Active Sport Heritage and Tourism Development: The Case of the Tour of Flanders Cyclo Event

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Sport tourism

Abstract 2016-199

Friday, June 3, 2016
2:05 PM

20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Forum East 2)

Sport heritage, initially one of the least understood components of Gibson's (1998) three-part sport tourism typology, is now a well-established research area in its own right (Ramshaw, 2014). The relationship between sport heritage and tourism development, however, remains relatively under examined. The objective of this presentation is to explore how active sport tourism activities that are part of the local sport heritage landscape can be leveraged to stimulate tourism development. Case study data from participants at the 2013 edition of the Tour of Flanders Cyclo are used. The theoretical framework of serious leisure is applied to discuss the behaviour and commitment event participants as active sport tourists and the implications for future tourism development.

The Tour of Flanders Cyclo is an annual, international participatory cycle touring event that is organised in conjunction with the elite, world-famous and more than 100-year-old Tour of Flanders cycling race. The Tour of Flanders Cyclo is a single-day sport event that is open to the general public and includes three routes that differ in length, intensity and difficulty (namely 83, 133 and 259 km). The backdrop to this physically demanding sport event is formed by the many cobblestoned hills of the Flemish Ardennes, a hilly region in the south of the province of East Flanders. The fact that participants can ride their own Tour of Flanders on the day before the elite cyclists – while, depending on the length of the route, completely or partially copying the route of the elites – makes it a unique and attractive event. This is particularly the case among international participants who in 2015 accounted for about 50 percent of event participants. To ensure the viability of the event and the viability of the host as a prime sport tourism destination, it is important to understand the different experiences and expectations of (inter)national sport tourists and to leverage the event accordingly.

Quantitative and qualitative data from participants at the 2013 edition of the Tour of Flanders Cyclo were collected through an online survey. A total of 1,091 registrants completed the survey (response rate = 6.95 percent), of which 441 were international respondents who mostly travelled from Belgium’s neighbouring countries. Data on socio-demographic variables, cycling orientation, cycling identification, active participation in the Tour of Flanders Cyclo and passive spectating of the Tour of Flanders were analysed using Pearson chi-square tests and descriptive analyses. One open-ended question that specifically asked respondents to elaborate upon why they participated in the Tour of Flanders Cyclo was included and analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Markland, 2007). In addition, respondents were asked to rate the importance of twelve event-specific characteristics in their decision to take part (e.g., the tradition of the Tour of Flanders motivates me to participate; riding an event with legendary hills motivates me to participate). Statistically significant differences between the international sample (N = 441) and the Belgian sample (N = 650) of event participants will be elaborated upon.

Within the existing literature, individuals are labelled as serious leisure participants based upon the presence of six qualities, including: perseverance, leisure career, personal effort, ethos/subculture, durable benefits and identification (Stebbins, 1992). Evidence of these qualities was found among international sport tourists who travelled to take part in the Tour of Flanders Cyclo, trained longer to prepare physically for the event, identified themselves more often as competitive cyclists and reported higher levels of identification (at the personal as well as the social level) when compared to their Belgian counterparts. Furthermore, international participants were more likely to immerse oneself in the subculture of cycling by participating in the Tour of Flanders Cyclo the first day and by watching the elite cyclists live along the route during the Tour of Flanders the following day. Although international participants clearly demonstrated characteristics of serious sport tourists, two-thirds of the international respondents only participated in the Tour of Flanders Cyclo and not in other participatory cycling events throughout the cycling season – not even in their home country. Although they were seriously involved with cycling and the Tour of Flanders, international participants were not likely to develop a serious event travel career which could include participation in the Tour of Flanders on a regular basis (Getz & McConnell, 2011).
This one-off participation can, in part, be explained by the fact that international respondents were mostly motivated to take part because of the unique and attractive characteristics of the Tour of Flanders, including its cobbled hills, history and atmosphere. By elaborating upon the heritage of the event – which was less important among Belgian respondents – international sport tourists suggested that you have to ride this classic event at least once in your life when you consider yourself to be a real cyclist. The importance of sport heritage for active sport tourists has clear implications for event leveraging and tourism development as strategies to promote long-term engagement with international participants should focus on creating meaningful event experiences that cultivate the physical experience of sport heritage. Ultimately, this presentation demonstrates both the role sport heritage could play in broader forms of sport tourism development as well as highlights the relationship between active and heritage sport tourism.

References:


