

Economic Impact of Religious Tourism in Mardin, Turkey

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Abstract

Following a worldwide trend, the number of religious tourists to the province of Mardin, in Southeastern Turkey has increased continuously during the last decade. Using a combination of methods this study aimed to assess the impact of religious tourism development on the local community and economy. We found that the effect is mainly positive. The hotels have high occupancy rates throughout the year and many new hotels have been built during the last five years. Also most visitors eat in local restaurants at least once a day and patronize local shops and businesses. The development of religious tourism has also led to the creation of many new jobs.

Keywords: religious tourism, pilgrimage, Mardin, Turkey.

Introduction

Visiting religious sites could, perhaps, be considered one of the earliest forms of tourism (Rinschede, 1992; Al-Amin, 2002). Some religions, like Islam, have made pilgrimages to holly places important pillars of their faith. In other religions, like Christianity, although not mandatory, pilgrimages have been practiced regularly for centuries.

A pilgrimage is a travel that is undertaken to a site with religious significance and/or that fulfils a religious or spiritual need (Griffin, 2007; Ambrosio, 2007; Raj and Morpeth, 2007). Alecu (2010) argues

that besides destination and motivation of travel (both religious) pilgrimages are characterized by the low quality of (local) services and very affordable prices (this also in Triantafillidou et al, 2010).

However, others argue that, whereas in the past pilgrimages were often associated with asceticism and physical penitence, today most pilgrims like to travel more comfortably (Vorzak and Gut, 2009). Pilgrims have changed their spending habits, they are not as frugal as in the past (Wright, 2007). Today they spend more for shopping than any other group of travelers (Bar and Cohen-Hattab, 2003). In Saudi Arabia, for example, religious travelers spend 75% of all tourist expenditure (Euromonitor, 2009).

Also, many of these journeys are multifunctional; today many people attend pilgrimages out of curiosity and to find out more about unknown places (Josan, 2009). Based on the two contemporary aspects we believe that the term “religious tourism” may be more appropriate to describe such journeys to religious sites. A pilgrim visits a religious site as part of his duty for being a faithful member of his or her religion or to fulfill a spiritual need (Collins-Kreiner, 2010a; Sharpley and Sundaram, 2005). The use of the term “tourist”, on the other hand, may suggest “pleasure” as motive. This seems to better describe the situation today as more and more people travel for both religious and recreational reasons (Shinde, 2007, Raj, 2008). How otherwise could we explain the paradox that, while Europe is becoming less and less religious, the number of people visiting religious sites is increasing? Many people are visiting these sites not for their religious significance but rather for their cultural, architectural or historical importance (Griffin, 2002; Sharpley and Sundaram, 2005; Noland and Nolan, 1992; Raj, 2008; Richards and Fernandes, 2007; Santos, 2002). Often times the visitation of religious objectives is combined with other forms of tourism and even shopping (Vukonic, 1996; Swatos, 2006).

Most of the works cited above examine issues of Christian pilgrimages in different parts of the world but an increasing number of more recent studies deal with the economic impact of pilgrimages and religious tourism in Muslim countries such as Palestine (Suleiman and Mohammed, 2011), Jordan (Al Dalaeen et al, 2011), Egypt (Kamil, 2000), Saudi Arabia (Henderson, 2011) and Iran (Okhovat, 2010; Heidarabadi, 2008; Taghvaei et al, 2010).

The scale of religious tourism

Lately the number of worldwide pilgrims and religious tourists has increased significantly (Blackwell 2007; Collins-Kreiner 2010a). The United Nations' World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2011) has estimated the number of religious tourists in the world to 600 million of which 50% in Asia and the Pacific and 40% in Europe. Every year about 28 million Hindu pilgrims go to River Gange in Northern India (Singh, 2006). Of the approximately 11.6 million foreign tourists that visited Saudi Arabia in 2008, 50% were motivated by religion. The same year, Mecca alone attracted 6.6 million tourists, most of them religious tourists (Euromonitor 2009). It is predicted that the number of foreign tourists to Saudi Arabia will continue to increase to reach 21 million in 2015 driven mainly by the growth of religious tourism to Mecca and Medina (Euromonitor, 2011).

Millions of tourists visit some of the most famous pilgrimage centers in Europe. The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is the most visited shrine in all Christendom with between four and six million arriving here each year. It is estimated that approximately 200 million pilgrims have visited the site since 1860 (Sacred Sites, n.d.). Medjugorje (Bosnia) is another pilgrimage site in Europe visited by more than one million pilgrims annually (Reader, 2007). In Romania, around 500,000 people are involved in religious tourism each year, and if we include also the pilgrims attending great religious celebrations, their number could be as high as 1 million (Vorzsak and Gut, 2009). Also, up to 700,000 Christian pilgrims travel to Israel every year (Reader, 2007).

Development of religious tourism can have strong economic impact on the local community as well as socio-cultural, political and environmental implications (Collins-Kreiner, 2010b; 2010c). Especially when dealing with small communities, the impact of religious tourism upon the economy should not be underestimated (Vukonic, 1998). For example, Lourdes, a small town in Southern France, with a population of 15,000, had in 1987 more than 300 shops, 370 hotels, 28 camping sites, 45 restaurants (in the town itself and the surrounding countryside), eight banks, and 18 big service garages (Vukonic, 1998). The town has three times more rooms than the number of its population and has the greatest number of hotels in France after Paris (Carroll, 2010). Practically we could say that the entire town is involved in servicing the pilgrims.

Excessive growth of religious tourism could put a huge pressure on the existing infrastructure especially in smaller towns and less developed areas but sometimes even in countries with great economic potential. For example, local authorities have restricted the growth of the number of pilgrims to Mecca by placing a quota on each country based on population (Reader, 2007; Henderson, 2011). In spite of this limitation, the number of pilgrims will continue to increase slowly as the supporting infrastructure expands. This led some to question whether this continuous (albeit slow) growth in the number of pilgrims for the Hajj is sustainable.

Overdevelopment of this sector could be a threat to the sustainability of the religious site (Swatos 2006). Wall and Mathieson (2006:9) have warned that, as more and more tourists start visiting the holy sites, their religious significance, which made them famous is being eroded. The presence of large numbers of tourists could inevitably lead to the commercialization or commoditization of the pilgrimage site (Eade, 1992) and could make the practice of religious observance very difficult (Nolan and Nolan, 1992). The situation could be aggravated when the visitors and the locals are of different religion. This situation is especially problematic when the residents are Muslim and the visitors are of a different religion (Henderson 2003). This is why a good planning and management of the site is necessary (Raj and Morpeth, 2007; Rotherham, 2007; Pavicic et al, 2007; Petrillo, 2003).

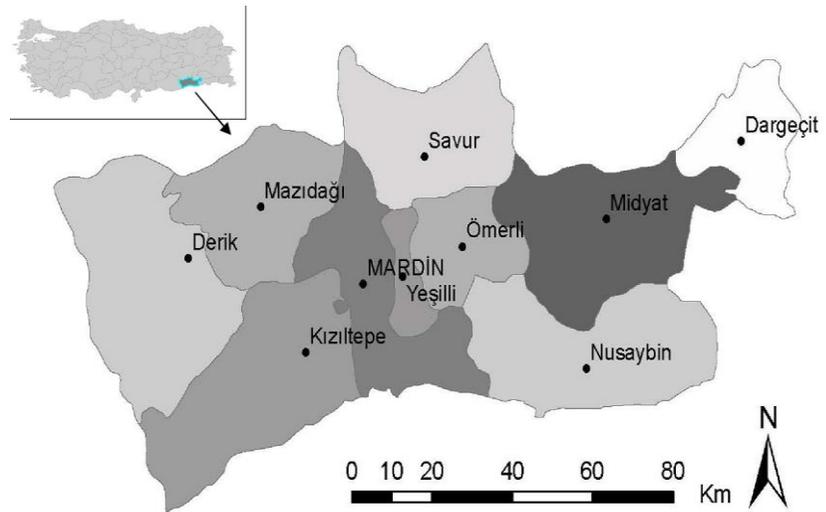
In general, due to perceived economic and social benefits, local population supports the development of religious tourism. Local people on the small Tinos Island, Greece have agreed that religious tourism has a positive effect on the economy through the employment creation, personal income and business opportunities (Terzidou et al, 2008). Also they appreciate the fact that, contrary to other types of tourists, religious tourists do not cause any trouble related to alcoholism and crime (Terzidou et al 2008). They complained mainly about the traffic these tourists generate, overcrowding and congestion. A study by Baedcharoen (2000) on religious tourism in Thailand has revealed that while the local residents strongly believed that tourism has brought many economic and socio-cultural benefits to their community they were ambivalent when asked about the costs.

Research question

The increase in the number of tourists could have both positive and negative effects on the local community and economy. In general,

tourism development is perceived positively by the local community if economic benefits outweigh social costs. A sustainable approach to religious tourism should, therefore, be community based (Rotherham, 2007). This is why the relationship with the local community and the interactions between the local people and tourists need to be investigated. The main issue investigated in this study is the economic impact of religious tourism development in the province of Mardin, Turkey (see figure nr. 1).

Figure nr. 1: The Province of Mardin in Southeastern Turkey



Methodology

In order to collect the data for our study we used a combination of methods. First, we interviewed seven hotel managers in the city of Mardin. Each interview lasted in average 30 minutes. We also talked with the president of Mardin's Tourism Bureau about the number of tourist that visited Mardin, the measures taken by the local authorities to promote tourism in the area and about the benefits to the local area brought by tourism and religious tourism.

Next we used a questionnaire to interview tourists around the major religious sites in Mardin City. The questionnaire had a total of 26 questions and was available in two languages (Turkish and English). Of

the 26 questions, the first five questions were about the socio-demographic characteristics of the surveyed tourists, and three questions were about the origins of the tourists. The survey was administered between 17 and 29 January, 2011. Unfortunately, the timing of our fieldwork was not ideal as the number of tourists is generally lower in January. Moreover the weather was also colder than usual which may have kept many potential tourists from traveling. In total, a number of 19 questionnaires were administered. The lower than expected number of responses determines the use of data collected this way with caution and always in correlation with data from other sources. Unfortunately, some correlations that we initially intended to make were not possible anymore.

The respondents are almost equally divided between men (47%) and women (53%), are young (84% are between 26 and 45 years old) and well-educated (79% having a Bachelor's degree and five percent Master or a doctoral degree). They came from all walks of life but close to one-third of the respondents worked in the education sector while 37% were either self-employed or managers. The majority of our respondents (58%) had a good income that allowed them to save and only eleven percent complained that their income was too small. The reason for being in Mardin is generally for tourism (53%). Also some of them visited for business (31%) and or were in transit to another place (16%).

The majority (74%) of surveyed tourists were visitors coming from Turkey. The rest were foreign tourists from Korea, Germany and Argentina. Based on the results of the survey, 42% of the visitors traveled with a partner to Mardin, 37% of the visitors traveled with family members or with groups of people while the rate of the individual arrivals was lower than others (21%). When we look at the mode of transportation, 47% of the participants went to Mardin by air, 37% by bus and 16% by personal car.

Primary data was complemented by data collected from many secondary sources such as academic articles, newspaper articles, websites, books and tourist brochures. We also spent a great amount of time observing tourists and how they interacted with local people and businesses. Some data was collected through informal discussions with different stakeholders. And, finally, we also examined the location and characteristics of tourism infrastructure (lodging, restaurants, transportation means) as well as how tourism was promoted.

Number of tourists who visited Mardin

In recent years, Mardin, after becoming a candidate on the UNESCO's "World Heritage List", started to attract attention not only in Turkey but also abroad (Koçoğlu, 2006). This situation has contributed to tourism development in Mardin. Due to UNESCO representation, interest and demand in tourism in Mardin has constantly increased over the years. The table below (table nr.1) shows the increase in the number of tourists visiting Mardin between 2001 and 2010.

Table nr. 1: The number of foreign tourists visiting Mardin and Turkey between 2001 and 2010

	Total number of tourists 2001	Total number of tourists 2005	% growth 2001-2005	Total number of tourists 2010	% growth 2005-2010	% growth 2001-2010
Mardin	54,870	81,964	49.4	203,000	147.7	270.0
Turkey	11,619,000	21,122,800	81.8	28,632,204	35.5	146.4

Source: *Provincial Directorate of Tourism (2011)*

This table, based on official data provided by the Provincial Directorate of Tourism, Mardin, shows that between 2005 and 2010 the number of foreign tourists in Mardin has increased by 147.7% and between 2001 and 2010 it has increased by an astonishing 270%. In comparison the number of foreign tourists visiting Turkey between the same years has grown by 35.5% and 146.4% respectively. However, the number of domestic tourists has increased even more. An unofficial source advanced even higher numbers of tourists for Mardin. It claimed that during the first half of 2005 nearly 250,000 visited the city, after more than 400,000 tourists had visited in 2004 (Anonymous 2005). The number of tourists continued to increase after 2005. In 2010, a total of 875,000 people visited Mardin and in 2011 the number of tourists reached 783,000 for the first five months (Provincial Directorate of Tourism, 2011; World Bulletin 2011). The number of tourists visiting Mardin is projected to increase the target being two million tourists by 2015 (World Bulletin, 2011).

Mardin is situated very close to the border with Syria and an accord between Turkey and Syria has eliminated the visas for the citizens of the two countries. This explains why Syrians make up the bulk of the foreign tourists to Mardin. Other prominent groups are from: USA, Italy, Japan, Australia, Poland, UK, South Korea, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Greece and Canada.

The importance of tourism and religious tourism for Mardin

As mentioned earlier, close to one million people visited the province of Mardin in 2010. However, this statistic does not mention how many tourists visited for religious motives. In a paper presented in 2010, Gunduz and Erdem reported on a visitors' survey they conducted in Mardin. According to them, 66% of the surveyed visitors stated that they have visited or intend to visit churches and monasteries while in the city.

The numerous historical and religious structures in Mardin attract an increasing number of domestic and foreign tourists. Not all the visitors to Mardin stay overnight and, among those who do, some have family and friends with which they can stay. Only some stay in hotels and other types of accommodation. In 2010 the total number of tourists staying in hotels was 109,928 people, 100,320 of them being domestic tourists (91.3%) and 9,608 foreign tourists (8.7%) (Provincial Directorate of Tourism, 2011; table nr. 2). This represents 12.6% of the total number of tourists who visited Mardin in 2010. However, the study included only eleven hotels in the province of Mardin so the number of tourists staying in a hotel could actually be much higher.

The 2011 study includes 28 hotels in the province of Mardin. During the first eight months (January-August) a number 95,111 tourists stayed in these hotels, of which 88,754 domestic tourists (93.3%) and 6,357 foreign tourists (6.7%). Presuming the same monthly distribution pattern as in 2010 the estimated total number of tourists staying in hotels in Mardin in 2011 is 147,003, a 33.7% increase over 2010.

In our study sample a higher percentage of visitors used the accommodations in Mardin. Close to 50% stayed either in hotels (37%) or pensions (11%). Of these 47% stayed two or three nights or for a weekend and 37% stayed for up to a week. Only 5% stayed for more than a week and 11% spent only one night in a hotel in Mardin. The rest stayed with friends and relatives (31%) or did not stay overnight (21%).

According to our informants from the major hotels in Mardin, most tourists prefer to visit during the spring and autumn months. Occupancy rates of hotels and motels are increasing in April-June and in September-November. Table 2 shows that almost 36% of the tourists likely to stay in a hotel will visit during the spring months (April-June) and more than 28.5% during the fall months (September-November). During these months, hotel occupancy rates could reach values of 80 - 85%. In fact, in recent years, many hotels could not meet the demand during these months. This travel preference could be explained by the fact that summers in Mardin are very hot which could make traveling uncomfortable. Winters, on the other hand, could sometimes be quite cold both in Mardin and in the place where the tourists originate. This visiting pattern mirrors the pattern of domestic tourists which represent the great majority (91.3%) of the tourists in Mardin. When we analyze the visiting pattern of foreign tourists, on the other hand we see that 72.8% of the foreign tourists staying in hotels visited Mardin between May and October. This reflects the vacation time in Europe and North America.

Table nr. 2: The monthly distribution of tourists in Mardin

	# D	% D	# F	% F	# T	% T	% F T
Jan.	4,943	4.9	343	3.6	5,286	4.8	6.5
Feb.	4,940	4.9	237	2.5	5,177	4.7	4.6
Mar.	7,345	7.3	361	3.8	7,706	7.0	4.7
Apr.	11,931	11.9	709	7.4	12,640	11.5	5.6
May	15,848	15.8	1,231	12.8	17,079	15.5	7.2
Jun.	8,798	8.8	1,028	10.7	9,826	8.9	10.5
Jul.	6,187	6.2	1,099	11.4	7,286	6.6	15.1
Aug.	4,786	4.8	1,512	15.7	6,298	5.7	24.0
Sep.	8,263	8.2	1,214	12.6	9,477	8.6	12.8
Oct.	10,638	10.6	925	9.6	11,563	10.5	6.9
Nov.	9,872	9.8	543	5.6	10,415	9.5	5.2
Dec.	6,769	6.7	406	4.2	7,175	6.5	5.7
2010	100,320	100.0	9,608	100.0	109,928	100.0	8.7

Source: *Provincial Directorate of Tourism (2011)*

D = Number of domestic tourists that month

% D = Percent of domestic tourists that month of the total number of domestic tourists in 2010

F = Number of foreign tourists that month

% F = Percent of foreign tourists that month from the total number of foreign tourists in 2010

T = Total number of tourists (domestic and foreign) that month

% T = Percent of tourists that month of the total number of tourists in 2010

% F T = Percent of foreign tourists from the total number of students

Currently there are 28 hotels in Mardin and new hotels are opening every year. Some of these hotels are frequented by an international clientele; others serve mainly domestic tourists. First five star hotel, Erdoba Elegance opened recently after a \$22 million investment. The hotel has 220 rooms and 450 beds.

Other benefits to the local community

However, not only hotels and other types of accommodation benefit from the development of religious tourism. The approximately one million tourists visiting every year are patronizing local restaurants, stores, markets, bakers, etc. A taxi driver informant told us that his business increases significantly during the spring and fall months when most of the tourists visit. There is a large contribution of tourism to local community. Also local artisans seem to do very well as tourists are buying more souvenirs. The study by Gunduz and Erdem (2010) found that 30% of tourists in Mardin spend more than 200 TL, 10% spend 151-200 TL and 14% spend between 100 and 150 TL¹. Most of these visitors also mentioned that most of the money is spent on souvenirs and silver jewelry. Mardin is famous for its silver filigree. The same study by Gunduz and Erdem (2010) found that 61% of all visitors to Mardin also make a visit to the local bazaars benefiting the local economy.

In our study we asked our respondent how much they spent in Mardin during their entire length of stay. For 21% of the participants the approximate budget for stay in Mardin was 200 TL or less and 26% answered that they spent between 201 and 400 TL. Also 26% of our respondents spent 401-1000 TL and 21% spent 1001-2000 TL during their entire length of stay. Only one participant (around 5%) spent more

¹ At the time, 1 euro was approximately equivalent to two TL (Turkish Lira).

than 2000 TL. Almost all of our respondents (95%) ate in restaurants at least once a day while in Mardin and 63% mentioned that they always buy artifacts and gifts from the sites they visit.

Many new jobs, mainly in the tourism sector, are also supported directly or indirectly by this recent development of religious tourism in Mardin. According to the local authorities, about 9.25% of the population of Mardin is employed in the tourism sector. Of these, approximately 1200 people are employed in the accommodation facilities in Mardin.

What have local authorities done to promote tourism and religious tourism in Mardin?

Most of our respondents have heard about Mardin through word-of-mouth (32%) and through internet (32%) while tourism brochures (20%) and the media (16%) were somewhat less efficient in popularizing the province to potential tourists. Also, most of our respondents had a positive experience in Mardin, 53% of them expressing the intent to visit again later and 63% being willing to recommend Mardin's religious sites to others. While these numbers may project a positive image of Mardin's potential for further tourism development, local authorities are aware of the fact that as more tourists arrive some of the infrastructure deficiencies will become more visible.

For example, increased numbers of tourists could lead to overcrowding. This, on the one hand can influence the character of the site as large crowds of tourists (especially when they do not behave appropriately) can affect the way people experience a religious place. On the other hand, a sudden increase in the number of tourists could lead to overuse of resources. In the study by Gündüz and Erdem (2010), 52% of the respondents complained about the number and quality of existing restaurants, 44% found accommodation facilities inadequate and neglected and 40% pointed out to the deficiencies in parking space. A few years ago, a tourism director from Mardin noted that, due to insufficient accommodation capacity most tourists visiting Mardin were actually day-trippers (Anonymous, 2005).

How have the authorities responded to this situation? They have encouraged the construction of new hotels and indeed the number of hotels and other forms of accommodation has increased considerably during the last five years or so. The quality of the hotels and hotel services has also improved especially after the opening of the first five-

star hotel. Also many historical buildings are being restored to serve as guest-houses or boutique hotels or restaurants (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007). For example, an old inn, Artuklu Caravan Palace, after very thorough restoration and renovation work was turned into a hotel with 43 rooms and 100- bed capacity. Other such examples of historic mansions transformed into hotels are Erdoba Mansion and Maria Mansion. Another old inn, Saru Han, serves as a restaurant.

There are also some accessibility problems. The province is situated very far from Turkey's major cities (Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir). There is a small airport in Mardin built in 1999 but many tourists are still arriving to Mardin via Diyarbakır airport situated some 100 km to the north. Also many tourists are arriving by car or bus from Sanliurfa (about 200 km to the southwest). These connecting roads need to be improved for better accessibility. There is a grand plan elaborated by the government (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007), according to which the Southeast of Turkey (including Adiyaman, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Hatay, Mardin and Sanliurfa) will be developed for cultural and religious tourism. A "Faith Tourism Corridor" will be established to include the cities of Tarsus, Antakya, Gaziantep, Saliurfa and Mardin. A new highway will be constructed to link Tarsus to Mardin and boost accessibility in the region.

Discussion, conclusion and recommendations

The number of tourists visiting the province of Mardin has increased considerably during the last several years and a great number of these tourists are interested in visiting the various religious sites. This surge in the number of visitors is attributable to a number of factors:

1. The threat of terrorism in the region has subsided and the province has become safe for tourists.
2. The Turkish economy has seen one of the highest growth rates in Europe and in the Middle East and seems to be less affected by the economic crisis. Salaries have increased in the country and Turks now have higher disposable incomes which they spend increasingly on travel and tourism.
3. The government has made tourism an important pillar for economic development. In order to increase the number of visitors it has signed agreements with almost all neighboring countries to eliminate visas for their citizens. Consequently the number of tourists from Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Iran and Syria

has increased considerably during the last several years. Many Syrians, Muslim and Christian, took advantage of this agreement to visit religious objectives of their faith in the province of Mardin.

4. The government is encouraging the development of alternative types of tourism as these are perceived to be more sustainable in the long run and to allow the participation of provinces that have not benefited from the development of coastal tourism. If successful, this strategy could contribute to the reduction of regional economic disparities.

The increase in the number of tourists has had a strong economic and social effect on local businesses and the local community. Firstly, several new hotels have been built in the province including a five-star hotel. Secondly, most of the tourists stay in the province for several days during which time they eat in local restaurants and patronize local businesses. This has encouraged the opening of new businesses that cater to tourists and local people. Many new jobs have also been created in the tourism sector. This, in turn, has contributed to the development of local non-basic sector as these new salaries were mainly spent in the local economy.

Rapid growth of the number of tourists could, however, put too much pressure on the infrastructure and could ruin the experience of the tourists. So far, the majority of the tourists we talked to seemed to be satisfied with their experience and many expressed their intention to return in the near future and/or to recommend the religious sites in Mardin to others. However, in order to ensure a smooth transition, the authorities need to continue the investments in infrastructure and to provide a more diversified range of tourism attractions in order to bring more tourists and to make them stay longer and spend more in the local economy.

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