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From ski to snow:

Rethinking package holidays in a winter mountain  
destination

**Chiara Mauri**  
**Lorenzo Turci**

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**From ski to snow:  
Rethinking package holidays in a winter mountain destination**

Chiara Mauri - Università della Valle d'Aosta, Aosta, Italy  
Lorenzo Turci - Università della Valle d'Aosta, Aosta, Italy

**Abstract** - This paper examines tourists' preferences for package holidays offering different bundles of activities in a winter mountain destination. A winter mountain destination is usually chosen to practice snow sports, and particularly ski, but more and more tourists want to fully exploit their holiday to live an authentic and comprehensive experience of the place. After collecting qualitative data on how tourists spend their typical day, a quantitative research is run to segment the demand on the base of tourists' preferences for bundles of activities performed during a winter mountain holiday.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The study uses a mixed method. Two focus groups are conducted to understand how tourists spend their time at a winter destination; results are then used to identify the components of the holiday, which are then combined in eight packages using orthogonal array. A questionnaire is administered to a sample of 273 tourists in a well-known mountain destination to measure their preference for different packages. Results are analyzed using factor analysis, conjoint analysis and cluster analysis.

**Findings** - Three are the most relevant findings. A) Winter mountain holiday is a highly segmented market. Even in a mountain destination strongly related to the practice of ski, there are many tourists who do not ski, and who spend their time doing something else. B) Food & beverage, and all their related activities, are at the top of all tourists' interests, and also passionate skiers rate very high tasting, eating, understanding and buying local food. C) There are four segments of winter mountain holiday tourists, who show very differentiated interests for the different activities that can be done in a mountain place.

**Originality/value** - This paper gives a contribution on what is there beyond sport in winter mountain destinations, and reveals new avenues to configure bundles of activities to attract different segments of tourists.

**Keywords** - Winter tourism, Mountain destination, Package holidays, Tourism demand segmentation

**Paper type** - Research paper

### **A call for authentic tourism experiences**

“Authenticity” has become a critical consumer sensibility: consumers increasingly decide whether to buy or not a product depending on its perceived genuineness (Pine and Gilmore, 2008). This concept is central in tourism studies too (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999; Taylor, 2001). In particular, the concept of authenticity in the tourism literature has evolved from “objective” authenticity (MacCannell, 1973) to “constructive” authenticity (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983) and, more recently, to “existential” authenticity (Wang, 2000). While “objective” authenticity has to do with the intrinsic originality of the toured object, “constructive” authenticity is related to the deliberate construction of displayed objects as authentic by tourists or service providers. “Existential” authenticity, instead, is not associated at all with the actual displayed object, but it is connected with the tourists’ inner state of being, a feeling of self-authenticity triggered by the experience lived in a particular setting.

If authenticity is so important for tourists, one possible way of increasing the perceived authenticity of a tourism product is to focus on its experiential component (McIntosh and Prentice, 1999), stimulating visitors to explore all its facets and to live their real content.

In the current economy, abundance forces suppliers to distinguish themselves from the competition in new ways, and one solution is to sell “experiences” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). People tend to value experiences much more than simple products, as they attach them a high value because they are memorable. The risk in selling experiences is that of creating staged experiences that are perceived as too superficial, commercial or artificial, and therefore not satisfying the customers’ search for authenticity (Boswijk, Thijssen and Peelen, 2007). As Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) argue, the risk of inauthenticity can be avoided through the “co-creation” of tourism experiences, inviting visitors to interact with tourism operators to create their unique experience.

In this setting, it would seem that holiday packages are not in line with modern tourists’ desires and expectations; however, holiday packages sales are increasing (Räikkönen and Honkanen, 2013; Wong and Lee, 2012)<sup>1</sup>. Traditionally, package holidays have been considered as a rational choice to maximize and optimize holidays: they enable to travel safely while avoiding transportation or hygiene issues (Enoch, 1996), and offer the benefits of ex-ante expense planning, pre-defined quality standards and qualified personnel assistance (Morrison, 2013, p. 173). Holiday packages are especially attractive for the growing segment of thematic tourism (e.g.: sport, nature, gastronomic and heritage tourism) (Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003).

This paper is focused on the effectiveness of winter Alpine package holidays. In Italy winter Alpine tourism mainly coincided with ski tourism (Pechlaner and Manente, 2002), but

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<sup>1</sup> In 2013, thirty-six percent of international tour operators active in Italy report an increase in package holidays sales, while in 2012 only 26% reported a positive trend (Istituto Nazionale Ricerche Turistiche, 2013, p. 4).

new trends in tourist behavior have emerged at the end of the Nineties: preference for short and repeated holidays; decrease in holiday planning; diversification of mountain sports and increase of “slow” sports (e.g.: snowshoe walks, dog- or horse-drawn sledge rides, winter trekking); rising interest in health and nature tourism; emergence of alternative extreme sports (e.g.: heli-skiing, ice climbing, freestyle skiing, ski mountaineering); demand for vibrant and entertaining night life (Skipass Panorama Turismo, 2012)<sup>2</sup>. Overall, ski tourism is declining: skiing is not anymore perceived as a status symbol, and young tourists are attracted towards more entertaining activities (Pechlaner and Manente, 2002, p.110). Moreover, the non-sport component of mountain tourism is getting more and more important: most tourists seem to enjoy the “relax” component associated with mountain tourism (47%) and its “nature” component (43%). Only 30% cite sports as the reason why they choose mountain destinations (Skipass Panorama Turismo, 2012). Given these trends, it is capital for mountain destinations to adapt and expand their visitor attraction portfolio to better suit new tourist expectations.

### **Methods of the empirical research**

This research has three objectives: 1) to investigate whether tourists still consider winter mountain tourism mainly as ski tourism; 2) to investigate winter mountain tourists’ preferences for the different activities available in a tourist destination; 3) to segment winter mountain tourists according to their preferences for different bundles of activities.

In order to reach these goals, an explorative analysis is conducted to understand how tourists spend their typical day at a mountain destination; then a survey is run to measure tourists’ preferences for specific activities. The analysis was repeated in three winter tourism destinations: Courmayeur and Pila (Aosta Valley – Italy), and Chamonix (Haute-Savoie – France). Within Aosta Valley, Courmayeur was chosen because it was identified as one of the three internationally most renowned Italian mountain destinations (Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo, 2008, p. 67), and its altitude of 1224 meters allows for many kinds of alternative activities. Chamonix was chosen for similar reasons, being the first of the top best ski resorts in France<sup>3</sup>: Courmayeur and Chamonix, besides being very close, are both elite destinations, hence their portfolio of activities goes well beyond ski, offering many ways out of «all ski». The third location, Pila, was chosen because the characteristics of its location make it a typical «all ski» destination; tourists who choose Pila should be skiers who like to dedicate all their time to ski, and hence less prone to spend time in other activities. In this

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<sup>2</sup> Skipass Panorama Turismo is the only Italian Mountain Tourism research center. The latest study (2012) is based on a panel of 28 Italian mountain destinations.

<sup>3</sup> “Top best ski resort in France”, *Snow Magazine*, December 2015; Alexander L.. (2017), “8 Top-Rated Ski Resorts in France”, *PlanetWare*.

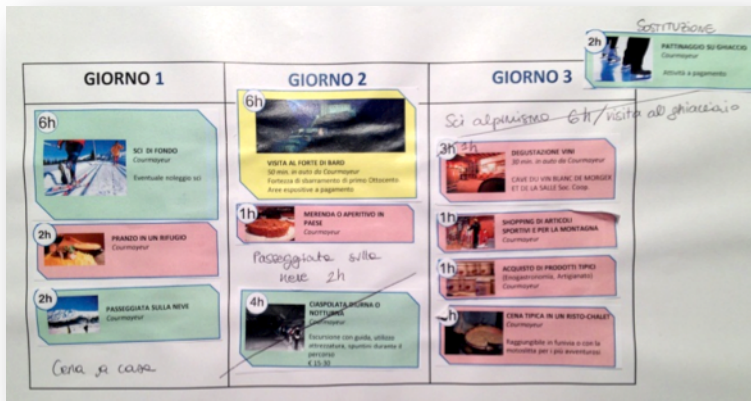
perspective, Pila can work as a benchmark to understand the different weight of the various activities included in a tourism package winter holiday.

This paper is centered on the research done in Courmayeur, a well-known ski area located in Aosta Valley. Aosta Valley is an Italian mountain region which, being famous all over the world for its ski stations, has however preserved its natural, cultural and artistic heritage, which constitutes an important and still underexploited asset (Macchiavelli, 2004). The reference destination of Courmayeur was identified to avoid subjective biases relative to the particular mountain destination visited by the respondents.

### **Qualitative research: how do tourists spend their time when they are on holiday in winter mountain destinations?**

The explorative qualitative analysis was needed because of the lack of research in package holiday connected with winter mountain tourism. The technique of focus group was preferred over individual interviews: in focus groups the participants explain themselves to each other and the researcher can evaluate the nature and extent of interviewees' agreement and disagreement. Moreover, participants can be directly asked for comparison of their experiences (Morgan, 1996), which helps to remind of insightful details. Two focus groups have been conducted (15 and 8 participants respectively) at the beginning of the 2013-2014 winter season (end of November). The focus groups were organized in two parts: in the first part, images of different kinds of possible activities were projected as a slideshow; after the show, participants were invited to share their personal experiences related to these activities. In the second part, participants were asked to plan a 3-day holiday in Courmayeur choosing from 29 possible specific activities located within a 90-minute drive, each activity paired with the time and total cost required. The 29 activities were grouped in 8 categories: ski, other sports, sightseeing, typical food & wine, folklore, culture, wellbeing and relax, shopping, and each category was given a distinct color-code. The 8 categories were identified in advance, and were taken from the official website of the Tourism Department; each category was then assigned 3-4 options so as to represent the breath of the portfolio of activities in terms of time, price, overall accessibility. Participants were invited to develop a collage, and then to review it in case of bad weather. Figure 1 shows the collage developed by one participant.

Figure 1. 3-days plan in a winter mountain holiday - Courmayeur



The final result of the two focus groups was set of collages of the bundle of activities that tourists choose in a typical three-day winter holiday. As Figure 2 shows, tourists spend their time in many different ways: only in three cases ski is the number one activity (30-40% of the total time), almost half of participants do not ski at all, while almost all practice other sports related to snow (snowshoe walks, trekking, skating). All tourists like to experience typical food & wine, and the great majority devote considerable time to activities related to the local folklore and to wellbeing and relax. Time spent to visit castles, monuments and museums is not residual, with its importance growing in case of foul weather.

Tourists' days are full of activities:

*“When I am there, I start the day going out to the local bakery to buy the local black bread, and then I prepare an important breakfast, far away from what we usually do at home. The bread, the jam, the milk, the yogurt: all is made there”.*

*“Even if we are in a hotel, we do not like to have dinner there. When we finish to ski, and maybe after a couple of hours at the local thermal bath, we look for a restaurant to taste real local food, made there. Local, I mean, not star restaurant. Small restaurants we like to discover”.*

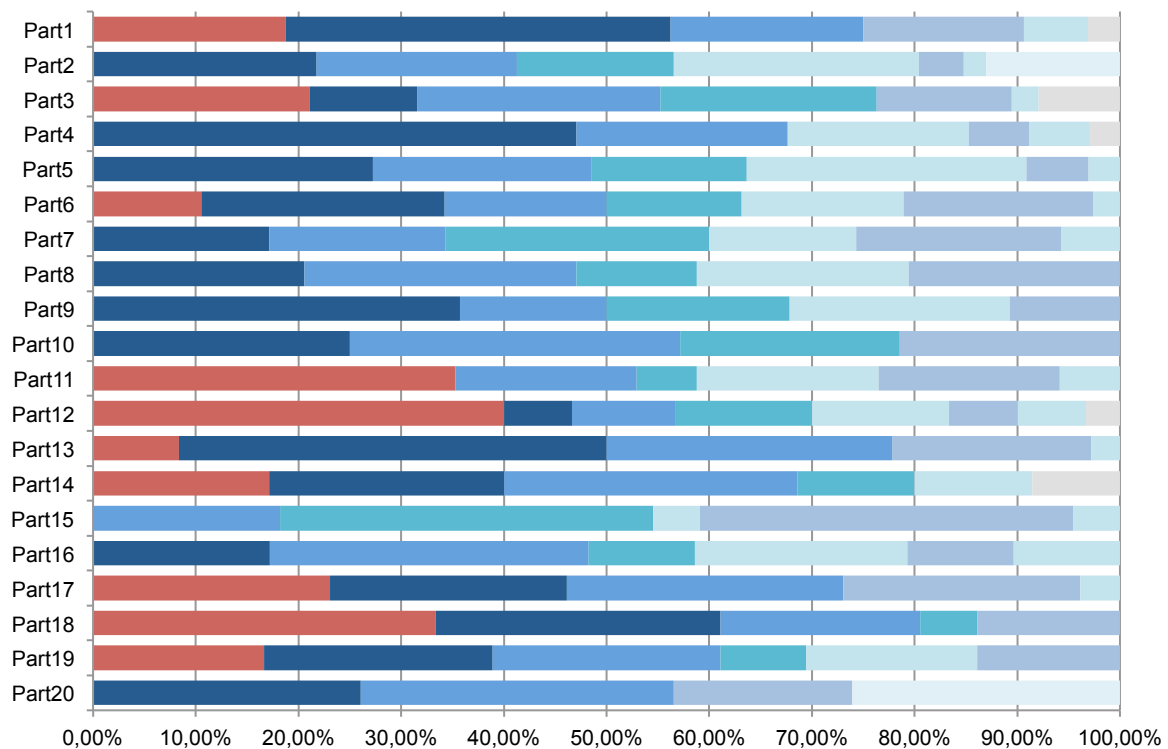
*“As soon as we arrive, we go through Internet to find all the events planned for our days, and we choose the one-two to attend. The events allow you to understand the real spirit of the place”.*

*“When I go to bed I am so tired, but fully happy and satisfied of my day”.*

These verbatim collected through the focus groups reveal tourists' will to fully experience the real authenticity of the place: in their shorter holidays, they try as much as they can to combine objective authenticity (the snow, the food, the restaurant, the spa) with constructive authenticity (the breakfast ritual) to reach an inner state of existential authenticity: being completely immersed in the place to live a memorable experience.

Figure 2. Bundles of activities chosen by tourists

(From left to right: Ski, Other sports, Typical food & wine, Folklore, Culture, Relax, Shopping, Sightseeing, Other)



### Winter package holidays: a highly segmented market

The activities emerged in the focus groups have then be used to configure different winter holiday packages, that have been administered to a sample of tourists to understand their preferences for specific bundles of activities. The quantitative research was structured as follows:

1. definition of package holiday components, derived from the focus groups;
2. design of 8 different kinds of package holidays and of their composition through orthogonal array technique;
3. design and administration of a questionnaire to a sample of 273 winter mountain tourists;
4. data analysis and interpretation:



- a. identification of tourists' attitude towards winter mountain tourism through factor analysis;
- b. cluster analysis of respondents on the base of their scores on the factors;
- c. identification of preferences for different packages through conjoint analysis in each segment (Green and Srinivasan, 1978; Green and Srinivasan, 1990);

The five most recurring activities were combined into 8 packages applying orthogonal array; each package had a title related to the breadth and depth of its offer (Sport, Classic, Beyond ski, Relax, Culture, Alternative, Body & Mind, and Complete), did not include travel and accommodation, and allowed individuals to plan the different activities at their will without a pre-defined schedule, so as to co-create their own holiday (Ferrari 2006; Suvantola 2002; Lugosi 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004).

After some questions related to their attitude towards winter mountain tourism and to their preference for different activities, respondents had to rate their interest towards the 8 packages on a 5 points scale (figure 3. Sample included 273 respondents, 18-70 years, equally divided between men and women).

Figure 3. Package "Sport"



That winter mountain tourism is not related only to ski and neither to sport is clear from the data shown in table 1: of the first ten activities, only 3 are related to snow sport, while the highest positions are taken by activities related to experience the authenticity of the place.

Table 1. Activities preferred by winter mountain tourists

Activity	Mean (1-5)	$\Sigma$	Variance
Local food & wine tasting	3,82	1,081	1,168
Thermal bath, spa	3,59	1,266	1,602
Buying local typical products	3,55	1,120	1,255
Participate in local folklore	3,52	1,125	1,265
Eno-gastronomy tours	3,24	1,243	1,544
Sledog	3,06	1,268	1,607
Visit monuments, museums, castles	3,00	1,220	1,489
Cultural events	2,99	1,219	1,485
Ice-skating	2,95	1,381	1,906
Downhill ski	2,92	1,726	2,979
Open-air activities (heliski, sleddog)	2,83	1,278	1,633
Snow-shoes walks	2,58	1,237	1,531
Nightlife	2,32	1,209	1,461
Snowboard	2,17	1,334	1,780
Cross-country ski	1,89	1,048	1,098
Casinò	1,44	,852	,726

Even if snow may be the most attractive and differentiating element of winter mountain tourism, activities related to snow do not get the highest interest. However, in the case of downhill ski, the highest variance signals that skiing is very important for some tourists and not important at all for others, while activities oriented to discover the authenticity of the place are important for all tourists.

An explorative factory analysis of the items that measured tourists' mental associations to winter mountain holidays revealed that tourists' attitude is shaped by five dimensions:

- Relax. Mountain holiday is relaxing, and help to separate from the daily routine. People can dedicate to tasting local wine & food, to live with their family, to immerse themselves in the nature and in the local traditions;
- Boredom. It includes negative associations such as monotony, low interest, outer motivations;
- Snow and open air. They are the classical words associated to winter holiday;
- Cliché. This factor results from two stereotypes associated to winter mountain holidays: they are only for old people or families, and they are expensive;
- Fun. It is made by only one item: have fun with friends.

A cluster analysis of respondents operated on their scores on these five dimensions resulted in 4 segments, named Fun seekers, Outer directed, Contemplative, and Skiers (figure 4).

Figure 4. Importance of the 5 dimensions associated to winter mountain holidays in 4 clusters

Fun Seeker	Outer-directed	Contemplative	Skiers
12%	23%	26%	39%

Relax	--	+	++	=
Boredom	=	++	-	--
Snow and open air	-	+	--	++
Cliché	-	--	++	=
Fun	++	=	+	-

A conjoint analysis operated in each segment on the ratings of the 8 holiday packages revealed very interesting insights (table 2). Downhill ski is the most important component of the package only for the Fun Seekers and the Skiers, while the two segments of the Outer directed and of the Contemplative assign it the lowest importance. This evidence confirms that skiing is a highly segmenting activity.

Food & beverage is a fundamental component for the Outer directed but also for Skiers: this last segment's behavior appears to be strongly linked to the stereotype associated to a snow holiday, skiing and traditional typical dinner, and choose the packages that offer them both. Outer-directed, the ones who go because their family/relatives go, are not interested in skiing, and are attracted above all by local food & wine, but also by wellness, relax, and also local culture.

Contemplatives like cultural activities and also relax and wellness; the importance of other sports is not small in this segment.

Table 2. Results of the conjoint analysis applied to the 4 clusters

Cluster	Attribute	Importance	Ranking	p-value	PearsonCorrelation
Fun Seeker	Ski	49,296	1°	,000	,989
	Food & wine	18,310	3°		
	Relax/Wellbeing	22,535	2°		
	Culture	7,042	4°		
	Other sports	2,817	5°		
Outer directed	Ski	8,986	4°	,003	,869
	Food & wine	29,275	1°		
	Relax/wellbeing	21,739	2°		
	Culture	21,739	2°		
	Other sports	18,261	3°		
Contemplative	Ski	10,249	5°	,002	,887
	Food & wine	19,668	3°		
	Relax/wellbeing	24,100	2°		
	Culture	28,532	1°		
	Other sports	17,452	4°		
Skiers	Ski	40,728	1°	,000	,941

### **Implications for tourism operators**

The results of this work have significant implications for all the stakeholders involved in developing and managing the tourist experience of a winter mountain destination.

The empirical research has shown the potential of the new “snow tourism”, which is emerging together with the classical ski tourism. Downhill skiing is not the sole attraction of winter mountain destinations, as proved by the low average interest of tourists for this sport and by ONT data (ONT 2012) on the decreasing number of practitioners of this discipline in comparison with the growing number of people who orient themselves towards other activities. In addition to this trend, also the increasing scarcity of snow (Joly, this issue) calls for a renewal of the ski-centric image of the alpine destinations, to preserve and even augment their attractiveness, possibly opening the door to new tourists. Even the most passionate skiers are not looking only for high quality ski slopes and modern ski systems: they want to experience other elements of the place which make it unique and worth to visit, above all local authentic food & beverage. The consequence of this trend is that if on one side the boundaries separating skiers from tourists are becoming blurred (Beede and Hudson 2003), on the other side they are far from being one only segment.

There are winter mountain tourists who experience boredom during their holiday: they are outer-directed individuals who go to the mountain to accompany their relatives and/or friends. They do not practice ski, but seem to like activities related to food & wine, culture, other sports. Given the non-small size of this segment (23% in our research), it would be interesting to explore more in-depth the actual behavior of these individuals, to understand if the activities they practice during their holiday may alleviate their boredom (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger 1990).

Winter mountain destinations should therefore enlarge their offer to a wide spectrum of activities, both to attract a growing number of tourists and to allow them to co-create their own holidays combining the elements that make the destination unique. Tourism packages can be an effective mean to put in contact mountain tourism with other types of tourism related to special interests such as food & wine, culture, astronomy etc. (Stamboulis and Skayannis 2003, Uriely 2005), but without distorting the enchanting alpine atmosphere: traditions, heritage, myths and landscapes are essential ingredients of a package, on one side because they are competitive factors difficult to copy, on the other side because they can instill a particular taste to the experience, creating involvement, emotions, enchantment and fun.

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