city branding, is according to the results not very effective. Most of the respondents know about Vlissingen simply because they either live nearby or from their friends and family. Results from the practice-based study also show that there is nothing like a city campaign, which would emphasize the city's competitive advantages and attract more visitors, while promotion plays an important role in city branding. As any other marketing product it requires a brand identity, a brand differentiation and a brand personality. In case of Vlissingen, its brand identity and differentiation is not very strong. Concerning health and health tourism, the desire of individuals for health is believed to be, however the main drive behind their patterns of consumption [1]. Still, according to the results of the interviews, most respondents are not that interested about maintaining their health. Moreover, based on the practical study, in Vlissingen, there are not many activities specifically linked to promote people's health. There are some sport activities such as yoga and boot camp, yet, they are not advertised for the tourists of Vlissingen. The question could stand, whether the tourists would be interested about these activities, if Vlissingen decided to promote them intensively and as a brand differentiation used healthy tourism. As one respondent said they don't really care for healthy eating whilst being on holiday, it might be that some people might not be attracted to the concept of health tourism at all.

When concentrating on the benefits of the coast, there are many studies that prove coastal visits are beneficial for physical and mental states [4]. Overall, the seaside visits highly improve people's mood and strengthen their awareness about the biology and ecology of the shore. Another study reveals that the coast proximity has a positive influence on health and decreases deprivation [15]. According to the interviewees, the coast is the main reason for them to visit Vlissingen. In addition, based on the practical study, Vlissingen seems to use the coast as a main attraction to lure more tourists. However, when asked whether the respondents are aware of the health benefits of the coast, nobody was consciously deciding to visit the coastal city to improve their health. On the other hand, some people seemed to be happy with that idea and did acknowledge that while they had not thought about it, it is indeed the perception of healthy air and the sea that attracted them. Vlissingen could maintain and



improve the quality of its long beaches, which are well admired, and attract people for not only long, but also clean and beautiful beaches. The waterfront of Vlissingen invites activities that promote a better health. Unfortunately, based on the interviews, the respondents find it difficult to engage in a physical activity in Vlissingen, because not that many interesting and suitable [18] activities are offered. On the other hand, for some people it might be the fact that they are not interested in performing any sports while on vacation. Furthermore, the respondents were asked if the physical health-promoting factor plays an important role in their sports activity motivation. For some people it is important to stay in a good health condition and for some people, sports simply means fun; they do not link it directly to their (physical) health. Due to the limited water zone being available due to rules and regulations, it is not feasible to perform water-sports as surfing or kiteboarding in Vlissingen: the commercial ships passing by results in having an area too small for people to practice these sports.

6 CONCLUSION

For successful city branding, differentiation and promotion is one of the most important aspects. Vlissingen's differentiation and promotion emphasizing coastal health benefits is basically non-existent. If using the right strategies, Vlissingen could improve its offer to its visitors and better brand the city as a healthy coastal city. The health concept is nearly not used at all at the websites, but it could make an enormous difference, not only for the specific target groups, but perhaps even for individuals who would like to try this new concept of healthy travelling. Moreover, visitors greatly enjoy the beaches in Vlissingen and share the opinion that they are beautiful and long. If the health factor is combined with something what people already enjoy – the beaches – it could be more effective than simply trying to convince the potential visitors to become healthy tourists. Starting from the destination management, the city Vlissingen could create a promotional campaign, which would emphasize the health benefits of the coast, pointing out that Vlissingen has long and beautiful beaches and offer the potential visitors attractive health promoting activities, such as a weekend at the local wellness centre, boot camp on the beach, yoga on the beach, cycling along the dunes, or if possible stand up paddle boarding. For the reason that a lot of people enjoy relaxation and less sports, it could promoted that Vlissingen is a place to relax, which is also good for people's health (decreasing stress levels, recharging). As older visitors might prefer different activities than younger visitors, it would be smart to offer for instance programs for older people including yoga, city walks and informal bingo nights for the social aspect. For the younger people there could be SUP lessons and a rental shop, situated at the Nollestrand. Moreover, the municipality could try to cooperate with some local entrepreneurs and offer them to differentiate their bar more as a cocktail bar with music, following the recent trends; during the summer busy periods, they could invite a DJ to play at the bar. The municipality could contact the local sport clubs that organizes boot camp and cross fit lessons in Vlissingen, and could offer to join the city's promotional health campaign and organize more lessons on the beach, where the visitors could combine the factor of exercising, benefits of the coast and fun with a challenge. Yoga by the Sea is already an existing concept, however, as discovered during the research, it does not cooperate with many companies or even the local tourist office. Future research should focus on expanding data collection to better understand practices related to health tourism practices in a coastal city. Interviewing practitioners that carry branding, spatial planning and promotional practices are a required to get a more complete understanding. Studying associated practices in other coastal cities would foster comparisons and stimulate learning from other cases.



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