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Does the colonial past influence the model of tourism development? The case of Ehden (Lebanon)

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has experienced steady expansion and substantial diversification; however, it needs to be developed endogenously to become an important driver of economic development. Studies suggest that tourists are looking for a different and unique destination experience (Poussin, 2009) and are increasingly choosing to immerse themselves in its true culture (Chambers, 2009). Nonetheless, many rural destinations in developed countries are saturated with an “artificialisation” of tourism experiences and a loss of territorial identity and cultural trivialisation (Hubbard & Lilley, 2000; Roca & de Nazaré, 2007). On the other hand, other rural destinations, preserve their authenticity and can use tourism as a tool for local and/or regional development (Valeiro & Ribeiro, 2007).

Although tourism development is based on the promotion of endogenous territorial resources (Spilanis & Vayanni, 2004), many former colonies of Western countries have promoted an inherited tourism model that has been organised and articulated exogenously to meet the requirements of the former settlers. We can clearly state that the origin of tourism in Lebanon dates back to the time when it was a French colony (Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022), implying that it could respond to an external development model controlled by foreign tour operators.

Ehden a town in the north of Lebanon is home to the Horsh Ehden Nature Reserve that was classified as a Nature Reserve in March 1992, making it the most important part of its natural heritage. Ehden also has a rich cultural heritage, including traditional architecture and archaeological sites and an important religious heritage brings together the structures (buildings), objects and ritual practices specific to each religion and region. The country’s ethnographic heritage is also very varied, with the region’s gastronomy also presenting an attractive image of the country’s culture and its geographical and economic identity.



The aim of this paper is to find the main characteristics of tourism in Ehden and whether Ehden's tourism model responds to a tourism model inherited from its colonial past or, on the contrary, it is a tourism model that involves the population and is based on the valorisation of local endogenous resources. This work represents an important contribution to research and knowledge of the characteristics of tourism in the mountainous areas of Lebanon, as it is the first to be carried out in this locality using social research techniques and one of the few studies on tourism in this country.

METHODS

The research employs a mixed methods approach. An archival research is conducted to trace the evolution of tourism initiatives and policies in the region, moreover, qualitative (preliminary interviews with local stakeholders) and quantitative methods (surveys of residents and tourists) are mainly used. Seven initial interviews with local stakeholders were conducted using a semi-directed interview model and a total of 138 surveys (70 resident and 68 tourist responses) were conducted between 2021 and 2022. In the resident and tourist surveys, respondents were characterised according to age, gender, level of education, place of residence and occupation. Subsequently, a descriptive statistical analysis of the overall results for each of the samples (residents and tourists) was carried out, followed by a contingency table analysis to cross-check respondents' preferences according to gender, age or education. The survey results were analysed with IBM SPSS Statistics.

RESULTS

Tourism in Ehden is highly seasonal, concentrated during the summer and a few weekends during the winter. Ehden has changed from a traditional mountain village to a holiday and recreational tourist town, which, combined with the harsh climate, has led many people to move to the nearby town of Zgharta. The various local actors consider that an integrated tourism model needs to be promoted in Ehden that values the cultural and religious heritage as well as the natural heritage.

The vast majority of the population is willing to promote an integrated tourism development model in Ehden (50.0%), although third of them do not have a clear answer for it (30%) and there are those who are not willing (20%). When analysing the results by age group, the older the age, the greater the interest in promoting an integrated tourism development model in Ehden. By gender, women are the most interested, and by level of education, university students are the most interested.

In addition, the majority of the local population of Ehden who answered the survey want to participate in the implementation of this tourism model (38.6%), however, almost a third of the respondents did not answer this question (32.9%) because they were not sure how to participate and a small percentage said they do not wish to participate.

Tourists from Lebanon accounted for 77.9% of respondents and foreign tourists accounted for 22.1%. The main countries of residence or origin of foreign tourists are KSA and France (26.7% each), followed by Australia (13.3%), Canada, USA, UAE, Qatar and Spain (6.7% each) (Annex VII).

Green and adventure tourism are the most important motivations to visit the region (86.8%), followed by gastronomic tourism (64.7%) and cultural tourism (64.7%). In addition, religious and/or spiritual tourism (60.3%) is also very relevant. Finally, luxury and spa tourism plays a shy but important role in Ehden (19.1%).

When analysed by age, all age groups showed a high interest in green and adventure tourism, followed by gastronomic and cultural tourism and then religious tourism, although some differences were found for specific age groups.

Tourists were asked about the complementary offer of Ehden in which some events and shows stand out, detecting that all respondents were mainly interested in the Ehdeniyat International Festivals (100%), followed to a lesser extent by other local events.



When asked about the length of stay in Ehden, most tourists spend the whole summer in Ehden (71%) and a quarter spend a couple of days or weekends (25%). When asked whether they would repeat their visit to Ehden, only 29.9% were clear that they would like to revisit, with a 35.4% saying they would not return and 34.7% stated that they might.

The majority of respondents prefer to stay in High-quality Hotels such as 5 to 4 star hotels and Luxury Rural Hotels (58.8%) when travelling, followed by those who prefer tourist flats at 20.6%, hotels under 4 stars (19.1%) and their own home 1.5% (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

The Lebanese tourism model and therefore the origin of tourism in Ehden comes from the time when it was a French colony (Santer, 2019) and could be expected to resemble a very westernised tourism model (Winter, 2009) given that the origin of tourism and its expansion to the world also comes from the West (Cohen, 2008). In fact, Ehden's diversified offer, increasingly focused on leisure and enjoyment, is closely related to the interests of European tourists (McKercher & Decosta, 2007).

The fact that the most demanded type of accommodation in Ehden is High-end Hotels is worrying since this type of accommodation consumes the most resources and generates the most waste. This is a clear sign that the requirements of tourist accommodation are not in line with sustainable tourism (Nicholas et al., 2009). Furthermore, the existing tourism pattern in Ehden is highly seasonal, concentrated during the summer and a few weekends during the winter. This shows that in the case of Ehden, the concept of green tourism has been distorted (Rozzi et al., 2010), resembling more a tourism model of enjoyment in nature (nature as a backdrop) rather than enjoyment and enhancement of nature.

Although most accommodations are run by local Lebanese inhabitants, the large enterprises are often dominated by a small part of the privileged population. However, the majority of the surveyed population wants to be involved in the promotion of an integrated tourism development model in the area. But it would be necessary to analyse how to implement an integrated tourism development model in a territory that already shows symptoms of saturation, "touristification" and environmental unsustainability.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the legacy of a colonial tourism model oriented towards the needs of tourists and not towards the needs of the local population has resulted in Ehden having a "touristified" territory.

The "Ehden model" shows that it is not a sustainable tourism model, as it was not structured on the basis of development and the valorisation of endogenous resources, rather on the promotion of leisure and entertainment activities. Moreover, tourism in Ehden does not take environmental conservation into account, it is very seasonal due to the concentration of demand during the summer and some winter weekends. However, there is great interest from the local actors and the population to promote an integrated tourism model in Ehden that would correct the deficiencies detected and have a positive impact on the local population.

As a prospective, it would be necessary to propose a research model that would make it possible to study in depth the needs of the Ehden population and to collect proposals to recover traditional socio-economic activities and introduce new ones that would serve as an advantage to promote autogenous socio-economic development in Ehden for all the inhabitants, in which tourism would cease to be the predominant activity.