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**GOING BEYOND SUN, SAND, AND SURF? AN IMPORTANCE-PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF ACTIVITIES IN A 3S RESORT DESTINATION**

An Importance-Performance Analysis of Activities in a 3S Resort Destination

Abstract: Recent studies have suggested that consumer demand for coastal tourism may be changing to incorporate a wider variety of activities including more adventurous and/or authentic experiences. This study analyzes the results of a survey of tourists departing a 3S destination using an importance performance analysis methodology to examine the importance of nontraditional 3S activities (safaris, sightseeing in cities, guided tours, etc) compared to more traditional activities (swimming, snorkeling, water sports, etc) and to provide suggestions for improving the tourism product. Results indicate that nontraditional activities are much less important than the traditional activities. Additionally, suggestions for improving the tourism experiences are made.

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## **Introduction**

Tourism is a major source of revenue and foreign exchange for Caribbean countries and is therefore a frequently encouraged development strategy (Hawkins & Mann, 2007). Most Caribbean tourism takes place along the coast and falls into the 3S (sun, sand, and surf) category. Given the core economic role of the tourism industry in the Caribbean, and in light of suggestions that tourism demand is shifting away from 3S type destinations, it is appropriate to examine the importance of various tourism activities in popular coastal resort destinations so that suggestions can be made to guide future development. This study uses an importance-performance analysis (IPA) to evaluate the overall importance of less traditional seaside resort activities and provide recommendations for future development in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic and other similar Caribbean destinations.

### **The new tourist and the 3S resort**

Tourism along the coast appears to be as popular as ever (Hall, 2001). However, some scholars argue that the traditional 3S type of destination may be slowly becoming obsolete (Agarwal, 2002; Sedmak & Mihalic, 2008) as the tourism industry is increasing catering to new segments such as ecotourism and heritage tourism. Unfortunately, one of the shortcomings of a 3S style destination development (instead of an environmental or heritage focused development) is the strong homogenizing effect on the area's culture and appearance that often leaves the destination devoid of any meaningful character (Gale, 2005). Some scholars believe this homogenization may cause problems in the future for 3S style resorts as new, postmodern tourists (Urry, 1990) demand unique experience and activities in their vacation destinations. Sedmak and Mihalic (2008) neatly summarize the issue, stating

Many radical changes occurred on the demand side, too. Changes in people's values and preferences caused a switch of a portion of demand away from

classical seaside destinations. These “new” tourists (Poon, 1998) reject inflexible and inauthentic products developed for mass tourism and resist the globalizing and homogenizing effect of modernity through localization and augmented interest in indigenous heritage and tradition (Gale, 2005). The up-market especially started to demand more customized products and experiences within local cultures in environmentally “responsible” destinations (Carey, Gountas & Gilbert, 1997).

Changes in consumer demand for tourism products necessitate a continued examination of the traditional 3S style tourism destination. It has been suggested that a restructuring of the tourism industry in coastal destinations is occurring (Agarwal, 2002), as new types of activities are added to appease this new demand type. However, the relative necessity of these new activities and their importance to tourists has not been well documented.

This study uses an IPA framework in an effort to accomplish two research objectives: one, to examine whether non-traditional (for 3S destinations) activities are becoming important to 3S tourists, and two, to make general recommendations for future development in Punta Cana and other similar Caribbean destinations.

### **Study area**

The study took place in May of 2010 in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic. Punta Cana is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Caribbean. While it is predominately a 3S type destination, a variety of activities are available to all tourists including touring the region to see cathedrals, Ponce de Leon’s castle, and National Parks.

### **Methods**

Over the course of five days, the research team attempted to survey all departing passengers at the Punta Cana airport by intercepting individuals seated in the terminal and the food court. The survey was offered in English, Spanish, French, and German. Included in the survey was a series of Likert scale questions about the respondent’s satisfaction with 15

popular activities and their satisfaction with their experience in Punta Cana as a whole (from 1 = Poor to 5 = Excellent). These 15 activities were identified by local developers and managers as being the most popular activities in the region.

The data was analyzed using an IPA methodology. The IPA is meant to give a clear assessment of how well various attributes are performing along with how important they are to overall satisfaction. IPAs can give a quick overview of what areas are most in need of improvement. In this study, the various activities are considered the attributes of the vacation experience, allowing us to examine which activities are most important to the vacation satisfaction. This study slightly modifies the methodology recently suggested by Deng (2007). To briefly summarize, respondents are given Likert scale questions which ask them to identify their overall satisfaction with the product (in this case the vacation as a whole) along with their satisfaction with a number of that product's attributes (in this case the activities). An attribute's performance is then calculated as its mean satisfaction response from the Likert scale questions. Determining an item's importance is a three step process. One, the natural logs of the responses to the attributes' (in this case the activities) satisfaction are taken. Two, a linear regression using the natural log of the attributes' satisfaction as independent variables and the overall satisfaction as the dependent variable is performed. And three, the partial correlations of these independent variables from the linear regression are used as the importance scores for the attributes. The importance and performance of each attribute are then compared to the mean scores for all attributes and these comparisons are used to place the dimensions into four categories as delineated in Table 1.

**Table 1: IPA categories**

Activities' importance compared to mean	Activities' performance compared to mean	Traditional name for category
Higher	Higher	Good Job
Higher	Lower	Concentrate Here

Lower	Higher	Possible Overkill
Lower	Lower	Low Priority

This methodology is notably different from the traditional IPA methodology (Martilla and James; 1977) in which respondents are asked to identify the importance of the attributes in a Likert scale question, a stated importance measurement. This study’s methodology instead uses statistical analysis to calculate an implied importance score. Deng (2007) believes this revised methodology resolves the problems created by two implicit assumptions of the traditional methodology. Namely that, one, an attribute’s performance and importance are independent variables, and two, that the relationship between an attribute’s performance and overall performance is linear. These assumptions have been shown to frequently be erroneous (See Deng [2007] for a more detailed description of the methodology and its advantages).

Two issues were encountered during the data analysis. The first was that adding all the activities to the regression model created issues with multicollinearity and suppression, the second was that relatively few (186 of 1044 usable surveys) respondents reported participating in all 15 activities. In an effort to resolve these issues, Deng’s (2007) methodology was modified in the following manner. A stepwise linear regression (entering at  $p < 0.1$ ), eliminating cases pairwise, with overall vacation satisfaction as the dependent variable and natural logarithm of the 15 activities as the dependent variables was performed. This model had an  $N$  of 250 and used seven activities as independent variables. For the activities included in the model, the partial correlations are used to measure the activities’ importance. For the independent variables that were excluded from the final model, importance was measured by what the activities’ partial correlations would be if they were included in the final.

The relatively low percentages of responses in the final model was a concern for the researchers, as this means that only individuals that participated in a large number of activities are included in the final analysis. This could lead to an overestimation of the importance of activities with low participation rates, as individuals who did not participate in a given activity would likely not find it important, but these individuals are excluded from the analysis since they cannot give an answer to the question. However, an analysis of activity participation (not included here for brevity) revealed a high correlation ( $R^2 = 0.58$  in a linear regression) between activity participation and activity importance as calculated by the partial correlations. This indicates that even the tourists who were interested enough in the less popular activities to participate in them, did not find these activities important. Therefore, it is likely that the importance of the less important activities is overstated and the importance of the more important activities is understated. This type of error should not have a major influence on how activities are sorted into the four categories of the IPA.

## **Results**

Over five days the team was able to collect a total of 1,044 completed, useable surveys. Tourists from the United States (37%) and Canada (25%) accounted for the majority of the responses; the United Kingdom (10%), Germany (7%), and France (6%) were other frequent countries of origin. The mean age of the respondents was 38, 54% of respondents had graduated from a university, and slightly more than half (54%) of respondents were female.

The final model of the stepwise regression is displayed in Table 2. The final model uses seven independent variables and has strong predictive power, explaining 59% of the variance. The predictors are listed in the left hand column.

**Table 2: The results of the stepwise regression.**

Activity	Beta	Std. Error	Sig.	Correlations		
				Zero-order	Partial	Part
(Constant)	-.252	.293	.391			
Dining in Restaurants	.636	.124	.000	.572	.313	.212
Swimming / Sunbathing	1.070	.239	.000	.546	.276	.185
Live Entertainment	.472	.118	.000	.547	.249	.165
Boating / Water Sports	.431	.196	.029	.571	.140	.091
Purchasing Gifts / Souvenirs	.204	.101	.045	.402	.129	.083
Spa	.198	.113	.081	.459	.112	.072
Snorkeling	.231	.133	.083	.467	.111	.072

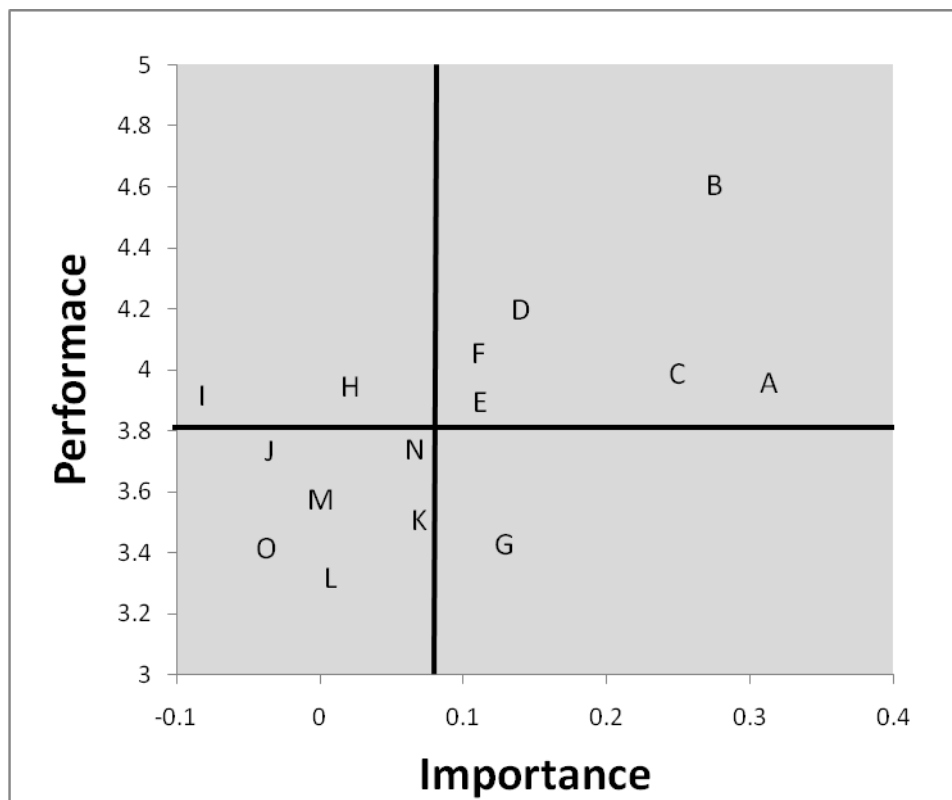
Activities that were excluded from the final model, along with what their statistics would be if include (i.e. made the eighth independent variable in the model), are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3: Activities excluded from the model and what their statistics would be if inserted into the model as the eighth independent variable.**

Activity	Beta	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation
Sporting Events	-.031	-.539	.590	-.035
Nightclubs / Dancing	.000	.006	.995	.000
Purchasing Arts / Crafts / Antiques	-.046	-.575	.566	-.037
Sightseeing in Cities	.075	1.416	.158	.091
Taking Guided Tours	.059	1.091	.276	.070

Golfing	-.077	-1.276	.203	-.082
Safaris / Four Wheeling	.019	.339	.735	.022
Casino Gaming	.005	.101	.919	.007

Based on the mean satisfaction score of the activities (displayed in Table 4) and the calculated means of the activities' partial correlation scores (0.091) and performance scores (3.83), the activities were separated into importance performance categories as follows.



**Figure 1: IPA results displayed graphically. The crossbars represent the means of the importance and performance scores. Each letter refers to an activity as follows. A-Dining in Restaurants, B-Swimming / Sunbathing, C-Live Entertainment, D-Boating / Water Sports, E-Spa, F-Snorkeling, G-Purchasing Gifts / Souvenirs, H- Safaris / Four Wheeling, I-Golf, J-Sporting Events, K-Sightseeing in Cities, L-Casino Gaming, M-Nightclubs / Dancing, N-Taking Guided Tours, O-Purchasing Arts / Crafts / Antiques.**

**Table 4: Activities sorted into four categories.**

Category	Activity	Importance	Performance
Good Job	Dining in Restaurants	0.313	3.96
	Swimming / Sunbathing	0.276	4.61
	Live Entertainment	0.249	3.99
	Boating / Water Sports	0.140	4.20
	Spa	0.112	3.90
	Snorkeling	0.111	4.06
Concentrate Here	Purchasing Gifts / Souvenirs	0.129	3.43
Possible Overkill	Safaris / Four Wheeling	0.022	3.95
	Golf	-0.082	3.92
Low Priority	Sporting Events	-0.035	3.74
	Sightseeing in Cities	0.090	3.51
	Casino Gaming	0.007	3.32
	Nightclubs / Dancing	0.000	3.58
	Taking Guided Tours	0.0701	3.81
	Purchasing Arts / Crafts / Antiques	-0.037	3.42

## Discussion

As for the first research objective, the results indicate that non-traditional 3S activities are not very important to the Punta Cana vacation experience. Activities such as attending a local sporting event, going on wildlife safaris, sightseeing in nearby cities, and taking guided tours all ranked below the mean importance score and are therefore deemed to be less important to the tourists' vacation experience. More traditional 3S activities that take place near and on the ocean such as swimming/sunbathing, boating / water sports, and snorkeling all ranked above the mean importance score. The disparity between the importance scores of

“purchasing gifts/souvenirs” and “purchasing arts/crafts/antiques” also points to the interest of the tourists being largely mainstream, as experiences purchasing unique artisan goods are less important than mass produced souvenirs. Since the analysis included only those tourists interested enough to participate in these activities (which are less frequently participated in than the traditional 3S activities), the importance gap may be even larger than Table 4 indicates. Overall, these results indicate that, at least amongst tourists visiting the 3S resorts, nontraditional 3S activities are not of major interest and resorts should continue to focus on traditional 3S activities to ensure high vacation satisfaction. The extent that these results are accurate beyond Punta Cana is unknown, but given the overall similarity of Punta Cana to other 3S Caribbean destinations we would suggest that the results are likely hold true in numerous other 3S destinations in the region.

As for the second research objective, the results show that improvement is necessary in the area of purchasing souvenirs and gifts. Many tourists may be turned-off by the low quality goods, aggressive salesmen, and the need to haggle for a fair price at the current markets. While seemingly a side activity, shopping has often been noted as an important part of the tourism experience (Lehto, Cai, O’Leary, & Huan, 2004) and can be an important source of revenue for locals in developing countries (Lacher & Nepal; 2010). Due to souvenirs shopping’s importance to tourists and the local economy, developers in Punta Cana and similar 3S destinations should take care to improve this aspect of the tourism experience, perhaps by creating a location where tourists can shop without being annoyed by salesmen or having to haggle for goods. As previously mentioned, the low priority category is populated predominately by non-traditional 3S activities and urban activities. While underperforming when compared to the rest of the activities, their low importance indicates that there is little need to improve these experiences at the moment.

Beach and water activities dominate the high importance, high performance category. Since these are often the primary motivation in a beach vacation and are among the most highly participated in activities, it is a positive sign that they are strong performers. While their high scores may indicate that there is little room for improvement, care should be taken to ensure they remain high performers in the future. Perhaps surprisingly, the tourists' dining experience was the most influential factor on vacation satisfaction. While Punta Cana is not noted as a culinary destination, this points to the importance of dining in tourism experiences that has been noted in previous research (Rand, Heath & Alberts, 2003). Fortunately, the destination is performing strongly in this activity.

Finally, a number of limitations should be mentioned. First, the survey took place over a few days in late May, so it may not be representative of the entire year's visitation. Second, it is possible that individuals whose tastes now go beyond the traditional 3S activities have chosen different destinations, and some might be persuaded to return if a wider variety of activities were emphasized. If this is true, perhaps we have underestimated the importance of the non-traditional activities. Third, as discussed in the methodology section, only 250 of the surveys were used in the model, and while we feel this has not adversely affected the results, it should be noted as a potential source of bias.

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