

## **Turning Weaknesses into Strengths: Nordic Tourism, Potentials for Growth and Major Challenges**

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**Abstract:** Nordic region is a geographical area which is characterized by a combination of nature, culture, history and technology and regarded as a common entity in political, economical and historical sense. Although rich in its resources, Nordic tourism has not actualized its potential in full. The present paper aims to identify weaknesses of the region, to outline a new set of directions for improving Nordic tourism and to delineate major challenges. Its geographical and natural beauties, cultural characteristics, technological advancement and policy development are identified as assets for tourism advancement in the region. Winter tourism, adventure tourism, nature-based tourism and cultural tourism are demonstrated as potential routes of growth. Marketing strategies and changing trends are discussed as major challenges, with suggestions for implementation.

**Keywords:** Nordic tourism; weaknesses; winter; nature; culture; challenges

**JEL Classification** D92, F43, L8

### **1. Introduction**

In globalizing and expanding world, tourism industry has become a significant sector within national economies, providing substantial economic, social, cultural and political gains. All regions of the world have become a destination place for international tourists, who are increasing in number and diversity throughout the new millennium. Although sun-lust destinations has come to represent one popularized tourism activity which is offered in particular regions of the world, changing patterns of consumption has paved the way for alternative types of tourism with an exclusive focus on individualized preferences and experience-based travels. Recent tourism trends have paved the way for tourism advancement in peripheral areas which do not possess natural and climatic resources to offer

Triple Ss (sun, sea, sand). Nordic region is a good example of such an area, regarded as peripheral and suitable for development of alternative tourism types. The present paper aims at providing a sketch of the Nordic region, to demonstrate its potentials and new paths of tourism advancement and to identify the major challenges that the Nordic tourism has to face.

### **1.1. The Nordic Region**

The Nordic region is a geographical area which covers Baltic Sea coasts and includes countries of Northern Europe, namely Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and parts of Greenland, Faroe Islands and the Aland Islands (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008a). Terms like “Nordic”, “Scandinavian” has been used interchangeably in the literature. However, they refer to different geographical areas, with Scandinavia encompassing Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The Nordic region, called *Norden* with a meaning of Northern in Scandinavian language, covers a broader geographical area, distinguished and consolidated in the episode following Second World War (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008b).

The Nordic region, characterized by a combination of nature, history and culture, is regarded as a common entity in political, economical, social, cultural and historical sense. Commonalities evident in the region have historical roots, with temporary periods of competition and divergence settling since 19<sup>th</sup> century. Currently, the region is marked by substantial cooperation and integration. The countries in the region constitute a common entity and consolidate their integration since comparable state regulations and political policies regarding tourism development are adopted in different countries; nested economic relationships are established and strengthened over time; common cultural characteristics and environmental attractions are possessed (Boniface & Cooper, 2005).

### **1.2. Tourism Industry in the Nordic Region**

Integration and cooperation among Nordic countries, in a world of constant globalization and widespread cross-cultural communication render possible to mention the term “Nordic tourism”, which transgresses national borders and provides a space open to communication, transaction and experience. The term “Nordic tourism” identifies a target tourism area which has been defined by reference to both internal characteristics of the Nordic region and environmental

circumstances. Nordic tourism area has been established by joint economic concerns, shared political regulations and a common cultural background which fosters an interior atmosphere of openness and exchange. Environmental circumstances characterizing Nordic tourism are innovative marketing strategies which highlight distinguishing characteristics of the region, and means of communication through media which elevate the image and reputation of Nordic countries (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008a).

Tourism, defined as a collection of wide-ranging economic, social, cultural and physical activities in a general sense has a different outlook in Nordic region. Contemporary statistics reveal that Nordic countries fall behind other OECD countries in several tourism-related parameters (Nordon, 2008):

1. %2.5 of the international tourists has chosen Nordic countries as a travel destination while this rate rises to %60 in other OECD countries.
2. % 30 of service expenditures is allocated to tourism on average in OECD members whereas tourism expenses in Nordic countries are below this rate, remaining below %20.
3. Economic benefits of tourism in OECD countries are higher, compared to Nordic countries.

Tourism-parameters in the Nordic region, compared to other OECD countries suggest that tourism in the area has great potential to improve and requires an organized attempt to facilitate its development

## **2. Nordic Tourism**

### **2.1. Present Weaknesses**

Several characteristics of the Nordic region are likely to put it into a disadvantageous position in terms of tourism development:

- Nordic countries are not popular destination places for tourists looking for the Triple Ss-sand, sea, sun, in their holidays. The region is characterized by harsh, icy and snowy winters which may become an obstacle for tourism development, although there are contrasts in the region in accordance with winds, altitude and humidity (Jones & Hansen, 2008) (Sporrong, 2008).

- Accessibility is one characteristic of the region which could hinder the development of tourism activities and shape tourists' appeal. The region may be perceived as peripheral and remote due to difficulty of access to the region, which may reduce its competitive power by increasing its costs of transportation (Hall, 2007). In addition, cost and ease of transportation to the region fluctuates seasonally, especially in particular regions of Norden (Nordon, 2008).
- When tourists believe that they travel to a remote destination, their expectations will rise in search of a unique experience. The rise of expectations become an obstacle in fulfilling tourist needs and necessitates high standards of service quality for satisfying customers (Zillinger, 2007).
- The push towards elevating service quality requires a highly-skilled professionals in the tourism industry, transgressing the employment of labor for maintenance of basic services (e.g. cleaning) (Nordon, 2008).

As outlined above, the Nordic world has environmental and managerial drawbacks which may potentially hinder the growth of tourism industry in the region. The next section presents a new set of lenses through which these drawback can be viewed; it outlines potential routes of improvement and innovation for turning them into strengths.

## **2.2. Potentials for Growth**

In contemporary world, patterns of consumption have been in a process of transformation which has implications for the tourism industry in general and the Nordic context in particular. Individuality and personal experience of tourists has gained prominence in the tourism industry, accompanying the shift of economic arrangements from Fordist to post-Fordist episodes. Mass tourism has lost its appeal in this changing world of consumption, production, socio-economic relations and technological advances (Poon, 1993 cited in Hall) (Müller & Saarinen, 2008b). The decline of mass tourism on a global and regional scale in 1980s and 90s has paved the way for alternative types of tourism to come to the fore as potential routes of growth (Gössling & Jultman, 2006).

The current trend in the tourism industry has been termed “new tourism” which highlights individualized ways of consuming tourism products. The notion of experience has prioritized tourism activities which provide tourists with an

opportunity to observe, share and practice uniqueness of the destination place and has highlighted tourists' involvement with the tourism product. The concepts of "winter tourism", "nature-based tourism" and "adventure tourism" has come up as a result of transforming trends in the world (Hall, 2007). In accordance with these transformations, tourism services has been reshaped to provide an integration of culture, nature and quality services, which is a valuable opportunity in bringing Nordic tourism on the spot.

Current alterations in tourism trends and recently developed concepts may prove to be beneficial for Nordic countries since the Nordic region has significant possessions and attractions which could be mobilized to promote alternative types of tourism. Contemporary developments in tourism industry offer a chance for turning weaknesses of the region into strengths and for endorsing tourism activities other than triple Ss. The following discussion outlines geographical, cultural-social and technological wealth of Norden and highlights the potential contribution of above stated drawbacks in the region for extending and improving tourism industry.

## **2.2.1 Geography**

### **2.2.1.1 Icy, Cold Season and Winter Tourism**

Seasonal characteristics of the Nordic region has been disadvantageous to promote Triple Ss and to attract tourists who seek sun-and-sea holidays. The Nordic world is characterized by a cold, snowy and long winter season, lasting from November to April although this time frame has been expanding with recent advances in technology (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008a). Winter season, which makes the Nordic world an unpopular sun-and-sea destination, could be promoted as an appealing holiday opportunity and put into use as an alternative field of tourism advance.

"Winter tourism" has been one of the most widely known and promoted tourism activity in Norden. The region provides opportunities for winter sports or adventure tourism like snow-mobile trekking, ice sailing etc, with snow mobiling and skiing being the most frequently chosen activities (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008b). Dog sledge safaris are among other popular activities which characterize Artic and Nordic countries (Jones & Hansen, 2008).

In recent years, progressive steps are taken in marketing, management and promotion of winter-based tourism. These steps have expanded the activities involved in winter tourism in terms of the scope and diversity of its attractions. One example of such alterations which become an international site of competition is the construction of ice hotels, attracting thousands of tourists all around the world (Olwig & Jones, 2008). Another alteration is the creation of Christmas tourism season, primarily in Finland throughout 1980s which become one of the major motivators of winter tourism in accordance with the commodification of Christmas and Santa Clause on a global scale (Synder & Stonehouse, 2007).

Through winter tourism and its promotion, Nordic countries can benefit from cold and icy winters, which contribute to the exotic image of the region. Zillinger (2007) highlights that needs and expectations of contemporary travelers are in a process of transformation. This transformation suggests that promotion of winter tourism and the image of coolness targets a different tourist profile and distinguishes the region from other destination places.

#### **2.2.1.2. Harsh, Wild Geography and Adventure Tourism**

The concept of adventure tourism has gained significance in the tourism industry in recent years and demonstrated a rapid rise in its popularity, prevalence and appeal. Defining adventure tourism has stimulated a substantial deal of debate in the literature, adopting different perspectives on the issue. In a general sense, adventure tourism includes activities which pose health-related risks and require active participation on the side of their performers. One distinguishing characteristic of adventure tourism is its high level of risk, taken up with a motivation of learning, experiencing and enjoying (Hall, 2007).

The Nordic region is a promising destination for adventure tourism especially in winter season, which provides enriching opportunities for tourists seeking risk, adventure and excitement. Gyimothy and Mykeletun (2004) demonstrate that risk, amusement and discovery are driving characteristics of Nordic adventure tourism and related-activities, such as winter trekking, snowmobile ski etc. (cited in Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008b). Norden provides an alternative to “sunlust” destinations by providing opportunities for camping and adventurous activities in the wild (Boniface & Cooper, 2005). Therefore, adventure tourism as a potential field of tourism-activity could be promoted, utilizing the images of wilderness, harshness and riskiness.

### **2.2.1.3. Natural Beauties and Eco-Tourism**

Contemporary tourism trends involve popularization of natural images; illustrations of nature have been put into use to introduce new destinations recently (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008a). With the advent of social transformations which put forward individualism and activity as the custom of post-modern life, the terms “eco-tourism” or “nature-based tourism” have come to the fore. In addition, environmental awareness has become a widespread concern which promotes eco-tourism (Nordon, 2008).

Eco-tourism involves traveling to natural beauties with an exclusive concern over preserving environmental resources and contributing to the enhancement of locals, and provides which ecological and social benefits. Eco-tourism consists of activities which aim to protect nature, to attain knowledge on nature and to experience it (Gössling & Hultman, 2006). Nordic region provides spectacular opportunities for improving eco-tourism and for marketing its nature-based wealth to promote tourism-related gains.

Geographical wealth in Norden is one characteristic which potentially advances tourism industry and renders possible to lean towards nature-based and sustainable tourism in the area. The region offers a diversity of landscapes from lunar volcanic grounds (Boniface & Cooper, 2005) (Sporrang, 2008) to shores, lakes, farmlands and forests of extraordinary natural beauty and preservation (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008b). An unpopulated, uncontaminated landscape; a panorama of magnificent mountains and coasts of great purity and greenness; and unique cultural practices are tourism products of the region which could support the development of eco-tourism in the region. (Gössling & Hultman, 2006). Moreover, untouched natural beauties and unusual natural phenomena such as nights lasting 6 months or aurora borealis can be introduced as unique and remarkable attractions which could be experienced and observed in Nordic countries.

The term “ecomuseum”, originated in France, has come to be used frequently for several Nordic countries. An ecomuseum is a holistic entity which occupies a particular region and reflects its unique social, cultural and physical characteristics, and thus provides an opportunity simultaneously with getting acquainted with Nordic culture and experiencing its unique landscape (Smith, 2003b).

Nature-based tourism, simultaneously relying on environmental resources and social networking for its sustenance, needs to be enhanced with an exclusive concern with the preservation of natural resources and appropriation of local networks in the Nordic region. Gössling and Hultman (2006) highlight that the term “ecotourism” has not been thoroughly comprehended by the community. Thus, integration among policy makers, tourism entrepreneurs and locals is significant for establishing a sustainable Nordic tourism niche (Nordon, 2008). In addition, promotion of wilderness and natural attractions characteristic of the region is necessary since these are natural resources which could be mobilized in the era of ecotourism (Hall, 2007) (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2008a).

### **2.2.2. Culture and Society**

Culture-based tourism has become a frequently chosen tourism activity in recent years, especially for the retired. The new tourism trends respond to an intensified interest in meeting with different cultural practices and participating in them, as a major part of tourist preferences and expectations (Yeoman, Greenwood & McMahon-Beattie, 2009). Due to the rivalry aspect of tourism industry, hotel and restaurant managers encounter customers coming from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds even they are not involved in an international organization (Genc, 2009). Cultural tourism has been defined as traveling motivated by an attraction of different cultural practices in order to interact and get acquainted with people of other cultures, and it includes activities such as participating in festivals organized in different regions, visiting museums and sites etc. (McKercher & Cros, 2002). The concept of cultural heritage has come to the fore, which encompasses wider historical and cultural context of a region (Swensen & Jarpasen, 2008).

In Nordic countries, cultural tourism has been unrealized potential for tourism advancement (Smith, 2003a). It has been pointed out that stressing the chance to witness and take part in different cultural practices is an important step to overcome the obstacle of seasonality in tourism (Stonehouse, 2007). In a similar vein, Lew, Hall, Timothy and Dallen (2008) have identified indigenous peoples as one of the most important characteristics of the region conducive to cultural tourism. These trends highlight that meeting with locals and cultural heritage tourism may be emphasized more in marketing attempts like Lappish culture in Finland and Saami culture in Norway (Synder & Stonehouse, 2007). Viking history

is another historical-cultural asset which could be promoted as a promoter of cultural tourism in the region.

Within the prevailing trend of cultural tourism, cultural and social images of the Nordic region has gained primary significance since culture has become one major determinant of tourists' destination choices and evaluations, which are shaped by tourists' culture of origin, cultural characteristics of the destination place and the discrepancy between them (Ng, Lee & Soutar, 2007). An investigation of international tourists' images of Norway demonstrates that it is regarded as a remote destination, which has not been heard of by a substantial number of tourists. The results suggests that a Nordic country is associated with complex cognitive images of "cold", "ice", "snow" and "dark" simultaneously with "friendly and kind individuals", "cleanliness" and "natural attractions" (Prebensen, 2007).

One aspect of the Nordic region which could support the development of cultural tourism is its safety and social security system. According to the report of UNWTO, events (e.g. terrorist attacks, sports festivals) taking place in a particular region of the world has implications for tourism development and tourist destination choices on a global scale. Current conflicts and catastrophic events, terrorist attacks like 9/11 trigger concerns with safety and uncertainty in today's world of travel and preoccupy tourists about the risks of traveling or destination place. Crimes and infectious diseases are among other factors which exacerbate travel-related worries (Larsen, Brun & Ogaard, 2009). Nordic society, possessing a highly developed and differentiated social security system, is a safe and low-risk destination which might appeal to a substantial crowd of travelers since terrorism, wars, inter-class conflicts are global occurrences that preoccupy international tourists.

Event tourism is another field of activity which could promote cultural tourism in Nordic region. Event tourism focuses on marketing and promoting events held in a particular region and aims to attain economic gains as well as social and cultural benefits by providing enriching experiences and constructing a positive image of the destination place. In today's world, participation in events which are organized in different parts of the world like cultural festivals, educational congresses, art and entertainment events has become a driving force for travel. In a study carried out in four Nordic cities (Helsinki, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Göteborg) reports that, Nordic tourism organizations in those cities have realized the significance of events for tourism development and highlighted that events increase the appeal of a destination, increase its hype and boost its image. Therefore, events have come to

be incorporated in marketing strategies of tourism organizations in Nordic region (Sarrivaara, Paivi & Roosa, 2005) and; festivals and cultural events like Edinburg International Festival need to be emphasized.

One last significant area which may exert substantial impact on improving and sustaining cultural tourism in Nordic countries is cultural heritage management. State regulation of the cultural heritage notion and state approach to the notion of cultural heritage occupy a prominent place in improving the appeal of Nordic area for travellers motivated by a will to experience and share different cultural practices. For instance, Norway state is involved in the regulation of arrangements among modern establishments and cultural heritages, monuments or sites, and concerned with the preservation of historical attractions, providing acts of legislation and laws (Swensen & Jarpasen, 2008).

### **2.2.3. Technological Development**

Nordic region is the vein of technological development, where quality standards of production and service have been set and, even the founder of a prize which determines the world standards has lived, namely Alfred Nobel. With a highly advanced technological infrastructure, Nordic area has the potential to improve its service sector (e.g. easing access, providing alternative ways of transportation) and tourism industry and to generate innovative ways of marketing (e.g. use of media or internet infrastructure, information management). In Nordic countries, technological developments may be put into use to overcome the problems of transportation, inaccessibility, infrastructure, satisfaction of customer needs (Nordon, 2008).

### **2.2.4. Policy Making**

Development of Nordic tourism requires an action plan and a policy which involve organization, coordination and innovation to address the obstacles of employment, growth, competition. In the workshop on Nordic Innovation in the Tourism Sector (2008) several aspects of necessitated policies have been identified:

- The policies developed needs to facilitate interconnection and cooperation among countries in the region. Communication and transportation transgressing the boundaries of the nation states enhances cooperation, which supports growth of tourism industry. An example of the facilitation

role of collaboration among different countries is joint-offerings, which provides tourists with an appealing opportunity to travel two or more countries in the region;

- Attempts to develop tourism industry in the region should emphasize preservation of natural and cultural resources of the region for their maintenance. The natural and cultural attractions of the region may become vulnerable to climatic changes or consumption patterns if sustainable development and protection of these tourism products has not been taken into consideration;
- Adoption of a strategic framework on a national and regional scale is necessary for policy development. It has been emphasized that more extensive and comprehensive strategic plans need to be set, which incorporate small and large scale tourism organizations, tourism operators and tourist preferences with a highly developed system of communication among different partners. An intensive system of interconnection provides the opportunity to expand information on regional tourism which remains isolated without such an effort.

Above stated suggestions for Nordic countries reveals that policy development needs to take a more integrative and comprehensive perspective on tourism development in order to attain competitive advantage on a global scale and to eliminate obstacles regional companies deal with.

### **3. Growth of Nordic Tourism: Major Challenges**

In a general sense, marketing in Nordic tourism industry is a major challenge identified in the present paper for tourism advancement. Marketing in tourism industry functions to communicate organizational objectives of tourism facilities, to introduce and convey the tourism product to travellers/customers and to identify their preferences, motivations and needs. In hotel and restaurant management marketing approach and hotel or restaurant services marketing should be understood in hospitality context. So one should have marketing style that is beyond product or service marketing (Genc, 2009).

The Nordic context presents obstacles with respect to several marketing functions, discussed in detail: 1) Introduction and promotion of tourism opportunities in Nordic countries, 2) Identification of tourist preferences and incorporation of them into the policy making processes and, 3) Adaptation to global tourism trends.

The first major challenge in Nordic tourism development is improving marketing strategies and generating innovative techniques in order to promote reputation and image of Nordic countries and to outstand in a competitive industry. Finding new ways of promoting the region, finding appropriate means of communication and emphasizing characteristics unique to the region is the complication which requires a complex process of decision and policy making in Norden (Nordon, 2008). The fundamental priority within these processes is the enhancement and promotion of a Nordic image which constructs it as a landscape of natural beauty, cultural experience, adventurous activity and satisfactory service. This construction needs to incorporate elements of nature, culture, history, social processes, arts, music and literature, and to adopt a holistic perspective (Jones & Olwig, 2008) in order to be more appealing for a diversified tourist profile and, to emphasize all resources and tourist products of Norden.

The significance of prioritizing customer experiences and strengthening long-term relationships with service providers and tourists/travelers have been highlighted extensively in tourism management literature. The second challenge in Nordic tourism context is getting acquainted with tourist motivations and investigating tourist profiles. Tourists' motivations and expectations are altered in accordance with the destination place, of which landscape, space, topography, climate and technological advancement are significant characteristics. That is to say, in the Nordic context a detailed and ongoing examination of tourist preferences and motivations, their demographic and psychological characteristics is required in order to provide satisfactory services and to inform development of applicable strategies. The need to strengthen the link between tourism product development and knowledge on tourist preferences are highlighted (Nordon, 2008).

Another challenge is to make manoeuvres which enables Nordic tourism to face with global trends in tourism industry such as experience-based tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism. Contemporary traveller is in search of an unusual experience within current tourism trends which prioritize experiencing and participating rather than observing. Within current trends, locality, interactions with peoples of different cultures, experience with local foods and cultural practices have gained prominence. Attempts to develop Nordic tourism needs to acknowledge changing outlooks of tourism and tourists in a world of constant transformation; and highlight its natural, cultural, technological potentials to catch up with these trends and to offer more extreme and innovative experiences.

#### 4. Conclusion

The term globalization asserts that every country or region has an attraction to offer for consumption as a tourism product (Yeoman, Greenwood & McMahon-Beattie, 2009). Norden is one region which has great potential for development of its tourism industry with its historical, cultural and natural resources although currently tourism is not a major source of economic gain in Nordic countries. As an initial progressive step, Nordic countries should focus on what seems to be a drawback for tourism development, and develop strategies to turn them into fundamental strengths.

Every region has its unique assets. Norden needs to highlight its uniqueness and emphasize its distinguishing characteristics in its tourism marketing attempts.

Tourism advances in the region should focus on promoting the resources it already has, and developing a marketing strategy which introduces it to tourists as an appealing travel choice and opportunity for unusual experiences. For sustenance of tourism activities and satisfied customers, a holistic and integrative perspective needs to be adopted for advancement, incorporating nature, culture, service and innovation.

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