

Challenges and opportunities that the covid pandemic brings to rural tourism: A case of Trilye, Bursa

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Abstract

Rural tourism has an increasing share in the countries tourism income and significantly contributes to the rural economy. The study's main aim is to compare pre-covid and post-covid rural tourism activities in and around Trilye District of Bursa province. Besides, to examine the challenges and opportunities that the covid pandemic brings to rural tourism through the Trilye example. The data was obtained from a structured survey conducted with 386 people who visited Trilye at least once. SPSS 23 program was also used to analyze the data obtained. The crisis in the tourism sector caused by the pandemic shows that the value is given to domestic tourists should be increased. Since the pandemic, visitors began to look more favourably on more diverse recreational alternatives, as well as a desire to spread their visits-with a desire to stay away from the crowd. Participants who preferred hotels during their pre-covid holidays stated that they would prefer places where they could stay away from the crowd, maintain social distance and spend time on their own, such as tents, glamping, caravans, hobbit houses or bungalows. Research results confirm that interest in restaurants and food stalls that sell local food products has decreased. On the other hand, interest in packed homemade food products produced by villagers has increased.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Trilye, Covid, Challenges, New Trends

Introduction

Trilye, also known as “Zeytinbağı” is a small coastal settlement located in Mudanya District of Bursa province and on the southern coast of Marmara Sea. Trilye is one of the undiscovered coastal villages of Mudanya district of Bursa province. There are seven churches and three 'holly springs' dating from the Greeks, and also plenty of fish is caught. The "arched church" called Panagia Pantobalissa is said to be the first church to be painted on its wall, and its columns were brought from Alexandria. Fatih Mosque was converted from St. the Church of Stephanos. Currently, 90% of the local people earn their living through olive groves. Fishing in Trilye is an essential source of livelihood today, as it used to be. Viticulture, winemaking and sericulture are among the past occupations. Trilye is located close to major commercial and industrial cities such as Bursa, Istanbul and Kocaeli. Consequently, tourism activities have started to develop in the village in recent years. The settlement has become more accessible with its renewed, expanded and sheltered port in recent years. It is possible to reach Trilye by sea as well as by road. There are fast ferry and sea bus services from Istanbul to Mudanya. After Mudanya, it is possible to get on the minibus and come to Trilye. The distance between Mudanya and Trilye is 11 km.

Thanks to its advantageous location, tourism activities in the village have started to develop rapidly in recent years. The village has been one of the ideal “places to visit, especially on weekends. The village has an accommodation facility of about 200 beds. Shops sell locally produced products. Restaurants generally serve daily caught fish.

Although the sudden popularity of the village created a significant source of income and tourism potential for the residents, the services provided did not increase with the same pace and quality, Especially in the summer months, overcrowding in the village has caused environmental pollution and frequent complaints. Besides, the village suffered a significant loss of tourists due to an outbreak of the new type of coronavirus (Covid-19). Trilye must overcome its current problems

and its challenges specific to the Covid process to restore the past tourism activity and overcome the corona process with minimal damage.

Covid-19 Outbreak, Tourism and Rural Tourism

The Covid-19 outbreak has significantly affected many sectors. However, tourism is one of the sectors most affected by this crisis. When the geographical area of influence and the speed of spread of Covid-19 increased, countries took some measures. The most important of these measures are travel and flight restrictions. While travel restrictions and flight cancellations continued globally, the tourism supply at national and international scale decreased dramatically (Acar, 2020). As a result, the tourism sector became one of the most lost experienced sectors. The closure of tourism businesses left hundreds of millions of people working in these businesses left unemployed (Alaeddinoğlu and Rol, 2020).

Turkey ranks fourth in Europe, the sixth in the world by the number of tourists and ranks sixth in Europe in terms of tourism revenue and fifteenth in the world. According to 2019 data, Turkey has hosted approximately 51.75 million tourists and obtained 34.5-billion-dollar revenue (The Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2020).

According to forecasts, performance growth in the sector was expected to continue in 2020. In March, flights to sixty-eight countries were halted in Turkey and restrictions on domestic travel were announced. These measures and increased uncertainty have led to a series of cancellations. As of the end of March, cancellation rates reached 90% for foreign and 50% domestic bookings. As of June 2020, the epidemic has been partially controlled, and normalization efforts have begun. During the normalization process, flights resumed, and facilities began to open their doors to visitors. Nevertheless, this 'new normal' has also brought about fundamental changes in people's tourism preferences.

The Covid 19 pandemic highlighted importance of rural development and tourism. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the Association of Travel Agencies of Turkey predict that during and post the Covid-19 pandemic, accommodation preferences will mostly turn from urban centres to rural areas. WTO research expects domestic demand to recover faster than international demand in this period of continuing international travel restrictions. It is envisaged that some countries may restrict travel abroad and encourage domestic tourism to support their tourism sector. The world's most tourist-attracting metropolises will not be visited as often as before in the coming years.

The tourists and locals who want to be isolated tend to rural areas instead of big cities (Gürbüz et al., 2019). Tourists and locals who want to be isolated due to the possibility of transmitting the virus who do not want to stay in limited places such as planes, trains and coaches in the long-distance journey, turn to rural areas instead of large cities. The countryside, which is also very suitable for caravan travel, will be preferred by travel enthusiasts. In addition to returning to the countryside, isolated hotels or hotels with villa-style rooms will be among the most preferred options for the next 1-2 years. Boutique hotels located in remote destinations will have a better chance to attract visitors this period.

In recent years, visitors have begun to move away from the big city crowds and stress and searched for different holidays and recreation (Gürbüz and Manaros, 2018). Their preferences were moving away from mainstream resorts and turning to rural areas close to major cities, consequently increasing rural tourism demand (Gürbüz and Özkan, 2020).

While this increase in visitors contributed to the rural economy and provided jobs to the rural people, on the other hand, they were suffering from infrastructure problems due to the limited capabilities of rural administrations. The Covid pandemic presents opportunities and threats within rural tourism and the tourism sector in general.

During this period, when the country and the sector experience devastating effects, there was also a significant increase in academic research. Acar (2020), Alaeddinoğlu and Rol (2020), Demir et al. (2020) Kılıç (2020) and Kıvılcım evaluated the effects of the Covid pandemic on tourism. Çakır and Barakazı (2020) and Altınay Özdemir (2020) also examined the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the tourism sector and emphasized the measures taken against the outbreak.

In studies approaching the effects of the pandemic on tourism from the supply side, Bayat (2020) interviewed eight hotel managers operating in Marmaris to examine the effects of COVID-19 on hotel businesses, while Yazıcı Ayyıldız (2020) discussed how the Covid process changed the

marketing strategies of hotels in 13 hotels in Kuşadası. İbiş (2020) interviewed 11 travel agents to reveal how the pandemic is affecting travel agents. Çınar and Özkaya (2020) and Bağcı et al. (2020) investigated the effects of the pandemic on health tourism.

From a tourist perspective, Aydın and Doğan (2020) examined the effects of the New Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic on Touristic consumer behaviour, and Sürme (2020) aimed to determine tourists' views on holiday purchasing. Yenişehirlioğlu and Salha (2020) examined the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on domestic tourist demand in Turkey, while Akbaba (2020) examined the impact of mental fatigue caused by the COVID-19 epidemic on tourists' intentions to buy, recommendations and willingness to pay.

In studies emphasizing the economic effects, Çıtak and Çalış (2020) examined the economic effects of the pandemic on the tourism sector in general, and Gümüş and Hacıevliyagil (2020) attempted to reveal the effect of the epidemic on the stock market through tourism and transportation indices. Sezen Doğançılı (2020) emphasized post-epidemic tourism support.

Even though covid most affects small-scale tourism operators in rural areas, and again covid creates the most opportunities for rural tourism, there is hardly any research addressing this issue. Özçoban (2020), in his review article, addressed the effects of Covid on the tourism sector and emphasized Turkey's rural tourism potential.

Arslan and Kendir (2020) conducted the only current empiric study in the field. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 participants from different professions living and working in Tokat and Zile district through videoconferencing. The findings stated that after the COVID-19 outbreak, Zile has potential or rural tourism activities, but emphasized that there were deficiencies in infrastructure and transport, especially promotion, in assessing its potential.

We evaluated the extend which Trilye village was affected by the Covid process, the opportunities and difficulties within the village and its surroundings, by comparing the pre and post Covid preferences of the visitors.

Methodology

Individuals who reside in Marmara Region and regularly go on vacation constitute the universe of the research. Convenience sampling method was chosen. The Marmara Region accommodates 30% of the total country population of 80 million 559 thousand 728 people, with 24 million 465 thousand 689 (Ministry of Interior, 2019). The sample size was determined by the formula used by The Cochran formula (1963). The following equation is used in the calculation.

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Where: e is the desired level of precision (i.e. the margin of error), p is the (estimated) proportion of the population which has the attribute in question and q is 1 – p. The z-value is found in a Z table. The minimum sample size was found as 384.

Participants

The pilot study was conducted via Google Meet with ten people. The structured online survey was activated on the tourism/travel/travel guide pages on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook between 1st June-30th September 2020. People who visited Trilye province and its surroundings at least once were asked to participate in the study. Survey access was terminated when the number of participants reached 400. After randomly or incomplete surveys were removed, 386 surveys suitable for use were analyzed. Besides, additional comments about the questionnaire and the comments made on tourism experience on the media platforms were taken into consideration where necessary.

Data collection

The survey method commonly used in tourism research was used to measure visitors' satisfaction levels in this research. An outline of the survey is included as an Appendix. The survey consisted of four parts. The first part included demographic characteristics of visitors, such as age, education, and income status. The second part contained statements about the visit details; in the third part, there were statements about levels of visitors' satisfaction with the visit. In the last

section, there were suggestions for increasing levels of satisfaction. We used five-point Likert scale statements that possible responses ranging from "1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

Data analysis

SPSS 23 program was used to analyze the data obtained. Independent sample T-test and one-way ANOVA were used to reveal the relationships between the variables. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the survey was found to be $\alpha = 0.785$. A Shapiro-Wilk test was used to test for normality assumption. The analysis showed that (D (386) $p = 0.011$, $p > 0.05$) the data does not show normal distribution. Therefore, the skewness and kurtosis values are further used, and skewness of -0.172 (SE = 0.121) and kurtosis of -0.524 (SE = 0.241) were found. Kurtosis and Skewness values are between -1.5 and +1.5. Therefore, it is assumed that the dataset has a normal distribution (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2013)

Findings

Gender distribution shows that 55.7% of the participants were women, and 44.3% were men. The highest group of participants was between the ages of 26-35, with 30.2%. 65.6% of respondents were people aged 55 and under, usually the retirement age in Turkey. These results show that Trilye is preferred by working people due to its proximity to the city. Also, those want to get away from the stress of work-life for a while. The over-65s remained at only 1.8% due to the long-term curfew imposed.

When the level of education is examined, it is seen that 27.6% of the participants were a university, 33.3% are a high school, and 27.3 are secondary school graduates. The fact that 25.5% of respondents were white-collar and 25.3% were blue-collar indicates that those who were able to keep their jobs and were economically safe during the pandemic needed short-term rest during this extremely stressful period. Only 8.3% of the self-employed and 5.7% of the retirees were able to visit Trilye.

The participants' geographical distribution shows that 28% of the participants were from Bursa, 24% from İstanbul, 6% from Kocaeli and 4% from Eskişehir. A significant proportion (76%) of participants stated that they visited Trilye before the covid pandemic. A significant majority of visitors used their private vehicles (68%). Particularly some of the visitors of İstanbul preferred ferries (26%). Visitors choosing coach and bus are predictably few (6%). They stated that half-capacity measures in public transport implemented by the Ministries do not make them feel safe. They want to travel as much as possible in their private vehicles because they do not want to travel with people they do not know in a tight close space.

Findings on Accommodation Preferences

The research results showed that 52% of the individuals who visited Trilye before the pandemic stayed in the region, while 48% had a day trip. After the pandemic, the rate of daily visitors increased to 72%, while a tremendous decline was observed in the rate of night stay. 68% of people who chose to stay the night before the pandemic stated that they preferred hotels, 24% preferred pensions, while only 4% stayed in tents and 2% in caravans. After the outbreak, the proportion of those who preferred hotels sharply fell to 36%. On the other hand, the proportion of those who preferred pensions was up to 38%. Those who stated that they were staying in tents were 16%, and those who stayed caravans were 8%.

Participants did not 'welcome' the half-capacity hotel booking rule proposed in the circular published by the. They emphasized that cleaning was one of the major issues pre-covid time, and are stated that staying in hotels during the pandemic will pose serious health risks. The assurance of the hotel managers that disinfectant procedures are carried out after each guest does not cause any change in the participants' opinions.

Participants who preferred hotels during their pre-covid holidays stated that they would prefer places where they could stay away from the crowd, maintain social distance and spend time independently. These are such as tents, glamping, caravans, hobbit houses or bungalows. It is one of the main concerns that social distance is unlikely to be maintained in hotels, and that other guests in the hotel may not be careful, even if they pay attention themselves.

Due to the proximity of Trilye to Bursa and other metropolitan cities, visits were generally limited to weekend accommodation. During the pandemic, a significant portion of the participants stated that they no longer prefer to stay overnight and return in the evening. It is also noteworthy in the increase in the number of families who stated that they would prefer tents and caravan accommodation, which were generally preferred by young people and foreign tourists.

Tourism Experience

Among the prominent reasons, the participants visited Trilye before the covid outbreak were to escape from the city crowds, take the sea air, swim, and engage in photography because the village has preserved its historical and natural texture. Having breakfast, which had been popular in recent years, and eating in the Trilye's renowned fish restaurants were also of considerable importance. However, when the reasons for the post-covid visit are examined, it seems that swimming and photographing have lost popularity while avoiding the city crowds and getting sea air remains vital. Furthermore, visitors are reluctant to visit breakfast bars and fish restaurants. However, following the covid outbreak, there has been a significant increase in hiking, camping and caravanning (Table 1).

Table 1. What is the reason for visiting Trilye and its surroundings? (%)

	Pre Covid 19	Post-Covid 19
Escape from the city crowd	64	68
Historical texture	28	-
Have a sea air	72	74
Going to the sea / Swimming	32	28
Photography	44	20
Fishing	52	57
Seafood restaurants	84	54
Having breakfast	76	58
Local Festivals	14	-
Trekking / Hiking	48	67
Having a picnic	24	48
Camping	8	36
Caravanning	6	29
Paragliding	4	-

In terms of visits, 12% of respondents visited the area individually, 36% said they came with friends, 27% with organized tours and 25% with their families. Group visits to Trilye and its surroundings before the Covid-19 outbreak were more popular than individual visit. However, with the pandemic, more individual visitors who cannot meet with their friends and families and do not want to join the group crowd are visiting the region.

When asked if the study participants had visited İznik and its region before, a large proportion (64.3%) stated that they had been there several times. The fact that visitors have visited the area before means that they are satisfied with the local people and their services. The natural and historical beauty of the region is appreciated and convenient for transportation. It also means that they see the region as reliable enough to visit after the virus and believe that the local people comply with the hygiene and other measures taken.

A critically important element that stands out with Covid is the increase in service quality. It is among the findings that this crisis should increase the value given to tourists, mostly domestic tourists. Before the pandemic, there were disruptions in service quality due to crowd, especially on weekends and in places that became popular suddenly. Rural areas do not have the infrastructure to increase visitor flow, thus resulting in environmental pollution suddenly. Simultaneously, facilities such as restaurants, cafes and accommodation were overcrowded on certain days of the week or certain weeks of the year were remained empty during weekdays or off-season. Trilye was no exception.

Along with the pandemic, visitors began to look more favourably on more diverse recreational alternatives, as well as a desire to spread their visits-with a desire to stay away from the crowd - to other times of the week and year. The diversity of rural tourism activities and the fact that it

does not depend only on specific periods of the year like coastal tourism, allows them to realize this desire (Gürbüz et al., 2002).

One of the most critical elements of the tourism industry is restaurants. Still, participants do not consider it appropriate to eat out during the outbreak (58%). Food is sold in shabby restaurants and stalls in rural settlement and offers an exceptional experience for visitors. As with fish restaurants in Trilye, many visitors visit the local area, exclusively to taste local dishes. However, one advantage of rural areas is that they also sell indigenous food products. As long as these products are packaged, visitors will continue to buy locally produced goods (82%) to provide income to the locals. Besides, visitors who prefer to cook themselves in pensions, hostels, caravans and tents will continue to enjoy these local delicacies.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to national and international travel restrictions and a significant decline in people's demand for tourism. Also, changes in people's tourism preferences and the demand for rural tourism activities have increased, where individual activities can be carried out, and social distance can be maintained. Although state authorities have tried to convince people of tourism activities' safety with the measures they have taken, the public remains insecure about tourism mobility, especially in these days when a second wave is predicted.

The findings suggest that people intend to postpone or keep their holidays short in 2020. Economic hardship the country goes through, worry about losing jobs, inability to receive salaries in full, and contributing to this decision.

It is not wrong to claim that the year 2020 will be problematic in Turkey as it is in all countries. A severe reduction in the number of foreign tourists offers an opportunity for local tourists. For local tourists, the pandemic has offered the opportunity to experience rural tourism activities that have started to develop in the previous years, at least to perceive more welcomingly. Survey results confirmed that interest in trekking, photography, camping and caravan activities, previously known only to enthusiasts, has increased in the Trilye.

Covid 19, on the one hand, restricts the socializing feature of tourism, on the other hand, highlights its relaxing and healing properties. For Trilye, which attracts tourists with its beach and fish restaurants before Covid, these activities offer an unmissable opportunity for tourism income in the post-covid period. Suitable routes for trekking and cycling should be determined, marking systems and guide facilities should be provided. Concurrently, camping and caravan areas should be increased, and primary infrastructure services should be delivered here. These activities are among the activities appropriate to the individual or social distance that increases after COVID-19; they support rural tourism because these activities support rural tourism, as they are among the activities that allow individual activity, as well as appropriate for the social distance necessary to prevent the spread of the virus.

Although Trilye has a tourist recognition, it is unfortunately stuck in the axis of beach tourism and weekend getaways. The sizeable rural activity potential of the region has not been utilized until now. Therefore, local decision-makers of Trilye should re-evaluate the promotion of the region from a broad perspective. One of Trilye's most important problems for years is transportation. While one can come to Mudanya from Istanbul by ferry in 1 hour, the last minibus between Mudanya and Trilye ends at 6 in the evening. The bus service started in 2017 serve every 40 minutes. The robust transportation infrastructure is essential for tourists, especially to rural destinations (Aydin et al. 2010).

This research is significant because it is one of the rare empirical studies in rural tourism. However, similar studies should be repeated in different destinations to generalize the opportunities and threats caused by the changing tourist preferences after COVID-19 in rural destinations. Another limitation of the research is that it was conducted online due to the pandemic restrictions. The elaborated opinion of the participants could not be assessed except for the answers given in the survey.

On the other hand, this study's findings and the recommendations developed as a result of the findings will be a road map for local decision-makers in particular and all other stakeholders, of tourism industry such as tourism managers, agents, and tourist guides.

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