

TOURISTS IN THE OLD CITY OF SALAMANCA: WALKING, PERCEPTION AND (MIS)AWARENESS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Heritage in historic cities is made up of tangible and non-tangible elements. Geographical site, housing styles, architectural materials or the urban grid itself are material and valuable resources. Social life, economic activities and cultural representations are immaterial assets too. However, tourists who visit historic cities usually catch a very slim perception of those interwoven elements that support the identity of old cities. Factors related to the trip (time span, previous information, the company of friends or relatives) are highly influential on the richness of the tourist experience. But cities themselves are also responsible for this reductionist behaviour because they design itineraries and print city maps which lead tourists towards a very short sample of iconic destinations (churches, palaces, walls, museums) that become a must-see. These personal and institutional practices finally shape a plain or succinct image of the historic city's heritage developed along a pathway flanked by architectural facades and wonderful vistas that preclude the social and urban context.

This article discusses and analyses this problem in the case of Salamanca (Spain), whose old city was appointed for the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1988. A huge concentration of visitors and tourists is recorded along the short shaft that connects Plaza Mayor, Rúa Mayor, Plaza de Anaya and Patio de Escuelas Menores, which is only a small part of the many and diverse resources and locations enclosed in this remarkable historic city. Such a restrictive tourism pattern has already been detected in this and other World Heritage cities in Spain, but it has not been neither mapped nor addressed from the tourism management perspective; these are the two main contributions of this article.

2. THE SIMPLIFICATION OF THE HISTORIC CITY: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

According to Ashworth & Page (2011), urban tourism shows four main features. *Selectivity*, because only a small part of the city is usually visited; *rapidity* (stages are short, both in the city as a whole and in each of the hotspots), *repetition* (the probability of returning is higher for larger cities and, as a whole, is lower for urban than for non-urban destinations) and *capriciousness* (urban destinations become popular or forgotten under the influence of marketing and the media). These empirical facts underlie in the theoretical concepts that have been launched to depict such a fragmented urban landscape. Terms like ‘tourist precinct’, ‘tourist district’, ‘tourist enclave’ or ‘tourist bubble’ all point to those small but iconic areas of the city where most visitors gather, walk, sightsee and consume.

Historic neighbourhoods in European cities probably constitute the best example of these tourist districts. No surprise, then, that Ashworth & Tunbridge (2000) coined the term ‘tourist-historic city’ to define the social construction of the historic city as a world-class tourist product endowed with specific and distinctive facilities, signposts and imagery for supplying information and regulating the tourist experience.

Current research about tourism in historic and heritage cities has carefully developed these issues via case-studies, available for a wide array of Spanish hotspots like Toledo, Granada, Ávila, León, Sevilla, or Santiago de Compostela. In their deep review of this literature, De la Calle & García (1998a) sum up the implications of rapidity and selectivity for Spanish historic cities and conclude that their local authorities and the tourism industry as a whole are challenged by two processes. First, the over-concentration of visitors in a narrow catalogue of resources and sites. Second, the subsequent under-use (and mis-awareness) of a large amount of alternative nodes that should be capitalized in order to provide a deeper, wider and more nuanced experience for tourists and visitors, far beyond the actually narrow one.

Within this theoretical, empirical and methodological context, this article makes three specific contributions. First, it is focused in Salamanca, which has not been yet properly addressed as a heritage tourist destination in academic literature. Second, tourists’ mental representations of the historic city are mapped. And finally, some conclusions are drawn to improve tourism management in the historic city in order to pull tourists out of the core tourist district. This applied side of the article explicitly wants to contribute to a more sustainable development of tourism in Salamanca, both reducing congestion along the aforementioned shaft and spreading the positive effects of urban tourism towards other nodes within the old historic city.

3. METHODOLOGY

Different procedures and research techniques have been used to track the pathways and practices of tourists in the old city of Salamanca. First, fieldwork and direct observation of tourists’ walking patterns. Second, a fifteen-question questionnaire was fulfilled by 48 tourists, randomly chosen over the old historic city. In addition, personal semi-structured

interviews were held with stakeholders of the tourism industry and management in Salamanca, and the main tourist information facilities were also visited and monitored. Documentary sources as city maps and Internet websites were, of course, analyzed to compare their contents with the information gathered through other direct methods.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The tourist sample that fulfilled the questionnaire is mostly made of women and the most prominent age groups range from 40 to 80 year old. A remarkable 60.4 per cent arrived to Salamanca as independent travellers and the rest were members of a guided group tour. Stay is usually short, because 77 per cent of tourists visit the city for three days or less. Visitors and tourists retrieve information from different sources, the local Tourism Bureau and official guiders (either locally borrowed or not) being the most usual ones. Few interviewees had purchased a full-length tourist guide as a main source for designing their walking choices.

Tourists who arrive to Salamanca in guided or group tours also visit the city in groups led by their usual guider or borrow a local guider. These people do not hang around Salamanca at their own will. Therefore, professional guiders have a deep influence on the patterns and itineraries followed by these tourists. On the opposite, tourists who manage their own travel enjoy a more diversified set of information sources. Only 8 per cent of them follow an official guided tour, but 25 per cent get information from the Tourism Bureau; relatives are also an information source for these visitors (11 per cent), who had already enjoyed a previous stay in Salamanca in 20 per cent of the cases. But it is only 20 per cent of tourists, either group or individual ones, who walk over Salamanca without an intended destination; this figure underlines the deep influence that oral or printed sources exert upon tourists' walking patterns.

To a greater or lesser extent, all visitors are found to follow a restricted itinerary and/or remember to have visited very few hotspots: the shaft spanning from Plaza Mayor to Rúa Mayor, the cathedrals and the ancient University of Salamanca (founded in 1218) constitutes the core tourist historic district or precinct. The length of the stay in Salamanca does not add key nuances to this fundamental pattern; only short extensions north and southwards along the streets which depart from the Plaza Mayor are reported as walking space by tourists who stay for more than three days in Salamanca. Information provided by local relatives and friends, or previous knowledge from earlier visits to the city, are two minor additional factors pushing tourists to leave the core node and visit other attractions.

Nevertheless, many other nodes and resources very close to this tourist precinct are neglected by the flow of visitors and tourists. Data show that their personal features (age, gender, job, nationality) play a very marginal role in their actual way of practicing the city. Their walking behaviour is mostly shaped by a very strong and deep-rooted pattern which is built even before the arrival to the city. According to other sources and statistics, such a walking pattern is also persistent over time, so tourism authorities must react and develop a strategy for scattering tourists out of the overcrowded historic core.

Some attempts have been made to offer a richer experience for tourists in Salamanca. Signposts have been updated and they are actually including information about other local

destinations, but overconcentration along the main shaft is still a problem. More actions should be put into practice. Some possibilities to be explored would be: (i) design and delivery of city maps where thematic historic itineraries outside the over-visited areas are displayed; (ii) development of shopping tourism by signaling the streets where local and global retailers are available, some of them in re-furbished and appealing historic buildings; (iii) boosting the role of the under-used and almost unknown Visitors' Welcome Centre, whose modern facilities clearly explain the whole range of possibilities that Salamanca holds for tourism with different interests; (iv) the involvement of alternative ways of tourism management, like free guided tours led by local volunteers who dare to share their favorite locations with non local visitors.