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Typification of Coffee Tours in Costa Rica: value of culture for rural communities

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Abstract

Costa Rican coffee tours provide varying amenities, experiences, specializations, and offerings for visitors. This research provides an exploratory approach to identify and categorize the various coffee tours in Costa Rica while offering a case study of how coffee culture is been used in the growing Agri-tourism sector of the country. The objective of this research was to perform the identification and typification of coffee tours produced by companies in the country. The study was conducted from November 2020 to April 2021. The data was collected through short-answer surveys from owners, administrators, and employees of coffee tour operations. Twenty-four surveys of coffee tours were collected throughout Costa Rica from six provinces. The research provides findings of varying offerings and characteristics that were categorized into three distinct groups.

Introduction

Coffee tours are a common feature of Costa Rica tourism. Based on this country's rich history of high-quality coffee bean production, it is not surprising that foreign and domestic tourists alike are interested in learning about coffee: its production, processing, commercialization, culture, and so on. However, it is difficult to pinpoint the differences in offerings between companies offering coffee tours and the differences in offerings among competitive coffee tours. According to the Ministry of Tourism, foreign visitors stayed in Costa Rica for an average of 12.6 days and spent an average of $1,400 in 2019 (ICT). With such large and consistent numbers of visitors to Costa Rica, identifying and categorizing coffee tour companies provide a competitive advantage providing their offerings to their target market and how these companies stand out from their competition to target and attract these visitors to their businesses. It is hypothesized that coffee tours are heterogeneous in terms of what amenities and experiences are offered to visitors and that definable subgroups can be identified from the coffee tours in Costa Rica. Furthermore, the different types of offerings may indicate different degrees of willingness to culture-sharing from entrepreneurs. This research aims to identify, distinguish, and characterize the various coffee tours that operate in Costa Rica.

Literature Review

Coffee Culture and Tourism in Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a popular destination for North Americans. Tourism has been Costa Rica's most important industry for many years (Biesanz et al., 1999). Out of the 3.1 million international visitors to the country in 2019, more than half came from North America with 1.3 million tourists coming from the United States, by far the largest tourism market for the country. The second-largest market, Europe, reached just above 500,000 visitors to the country in the same year (*Anuario Estadístico de Turismo 2019*).

Many coffee-related tourism projects have been initiated in coffee-producing countries, including Costa Rica recognizing the value of sharing coffee culture with the visitors. Candelo et al. (2019) found that the four main benefits for the local communities of farmers and their families are empowerment and cooperation, business diversification, sustainability, and the creation of a destination image. Coffee tourism is viewed to be creating favorable and appealing conditions for tourists. Coffee in Costa Rica is very popular with its residents as well as the millions of international tourists who visit the country every year. Costa Rica arguably produces some of the best coffee in the world and this valuable commodity is exported throughout the world in specialty markets. The unique coffees produced by each farmer present a full spectrum of tastes and aromas uniquely brewed in each region of the country. Also, there is a collected knowledge and tradition of how to cultivate, process, and prepare coffee. For example, since 1989, all coffee produced in Costa Rica is legally required by law to be arabica beans to maintain a high quality (Law No. 19302-MAG). Costa Rican coffee is now exported around the world and eventually became known as one of the highest-quality coffees available (Pendergrast 2010: 40-41, 154).

The Costa Rican Coffee Institute (ICAFE) divides the coffee-growing areas into eight coffee-growing regions: Central West Valley, Tarrazu, Tres Rios, Orosi, Brunca, Turrialba, Central Valley, and Guanacaste. The highest quality coffee is grown approximately 1,200 to 1,700 meters above sea level and the beans are grown from September to December in a shorter season. Lower-quality coffee is typically grown below 1,200 meters below sea level, with a longer growing season from late June to December. The International Coffee Association states that for the crop year commencing in 2018, Costa Rica produced 1,427 thousand 60kg bags (2018). "Nowadays, close to 40% of Costa Rica's coffee exports are classified as high-quality coffee beans that sell at a 40% premium when compared to traditional Arabica" (FAO, 2018).

Coffee tourism in Costa Rica

An increasing amount of coffee professionals and coffee enthusiasts are traveling to coffee-growing regions, observing the early stages of the coffee production chain (Sanchez, 2008). Therefore, diversification of coffee operations is a feasible option for these farms to implement other forms of revenue through coffee tourism. Coffee tourism can be defined as "being related to the consumption of the coffee, history, traditions, products, and culture of a destination" (Jolliffe, 2010g: 9). Coffee tourism is considered a subcategory of rural tourism (Boniface, 2003). One of how coffee tourism is practiced is through coffee tours executed by companies that grow coffee beans. The production of coffee contains numerous steps in processing before achieving the cup as a beverage and these processing methods and areas are important attractions (Kleidas and Jolliffe, 2010). Coffee tourism can be classified in many ways, such as being a part of a cultural and culinary tourism initiative (Jolliffe, 2010a). Coffee tourism can also be classified under special interest tourism (Weiler and Hall, 1992) or niche tourism (Robinson and Novelli, 2005) such as tourism involving research. Coffee tourism can also be listed under agritourism. Agritourism may be defined as "any practice developed on a working farm to attract visitors" (Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008). Pendergrast (2010b: 367-368) describes visits to coffee farms during the harvesting season as coffee ecotourism and calls coffee tourists "ecotourists".

Coffee tours and rural communities

Visitors and tourists experiencing coffee tours have the benefit of seeing the full production of the coffee supply chain, from the beginning stages of growing the coffee beans at the farms until the coffee is processed and ready to be exported at the production facility. The attractions identified along this supply chain have been identified in relevant literature in the coffee tourism field observing the potential for coffee farm and community tours and visits, coffee trails, production facilities or factory visits, and cupping (e.g. Anbalagan & Lovelock, 2014; Brennes et al., 1997; Kleidas and Jolliffe, 2010; Lyon, 2013; Whyte, 2008). Jolliffe (2010) notes that many coffee farm owners consider coffee tours or experiential activities as important opportunities to educate their clients about the various operations and productions that make the difference in distinguishing great coffees from each other.

Coffee tourism in rural areas is less accepted by the academic community and the public than wine tourism (Yun, 2014), and studies of coffee tourism typologies are limited. However, coffee tourism does seem to share similarities with wine tourism. Karlsson and Karlsson (2017) list the prerequisites required to be considered coffee tourism: coffee tourism has to be implemented in an area where coffee beans are grown and produced, coffee tourism has to disperse information and education about coffee, and the tourist experiences the coffee-making process and can try the coffee produced on site (2017). The research team also categorized tours into traditional, educational, and comprehensive types.

Traditional types may provide tours or tastings for visitors, but no design of specific experiential activities is involved. Tourism is not the primary source of income for these estates. Educational tours include information on growing coffee, as well as providing visitors with tours and coffee samples. These coffee estates provide classes and experiences for visitors that further educate the topics of coffee. Comprehensive coffee estates comprise growing coffee, providing coffee-related activities, and providing meals and accommodations (Karlsson and Karlsson, 2017). Coffee tours in Costa Rica do not share the same clientele or offering types, nor do they necessarily cater to the specific types of tourists and consumers as wine tours. A more in-depth investigation of the typology of coffee tours is needed to understand the connection between coffee and tourism and the way these Costa Rican coffee tours create experiences at coffee destinations for visitors.

Methodology

The objective was to perform the typification and characterization of coffee tours produced by companies in Costa Rica to develop a categorization of coffee tours within Costa Rica. The first step was to identify all coffee tours in Costa Rica. Following Terziyska's study on wine tours (2018), the research began with the content study of the websites of companies offering coffee tours in Costa Rica and providing online information on their coffee tours. An internet search using the keyword "coffee tours in Costa Rica", was performed in English, and then recorded. Various Google searches were utilized to identify coffee tours to contact. Online searches (e.g. coffee tour Costa Rica) provided a majority of coffee tours. Other tourism websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) and Costa Rica tourism blogs (e.g. https://costaricaexperts.com/costa-rica-coffee-plantation-tours/, https://news.co.cr/costa-rica-coffee-tours-cupping/2989/) also listed coffee tours that were then investigated to find contact information. No national register of coffee tours with the Ministry of Tourism or other institutions in Costa Rica was found through online searches. Once the name of the coffee tour was found, the researcher recorded pertinent information about the company and contact information, including name, website, email, and phone number. Forty-two companies conducting coffee tours were found and invited to fill out the survey.

A survey was constructed to gain any pertinent information regarding coffee tours in Costa Rica. Each survey question contained both English and Spanish to be inclusive. The survey contained 23 short-answer, multiple-choice, and single-answer questions about the company in general and specifically the company's coffee tours. It contained questions concerning the number of years the company has been in operation, the number of years of conducting coffee tours, the length of time of the coffee tours, price, what is learned on the tour, additional amenities, online presence, and social platforms, special characteristics, certifications, etc. A pilot test of the survey was reviewed and completed by Costa Ricans to ensure the correct translation and meaning of each question.

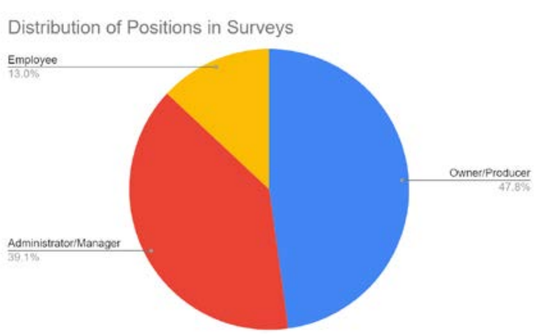
The next step involved sending out the survey to each business providing coffee tours, indicating the intent of the research. Businesses were sent a link by email or WhatsApp to an online survey concerning their business and coffee tours to gain insight into the characteristics and offerings of their coffee tours. Companies providing coffee tours were contacted a second time if no response or survey was done. Some companies were reached by WhatsApp, Facebook, and phone if a response was not provided. Based on Wang et al's research analyzing tourism experiences (2019), the coffee tours needed to fit three criteria to be studied: open to the public, provide coffee experience activities and offer coffee tours. Survey results were analyzed to discard those without these three criteria.

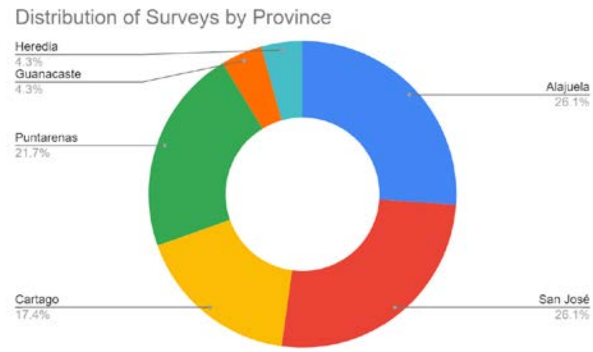
The main variables that characterized the coffee tours were then subjected to a hierarchical cluster analysis using the Ward grouping method and Gower general coefficient as the distance measure, as developed by Ward (1963). The objective of cluster analysis was to address heterogeneity in the data set from the surveys. Clustering can also help marketers find distinct groups in their customer base and characterize their customer groups of customers based on various distinctions.

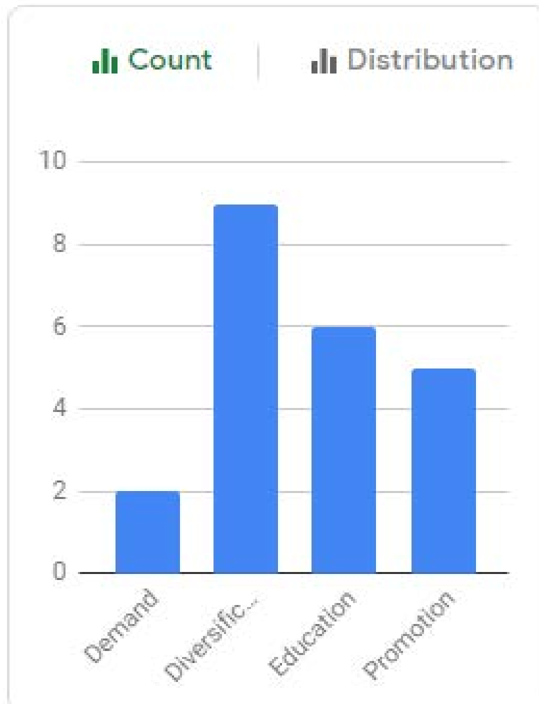
Results and Discussion

The results included usable surveys from twenty-four companies providing coffee tours in Costa Rica. Six provinces were represented: Alajuela (6), San Jose (6), Cartago (4), Guanacaste (1), Heredia (1), and Puntarenas (5). The respondents were 9 administrators/ managers, 3 employees, and 11 owners/producers. 15 companies have been in operation from 1-10 years, 5 companies from 18-37 years, 2 companies from 55-73 years, and 1 over 100 years. Eleven companies have been providing coffee tours for up to 7 years, 7 companies for 8 to 16 years, and 5 companies providing coffee tours for more than 16 years. The primary purpose companies began offering coffee tours was consolidated and fell into four categories: consumer demand (2), diversification (11), education (6), and promotion (5). Coffee tour times ranged from 1 hour up to 4 hours, with the majority of coffee tours around 2 hours. Coffee tour prices ranged from $10 up to $45 for foreigners, with the majority of prices between $20-40. Every company has a target market for international visitors. Of the target markets listed, 8 companies checked 1-3 target markets, 10 companies checked 5-6 target markets, and 6 companies checked 7-9 target markets. All companies surveyed but one responded with having at least 3 social media platforms. 3 companies checked 1-2 activities conducted on their coffee tours, 7 companies checked 4-6 activities, 7 companies checked 7-9 activities, and 7 companies checked 10-11 activities. Out of the additional amenities, 9 companies checked 6-8 amenities, 11 companies checked 9-10 amenities, and 4 companies checked 11-15 amenities on-site. All surveys reported being offered in Spanish and English. No companies surveyed reported other languages utilized for coffee tours than Spanish, English, and French, of which 5 reported offering coffee tours in French.

Demographics and coffee tour characteristics

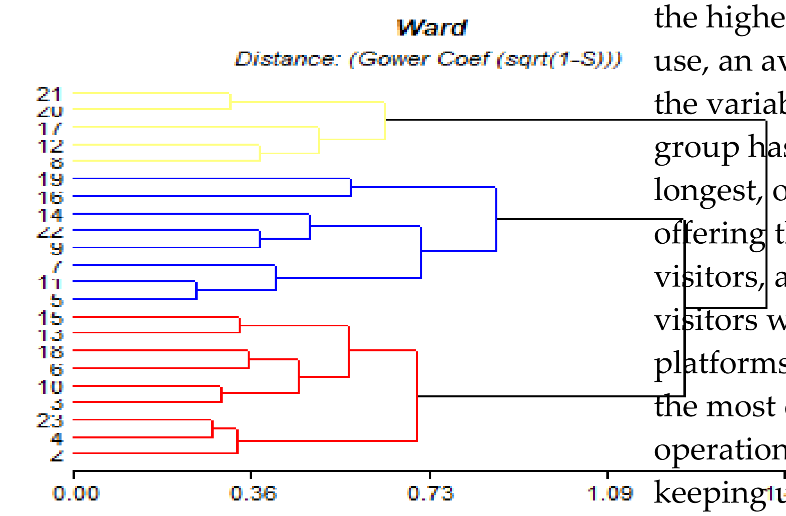






The hierarchical cluster analysis was utilized with the Ward method and Gower's General Coefficient measure (Ward, 1963) and found three distinct clusters based on four chosen variables: the number of years the company has offered coffee tours, the total number of selected offerings on coffee tours, the total number of amenities selected in addition to the coffee tours, and the total number of media platforms selected that are utilized by the company. The three groups were found to be statistically significant.

Cluster Analysis: Group 1 (Red), Group 2 (Blue), Group 3 (Yellow)



Analysis of variance table (Wilks)

S.V.	Statistic	F	df(num)	df(den)	p
Cluster	0.06	11.79	8	32	<0.0001

Analysis of variance table (Pillai)

S.V.	Statistic	F	df(num)	df(den)	p
Cluster	1.43	10.54	8	34	<0.0001

Analysis of variance table (Lawley-Hotelling)

S.V.	Statistic	F	df(num)	df(den)	p
Cluster	6.95	13.03	8	30	<0.0001

Based on the analysis of the clustered groups, the researcher was able to characterize the coffee tours in three distinct groups: Ripened, Perennial, and Green and Growing.

Ripened

This group (3 - yellow) contains 5 companies. They contain the highest average number of years that the company has been providing coffee tours at an average of 20 years. This group had the highest selected amount of what is learned on the coffee tours, an average of 11. This group also had the highest total number of additional amenities and offerings provided, at 12. This group had the highest number of social platforms in use, an average of 8 selected. Based on the variables utilized in the analysis, this group has been offering coffee tours the longest, offering the most on the tour, offering the most additional amenities for visitors, and the highest potential reach of visitors with the greatest number of social platforms. It is inferred that this group is the most developed and at full-scale operation. This group might have been keeping up with the tourism demand as tourism increased since the 1990s.

Perennial

This group (2 - blue) contains 8 companies. The group had the middle average number of years that the company has been providing coffee tours, at an average of 14 years. This group contained an average of 5 selections for what was learned on the tour. The group recorded 9 additional amenities available and 5 social platforms utilized. These companies have been providing coffee tours long enough to be developed, but may not have the required resources to improve and enhance their tours. These companies could be run on a small, but still offering what tourists desire and demand.

Green and Growing

This group (1 - red) contains 9 companies. This group had the lowest average number of years that the company has been providing coffee tours, an average of 6 years. However, the group averaged 9 selections of what is learned on the coffee tours. The group offered an average of 9 additional amenities available and 5 social platforms utilized. Although the youngest group, these companies offer just under the Ripened's group number of what is learned on the tours. These companies have had less experience in the number of years offering coffee tours, yet offer the same additional amenities and utilize the same number of social platforms as the Perennial group. It is inferred that this group of companies is keeping up to date with online platforms and additional amenities for its visitors.

Implications

Findings show three distinctive types of tours: ripened, perennial, and green and growing. This offering of tours, we argue here, is not easy to distinguish by the tourist especially since we did not find a correlation between the type of tour and the price paid for it. Careful consideration must be given then to the expectation created around the coffee tour by the tour operator and/or agency that booked the tour. Said that the findings clearly describe the spectrum of coffee tour experiences in Costa Rica. It seems like there is no barrier to entering the market since different land scales of farmers are involved in the industry. Years of operation in coffee production is not an entering barrier, either.

This research is valuable, as it distinguishes necessary information to differentiate companies providing coffee tours and their offerings. Coffee estate owners and managers would be interested in the specific typologies to differentiate the experiences that visitors demand and diversify their offerings. Coffee estate owners and managers can utilize this research as a marketing tool, promoting their businesses as what makes their coffee tours special and unique to other coffee tours. Understanding which category their coffee tour is assigned will assist these coffee estates to build on their current offering and better identify what they can do to improve their offerings.

This research also assists coffee estates and their communities in establishing a greater understanding of what is needed to begin offering coffee tours as they can choose the type of coffee tours they desire: ripened, perennial, green & growing. Coffee farmers adding coffee tours to their current operations could develop a more diversified revenue stream, provide for the increasing demand by tourists, and/or educate those purchasing their coffee beans. Our finding, however, did not distinguish any differentiation based on cultural consideration or scale of production. For example, no tours focus on the traditional processing of coffee versus industrialization processing. Defining and delineating the distinguishing characteristics of coffee tours should also provide coffee farmers with clear guidelines for establishing and improving experiential-based coffee tourism. Here a final warning should be given, most existing coffee estates have capacity limitations in space, personnel, skills, and techniques, therefore it is difficult for coffee estates to promote at a larger scale (Anbalagan and Lovelock, 2014). Having more visitors than available carrying capacity produces negative impacts (Wang, 2019)

Limitations and Future Research

During the research period, the COVID-19 pandemic was ubiquitous throughout the country. Due to the pandemic, tourism in Costa Rica was not "normal". Results recorded by companies may have been affected due to the pandemic and what is offered on their tours. Costa Rica implemented restrictions for large groups and tours were altered to minimize the spread of the disease. Group sizes were limited during tours and new sanitation and health measures were changed to accommodate visitors.

Only coffee tours found online with a website or email were contacted. Forty-four potential coffee tours in Costa Rica were found through online searches. However, not all who were approached for a survey responded. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, online surveys were utilized to gather more information from more tours and operators rather than a select few for in-depth interviews to collect as much data as necessary from as many tours as possible. With the limited time available, the research is based on the self-assessment answers by the companies responding to the survey. As the companies self-assessed, further research would be needed to validate the responses. Further research to gain more understanding of coffee tours and typologies to develop would be utilized in conjunction with interviews and/or ethnographic studies.

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