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Describing the Small Vessels Maritime Tourism

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Abstract

Tourism trends indicate the growth of maritime tourism and the increase of diversified operations to fit a variety of tourist preferences. Operators have delivered in producing new tourism experiences on small maritime vessels that stand in contrast to the image of mass tourism and large ship cruising. Interviews with maritime tourism stakeholders reveal how small vessel operations fit into a competitive industry. These operators will make the valuable distinction ignored by many that smaller expedition ships and like vessels do not fit the cruise tourism model and that their tourist product is separated from cruises based on two main elements; authentic experience and sustainability.

Whereas traditional cruise tourism conjures images of luxury and excess, a rapidly developing tourist profile has prompted the diversification of maritime tourism. Where maritime tourism has expanded both quantitatively and qualitatively there are now ships of every size and shape in almost every port around the world, ready to deliver a unique tourism product (Diakomihalis, 2007). While the scope of maritime tourism remains ambiguous, researchers have begun to look beyond the iconic image of mass tourism cruise ships to study the diversity of tourist experiences that occur at sea (Kizielewicz, 2012; Jones, et. al., 2016). Rapid expansion and transformation of the industry have generated opportunities to create diversified and competitive tourism products aboard a variety of vessels (Georgsdottir & Oskarsson, 2017). Some researchers have often likened all maritime tourism to cruising (Bowen et. al., 2014; Marti, 1986), others consider a variety of on-shore and off-shore experiences maritime tourism (Diakomihalis, 2007; Kizielewicz, 2012; Hall, 2001; Miller, 1993). While there is no doubt that maritime tourism includes the cruise industry, how far beyond this mass tourism market does our understanding of maritime tourism go? In many maritime destinations around the

world sailing, yachting, and daily maritime tours make up a large part of the industry, "the perception of maritime tourism solely as a mass phenomenon is obviously wrong because traveling in smaller groups: 12 passenger cargo-passenger ships or yachts and sailing ships also represent a significant segment" (Kizielewicz, 2012). Researchers have struggled to differentiate the on-shore and off-shore experiences; some combine 'coastal' and 'marine tourism' (Miller, 1993), while others (Hall, 2001) use the terms 'ocean tourism,' 'coastal tourism,' 'cruise tourism,' and 'marine tourism,' all interchangeably going so far as to include water sports into the definition, including scuba diving and windsurfing along with cruises and yachting. In response, Kizielewicz analyzed the maritime industry and produced a working definition that differentiates maritime tourism from a maritime excursion, "maritime tourism can be defined as staying at sea or ocean for the purposes of tourism or business, using maritime means of transport in the period not longer than 12 months. And in turn, a maritime excursion is a tourist activity with using the means of water transport for tourism or business that lasts no longer than 24 hours" (2012). Using Kizielewicz's definition of maritime tourism, sport-related water activities such as scuba diving, surfing, and jet skiing are all examples of maritime excursions, not maritime tourism. Removing these from the equation, there remains a large amount cruising and sailing vessels available to tourists.

The "small vessels" community

Many coastal economies have capitalized on the ability to charter vessels to tourists for an experience that enables them a directness to the sea unavailable to cruise passengers (Diakomihalis, 2007). From this emerges three main subsections of the maritime industry in addition to cruising; yachting, sailing, and leisure maritime shipping. These activities may take place on master sailing ships, sailing vessels, sailing yachts, bareboat, small caiques, luxury caiques, motor yachts, mega yachts, big caiques, maritime cruises, blue water cruises, maritime yachting with or without a crew, ferry travel, high-speed ship travel, submarine expedition, fishing vessels, passenger-cargo ships, and cargo ships (Diakomihalis, 2007; Kizielewicz, 2012). It is popular to categorize maritime vessels by size but is done with little consistency. Where Kizielewicz categorizes individual vessels (1-9 passengers), group vessels (10-500 passengers), mass cruises (501-2000 passengers), and resort cruising (2001-4000 passengers), there are various other ways to make the 'small' vs 'large' distinction:

- *Marti (1986): Small Vessels (1-100 passengers) and Large Vessels (more than 100 passengers)*
- *Go Over Seas.com (2019): Small ship cruises (1-300 passengers) and Traditional cruises (more than 300 passengers)*
- *Honey et. al. (2010): Pocket-Cruises (1-250 passengers) and Traditional cruises (more than 250 passengers)*
- *Sariisik et. al. (2011): Yachts (36 passengers or less)*
- *Cruise Critic.com (2020): Small ships (1-799 passengers), Small-Mid ships (800-1499 passengers), Midsized ships (1500-2499 passengers), Large ships (2500-3499 passengers), and Mega ships (3500 or more passengers)*

With a combination of vessel sizes and itineraries to explore, tourists have more options than ever to engage in diversified maritime experiences. Where tourists seek out new experiences, the small vessel maritime community has responded with unique operations that challenge traditional cruising. They are met with a wide range of on-shore and off-shore offerings that span hours to months. With a loose understanding of what tourism products and experiences make up this growing industry, this study looks to explore how maritime tourism has expanded beyond cruising to offer diverse tourism products. In doing so, operators and other maritime tourism stakeholders are given an opportunity to share valuable insight into the development of the community. We explored how the operators and other stakeholders of the small vessel maritime tourism industry prefer to define themselves and the valuable distinctions they make between their operations and other players in the maritime tourism industry.

Exploring the small vessels maritime tourism community

A mix of semi-structured interviews from a variety of industry professionals and empirical research, involving both academic literature and media reports, are used to triangulate the reliability of source information. Exploratory research hinges on our understanding that knowledge is "situated" and that by looking at the same material from multiple angles we can uncover "previously hidden facets of reality" (Reiter, 2017).

Interviewees were selected using snowball sampling which is a valuable tool in gaining access to finite or marginal groups "[leading] to dynamic moments where unique social knowledge of an interactional quality can be fruitfully generated," (Noy, 2008). This technique was used to gain access to operators and people who have experience with the operations of the small vessel maritime tourism industry by utilizing existing relationships. Initial exploratory conversations with three of the participants revealed emerging themes and shaped the direction of the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview was created with three objectives in mind: Explore operations related to maritime tourism, discuss emerging themes of diversification and sustainability and, gather participants for expanding the study.

Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone. Emails were used to follow up with interviews and clarify information when needed. The resulting research is a narrative of industry professionals and empirical material that provides an increased understanding of the maritime tourism industry. In the end, six participants were contacted and interviewed about their involvement in the maritime tourism industry. The participants varied in age, gender, and race. Three of the participants are owners or managers of maritime tourism operations (but not cruises). Two participants are managers of popular North American ports of call. One participant is a director of a national cruising association. All participants and their enterprises are in North and Central America. The interviews took place during the months of January and February 2020.

Our findings: describing the small vessel maritime tourism industry

Not a cruise!

An overwhelming sentiment with the three operators interviewed was that they did not associate their maritime tourism operations with cruising. In fact, two of the operators disassociated their enterprise with 'tourism' as well and called the passengers guest-crew as opposed to tourists or customers. In some cases, the distinction was a technical one (e.g., having less than 12 passengers means we are not a registered passenger vessel), but more often the avoidance of certain vocabulary was based on of perception of cruising as being negative:

> *'Cruise' to me personally has a negative connotation…I would not want to associate myself with the 'cruise industry' we are much more about ecotourism…everything I try to do is more real. We avoid the word tourism… we want everybody who comes on board to be integrated in a larger way… [they] are expected to participate in one way or another. We wouldn't want to send the wrong message… [it is not] a hotel... With adventure tourism…those people are not catered to in the same way as traditional tourists…we wouldn't want to attract people who want to be catered to because that is not what we offer.*

Yes, a maritime travel experience!

Interviewed operators all feel strongly that what they provide is a service that is inherently different than a cruise. Two of the operators are sailing cargo vessels that combine a twelve-person (overnight capacity) guest-crew into their business model with variable distribution of tourism integration. There is very little information regarding this niche form of maritime tourism in the literature, therefore, exploring the extent of the tourism operation became both exciting and challenging. These operators fell into the ambiguous peripheral of maritime tourism that was noted by many of the industry researchers. A study by Szarycz explains the draw for tourists to seek out these types of vessels for an "atypical" experience, thus further differentiating themselves from the majority of maritime tourism operations; "among these niche-oriented product offerings are 'freighter cruises' inviting participants to travel by cargo ship solely for the purpose of a unique and atypical travel experience" (2007). Testimony of freighter travelers can be found from adventure magazines to popular newspapers (outsidemagazine.com, 2020; nytimes.com, 2020) indicating an increase in interest in this form of travel. Two of the operators interviewed claim that their service offerings go way beyond freighter travel by offering a reciprocal and integrated experience that combines sustainable cargo with guest passengers.

The idea of a cruise is more akin to a luxury hotel than an oceanic adventure is not new. The comparison has been made by many researchers before; "floating cities," "floating hotels," "well-organized hotels," "mobile tourism enclaves," "cathedrals of entertainment," and "cathedrals of consumption," have all been attributed to the traditional cruising industry (Diakomihalis, 2007; Georgsdottir & Oskarsson, 2017; Szarycz, 2008; Quatermaine & Peter, 2003; Ritzer, 1998). Each operator speaks to what differentiates them from this floating-hotel-like image that is cruising:

> *We are trying to fill a niche we believe is underserved with what we are doing*

[combining sailing and cargo and passenger crew]… we use [the term] experiential adventures and charter opportunities. [About the terminology 'small cruiser' or 'pocket cruise'] I would never associate that with what we are doing… We use tourism out of necessity, and there is a real interest and demand there… people will pay to come sailing and that will support the sail cargo service we provide.

And to explain what a traditional cruise looks like, a participant shared that:

cruising is putting as many people as you can on a ship… the sheer numbers of how that operates… you can't have a real experience [in nature or with culture].

The inherent 'realness' of their operations was used regularly to form a contrast with the perceived 'fakeness' of cruising. The third operator is a self-defined 'adventure company' and has a fleet of small ships that range from 22 to 86 guest capacity. This operator with the largest fleet and most extensive itineraries appeared on the surface to have more in common with traditional cruising but made a similar distinction between the 'realness' that they are able to provide:

We like the intimacy, we don't have WiFi on the boats, we don't have gambling on the boats… if you are used to a regular cruise ship it is not like that. We are an adventure company… We don't go port to port [like traditional cruises] we get you out into the wilderness… [the experience] is concentrated on the adventure part of it and getting to be with nature.

The operator further highlights that their itineraries are flexible in order to take advantage of better weather situations, wildlife sightings, or guest's preferences of activities; ***We are the wild west out here!*** 'Adventure' and 'real' are more than just buzzwords used to sell a product when the operators all expressed that there was no place for 'contrived' experiences in their operations. The two-port managers who participated in the study agreed:

"We are really interested in this market [small tourism ships], they tend to be more environmentally conscious… they get to see more of what [a place] has to offer."

Even the director of a national cruise association admitted that these experiences were hard to achieve on traditional large cruises, saying that the cruises were only in port for 12 hours or less in this location. However, he argued that traditional cruises could be a gateway to further, more intimate, experiences; Cruise ships are a window into the country. Even if they are here for 12 hours, they will fall in love and want to come back.

All of the participants saw value in the type of intimate experiences a smaller vessel could provide tourists and the operators themselves were eager to distance themselves from the cruise industry. In making this distinction, the operators have shown that the maritime industry is far more than just cruising.

<u>Authenticity as the main ingredient</u>

All participants noted an inherent difference between traditional cruises and the service offerings of smaller vessels with guest crews. The operators attributed part of this difference to their ability to provide authenticity to the guest. Traditionally, tourism has been a contrived and superficial pursuit, but as the discipline expanded, it was determined that there are different types of tourists seeking different experiences (Cohen, 1979). MacCannell (1976) presents an understanding of the tourist experience as a pursuit for authentic experiences. The type of tourist that

MacCannel saw has more in common with the guests that are drawn towards experiential adventures such as those provided by small ship operators. They reject commodified experiences and seek realness. In contrast with their contrived lives, they can find real meaning through travel. While it would be dangerous to assume that tourists fall into categories so easily, it is worth noting the popularity of tourism services that claim to stand in opposition to the masses. The postmodern tourist has emerged as a person who is interested in a variety of experiences and as a result niche tourism markets are gaining worldwide awareness (UNTWO, 2017). With articles like 'Eight International Cruises that don't Suck' (outsidemagazine.com, 2018), one can observe that there is a desire for some tourists to seek unique and niche experiences during their vacations and travels. As described by Szarycz (2008), freighter travelers consider themselves 'travelers' able to "construct their own meanings about their experiences, the places they visit and the people they meet" giving credibility to their travel and journey authenticity.

Georgsdottir & Oskarsson found that for those who worked in the cruising industry, they much preferred to work with passengers who travel on small cruisers, "*they tended to speak more positively about smaller exploration ships. They described the passengers from such ships as 'well educated', 'active' and closer to nature, 'people who want to see and learn'*" (2017). The adventure operator agreed with this sentiment:

> *They [big ships] can tell you about it, but we get to show you it. You get to be with nature, we want you to experience that… to smell it, taste it, see it, and respect it… Being on a small ship educates you more about the environment, it is more intimate. We want people to see the real Hawaii, the wild Hawaii… the real Alaska.*

This was echoed by another operator:

> *[You go on cruises] to see things but not to understand them.*
> *There are people who want to get out and pretend they are doing something… we are the furthest thing from that… my goal is to offer real experiences with an old boat that really does sail, that really does require participation, and we are doing real things, we are really trying to build a business of shipping goods from local communities.*

In this way, achieving authenticity is tied to contact with nature as well as participation in onboard ship operations. MacCannell would describe this as "backstage areas" where the operation of the vessel is not altered for the presentation to a tourist, but integrated into the experience to convey authenticity. The operators will argue that contact with the sea and the forces of nature should be inherent in any form of ocean travel (1976). Where yachting is presented as a form of maritime tourism that offers "directness to the sea" by allowing the tourist autonomy over the navigation of the vessel (Diakomihalis, 2007), that same directness can be achieved with these experiential voyages;

> *[on a cruise ship] you're not experiencing the sea, you never really come in contact with it.*
> *[A cruise] is like watching a movie.*

Here the participant indicates that their own operation is in opposition to the way cruise passengers are removed from the oceanic experience.

Intimate experience with a positive impact

The way each operator creates an authentic experience for their passengers is motivated by their mission to achieve realness as discussed above. However, two of the operators credit their ships' small size with the ability to create those intimate experiences:

> *We are a small ship company and we want to stay that way, while still having a big impact.*

This operator foresees expanding their operations in quality more than quantity and highlights the attentiveness they are able to give each guest by having at least one guide for every eleven guests:

> *We want everyone to feel taken care of… and that there are options for everyone.*

This attentiveness, they argue, would not be possible on a larger ship. It all aligns with their vision that stands contrary to the idea of mass tourism:

> *[The founder] had a vision of taking people to remote and untouched places… we want to keep people out in nature… to get away from massive amounts of waste, massive amounts of consumption.*

In agreement, an operator explained:

> *With a small group, you can go somewhere and have a real experience… When you have a small crew on a small ship you can bring people into a town without overwhelming that community, and they get a real experience*.

In a popular North American port, maritime tourism ships of all sizes go in and out of the port daily, "marinas are considered very significant facilities for the development of maritime tourism," (Diakomihalis, 2007). The port managers interviewed explained that they anticipate more of the 20-100 passenger small cruisers to frequent their port in the future and have conducted a study on how they can meet the needs of these types of ships and what facilities are required to accommodate them. In the literature, these smaller "expedition" ships are gaining popularity (Georgsdottir & Oskarsson, 2017).

> *[The community] probably enjoys having passengers from small ships more, they have more time [at port] and want to interact more.*

The literature agrees that having passengers arrive in ports in smaller numbers is more beneficial for the host community, "keeping the size of tour groups to a minimum is an opportunity to reduce negative social impact and least disturb host communities' way of life, as well as reducing stress on the natural environment," (Weeden, 2001). This consideration for tourism's impacts is shared by all of the operators and is considered a distinguishing characteristic of their small ships. With traditional cruising being characterized by excess and mass tourism, the maritime industry appears to be being pulled in two different directions, "until recently the tendency in the cruise industry was towards larger and more luxurious ships, but now it seems to be changing direction"(Georgsdottir & Oskarsson, 2017).

Sustainability

Tourism operations are feeling the pressure of incorporating sustainability to satisfy social demand and remain competitive (Hritz & Cecil, 2010). The maritime industry is feeling the same pressure, so much so, that Environmental Sustainability and Destination Stewardship were the #1 and #2 trends in the CLIA 2020 State of the Cruise Industry Outlook. However, many would consider these steps reactive and not proactive, as several

reports have raised concerns about the sustainability of cruise operations (Gibson & Papathanassis, 2010; Papathanassis, 2019; Hritz & Cecil, 2010; Brida & Aguirre, 2008; Johnson, 2002; Polat, 2015; Ponton & Asero, 2018; O'Brien, 2014; Klein, 2010; Jones et. al., 2019; Klein, 2011; Han et. al., 2018; Jones et. al., 2016). The UNWTO warned that cruising, by nature of bringing large numbers of people to concentrated areas for brief periods, has the potential to magnify tourism's negative impacts (2016). It would seem that smaller ships than are better positioned to create smaller impacts and better control the narrative of sustainability and maritime tourism.

By putting sustainability at the core of all operations, one operator hopes that the guest crew will feel fulfilled in contributing to such an enterprise; a genuine business that has meaningful outcomes:

> *Guests [are] contributing to this reality of making a change.*

As one of the sailing cargo operations, sustainability is integral to the business beyond the applications of tourism. A list of sustainable initiatives creates an impressive resume as an example of what the industry is capable of achieving:

- *Regenerative ship building; a combination of using local native hardwoods as lumber and tree planting*
- *Offer formal and informal training in specialized ship building and sailing skills to create opportunities for local people*
- *Equal opportunity for women*
- *Goal to have 50% local workers*
- *Conduct surveys and participate in studies to understand social & environmental needs within community*
- *Partnerships with local institutions to create learning opportunities*
- *A sustainable investor reinvestment program for shareholders*
- *Carbon neutrality*
- *Technological innovators for environmental sustainability*

> ***The community supports us and other people come here and see how we support the community… everything we do we look at the social and environmental impacts.***

Starting from the ground up, incorporating sustainability has defined their operation and is an important differentiation factor within the maritime industry. Such initiatives go beyond 'best practices' to incorporate multiple levels of sustainability into the business model. Another operator has a similar outlook and includes their guests in their mission.

The operators recognize the acceptance that their sustainability efforts are having with their guests:

> *More people than not were amazed and proud of getting behind a company that stood for something… 95% of guests [felt similarly to us] about [the environmental stance] so it strengthened our community. It is peace of mind, to work for the planet and come to work every day knowing that.*

- *Educating their guests about water usage*
- *Use locally sourced and organic foods whenever possible on the tours*
- *Require all guides to have a Leave No Trace certification*
- *Bring National Park staff on the boats when entering marine sensitive areas*
- *Use only environmentally friendly chemicals including giving guests 'true' sunscreen that protects coral reefs*
- *High employee retention*
- *Bamboo bedding*
- *Buys materials in bulk*
- *No single use plastics*
- *Provides stainless steel water bottles for guests*
- *Collects rainwater on the vessels*
- *[The owner] uses resources and influences to campaign for environmental policies and make socially responsible choices*

These small vessel operations stand in stark contrast to the common critiques of the maritime and cruise industries as being large polluters. Johnson(2002) provides a comprehensive look at where the cruise industry should be paying more attention to their sustainability efforts by examining the waste impacts, infrastructure impacts, operations impacts, distribution impacts, and use impacts that add up while operating one of these floating cities. Evidence submitted by the Network to the US EPA in 2000 stated that a typical cruise ship can generate an estimated 1,000,000 gallons of greywater on a 1-week voyage, as well as significant amounts of hazardous chemical from onboard printing, photo processing, and dry-cleaning operations" (Johnson, 2002).

From the point of view of the director of one national cruising association who participated in the study, large cruisers are focusing on technical innovations that alleviate negative environmental pressures. He was impressed by some of the larger cruise lines. He explained that the cruisers were switching to more efficient oils and fuels, installing advanced wastewater management, and reusing gray water where possible. Their economies of scale allowed them to phase out older boats and install newer technologies with sustainability in mind. The CLIA highlights in their State of the Cruise Industry Outlook that their cruise lines were focusing on using Liquified Natural Gas, Exhaust Gas Cleaning Systems, Advanced Wastewater Treatment Systems, and Shore-side Power in order to be more sustainable in 2020.

However, vessels of all sizes should be considerate of more than just their environmental impacts. Cruises create considerable socio-cultural impacts on host communities at port cities. Researchers have called out major cruise lines for adopting strategies that create underlying tension between sustainability and economic growth (Jones et. al., 2016). With maritime tourism expected to grow in the coming years, tourism operations must evaluate their social and environmental impacts and avoid negatively impacting the quality of life of local peoples (Klein, 2011). At the ports, the managers interviewed see an opportunity with these small vessels;

We have an interest in these [smaller] boats because they add more to the town… they spend more money in the community.

At the same time, both participants recognized that ships of all sizes are interested in the needs of port communities, especially in so far as it affects their bottom line. With such far-reaching impacts, it can be difficult for tour operators to manage sustainability, yet all three of the operators' site sustainability as an integral part of their operation:

[Sustainability] is imperative, I couldn't do something if I thought it would have a detrimental effect on the environment… at every level of our business, we want to evaluate how we can have the lowest possible impact on the environment.

Everything is easier [by incorporating sustainability from the inception of the business], you attract the right people from the beginning… it helps to enrich and support our goals.

We try to be proactive… in every little thing we can.

Conclusion

By analyzing the attitudes, opinions, and operations of those involved with the small vessel maritime tourism, this paper has presented new information that expands the current understanding of what constitutes maritime tourism. Operators feel strongly that they provide unique experiences that are authentic forms of oceanic adventure and are rooted in sustainable practices. This new, still unspecified community of small vessels maritime tourism operators contrasts traditional views of cruise tourism. Port managers too are excited about the potential of new types of maritime vessels minimizing the negative impacts and maximizing the positive impacts of tourism in and around port communities. While traditional cruising will likely remain the major feature of the maritime tourism industry, a new wave of postmodern tourists creates the opportunity for small operators to make large waves in maritime tourism.

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