UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes:
their presence and presentation in eLearning courses
by National Tourism Destinations

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Abstract

National Tourism Offices are currently using different channels to promote destinations and its tourism product: directly to the end consumer, through the media, or in collaboration with the travel trade intermediaries: tour operators and travel agents.

This paper will evaluate how innovative technologies, in particular eLearning courses, are being used in the awareness-raising, representation and training about Cultural landscapes.

The focus in this research is on communication practices through online training platforms of the national tourism administrations, excluding all platforms for tourists, city marketing, attracting visitors, and the like. This research presents an analysis of the eLearning courses offered by National Tourism Offices, particularly concentrating on the countries hosting UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes. Such eLearning courses are offered to travel agents and travel consultants all around the world in order to prepare them with the knowledge on the tourism destination and its attractions. While successfully finishing the course travel agents are expected to have needed knowledge about such a tourism destination, to be aware on who the right clients are and how to sell better the destination to them.

This research will assess (i) presence of UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes in such training activities, and (ii) the way they are presented, framed and featured.

Keywords: eLearning, cultural landscapes, tourism training, eTourism, destination marketing

Introduction

eLearning has been playing a major role within the tourism and hospitality sector since the beginning of the XXI century. The tourism industry faces structural human resource problems such as skills shortages and staff turnover, seasonality and a high percentage of Small and Medium Enterprises whose employees have limited time for training, knowledge upgrade or education. At the same time tourism corporations, for instance hotel chains, transportation companies airlines, have the problem of the employees that need similar training all around the globe. Provision of such a training offer is a very costly activity. eLearning is believed to be useful in addressing some of these training issues (Cantoni, et al., 2009; Kalbaska, 2012; Kuttainen & Lexhagen, 2012; Sigala, 2002).

In particular, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) at different levels: national, regional and cities, have started to adopt eLearning in order to provide basic knowledge about tourism destinations to foreign travel agents. Several tourism offices globally are taking the responsibility of providing online education and training to the businesses working in the tourism sector. This is particularly relevant in emerging markets where travel agents are still intermediating most of the travel selling activities, but unfortunately don't have an extensive knowledge of the destinations they "sell". Such eLearning courses do provide very different learning experiences, ranging from simple online brochures accompanied by quizzes to highly interactive and rich courses, requiring up to 40 hours of studying time (Cantoni, et. al, 2009). Most of such courses include historical, geographical and cultural information, along with itinerary-planning recommendations to travel agents and travel consultants. Additionally, some courses are offered in various versions suited to different markets, where not the same attractions and areas of a country are proposed to different involved publics and stakeholders.

The assessments of the presence of UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes is necessary in order to evaluate the representation of such an important part of the tourism destination offer, along with an understanding on the room for possible improvement within national and international training context.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses related work. Section 3 presents the method used and the undertaken research. Finally, Section 4 presents the summary with conclusions, limitations of this research work as well as proposes future research lines.

Literature review

eLearning involves all technology-enabled learning activities, which include the delivery and management of training options and all the types of support via desktop computers, mobile and tablets, networked and web-based technology. Educational service providers offer online lessons and webinars, online tests and video-tutorials, as well as educational consulting to meet the diverse demands of their global customers. According to Zornada (2005, p.14), eLearning from the company point of view, is a "revolutionary way to empower workforce with the skills and knowledge the company needs to keep a balanced performance within a rapidly changing international market". Online training courses can use the technologies available today in order to create learning process as interactive, fun and efficient as possible. They can also increase information retention and motivation of the learners.

DMOs have been using eLearning courses in the last decade with the aim of educating their travel trade partners: travel agents, travel consultants and tour operators. These online training activities designed for national and international travel trade are used in order to teach the later ones on how to sell a country or a region as a tourism destination. Currently 71 eLearning courses are offered by the DMOs at the national level. Examples of such courses include Botswana Tourism Training Course, Switzerland Travel Academy, and the Aussie Specialist Program (Kalbaska, 2012). DMOs are using such training activities also for the creation of the brand awareness of the destination, so that travel agents can understand better the difference between one and another tourism destinations, while clearly differentiating their particularities.

On the other side, travel agents have also understood the importance of such training activities. As with a continuous growth of the importance of ICTs and online booking channels, along with a very knowledgeable consumer who is able to plan and book trips on himself, travel agents need to develop strong product knowledge to remain competitive. Furthermore, the complex nature of the tourism industry creates challenges for tourism professionals. Constant changes and uncertainty of the sectors require all the employees to learn continuously. A travel agent can remain competitive within this complex and competitive environment only if he/she become a knowledgeable advisor, who provides recommendations, creativity and advocacy of the destination. eLearning courses about tourism destinations are often used by travel agents and travel professionals, as they offer flexibility of the learning environment, but also save time and money.

Online training courses about tourism destinations have been studied extensively so far: from the framing of the eLearning offer by DMOs into the overall map of existing eLearning courses in the hospitality and tourism domain (Cantoni, et.al, 2009); to the

benchmarking studies on the structure of such a training offer (Kalbaska, 2012; 2014); to the understanding of the motivations of the travel agents coming from different geographical contexts on undertaking such training activities (Kalbaska, et.al, 2013, Van Zyl, et.al, 2015); to the evaluation of formality/ informality of such learning contexts (Adukaite, et.al, forth).

To our knowledge, so far the content structure of such online training activities has not been studied. Furthermore, no record were found of the related research on the "presentation" of UNESCO sites in general and UNESCO-enlisted Cultural Landscapes in particular in the framework of online training activities created for the travel trade. Articles 4 and 5 of the World Heritage Convention clearly state that apart from conservation and protection of world heritage of the Outstanding Universal Value, also its "presentation" (UNESCO, 1972: p. 3) is among the main aims of UNESCO. This task of presentation implies communication and creation of public awareness among the local community (UNESCO, 1972), but without any doubt it also reaches beyond national borders, and thus clearly concerns the field of tourism (Pedersen, 2002).

National Tourism Offices, responsible for marketing, interpretation and communication of the tourism destinations globally are currently using different channels to promote destinations and its tourism product: directly to the end consumer, through the media, or in collaboration with travel trade intermediaries – tour operators and travel agents. As the travel trade still possess an important sales value globally, especially in the emerging markets, education and training of them should be a crucial activity for a DMO.

This paper presents a benchmarking analysis of several courses offered by the National Tourism Offices representing the countries hosting UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes. The research will assess (i) the presence of the UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes in such training activities, and (ii) the way they are presented, framed and featured.

For the sake of this research, the following definition of the UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes has been taken into consideration: "There exist a great variety of landscapes that are representative of the different regions of the world. Combined works of nature and humankind, they express a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment. Certain sites reflect specific techniques of land use that guarantee and sustain biological diversity. Others, associated in the minds of the communities with powerful beliefs and artistic and traditional customs, embody an exceptional spiritual relationship of people with nature. To reveal and sustain the great diversity of the interactions between humans and their environment, to protect living traditional cultures and preserve the traces of those which have disappeared, these sites, called cultural landscapes, have been inscribed on the World Heritage List" (UNESCO, 2016). The examples of cultural landscapes are

cultivated terraces on the mountains, gardens, and sacred places. In March 2016, there were 88 properties in the UNESCO World Heritage List indicated as cultural landscapes.

Methodology

With the main goal on evaluating the eLearning courses offered by National Tourism Offices and focusing on the countries hosting the UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes, the benchmarking analysis has been undertaken in March 2016. The following official list of the UNESCO listed Cultural landscapes has been taken into consideration: http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape. This list featured in March 2016 88 UNESCO Cultural Landscapes properties, belonging to 56 countries.

The list of UNESCO has been checked against an available collection of existing eLearning courses offered by National Tourism Office: www.elearning4tourism.com, which in March 2016 featured 71 available eLearning courses created to train travel agents and travel consultants.

Finally, 21 nations were taken into consideration as they do possess both UNESCO Cultural Landscapes (33) and their National Tourism Offices have created eLearning courses for the travel trade. As such eLearning courses might potentially present UNESCO Cultural landscapes to the travel trade who should sell the destination to the end client they will be analysed within the study.

This research aims to:

- assess the presence of UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes in the eLearning courses offered by National Tourism Offices,
- to evaluate how they are presented, framed and featured.

International versions of 21 eLearning courses were analyzed, where the language of the training activity was English. Different linguistic versions were not taken into consideration within this study.

Results

With the aim on assessing the presence of UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes in the eLearning courses offered by National Tourism Offices, 21 available eLearning courses were analysed within the study. Among them, Austria Expert Program, Canada Specialist Program, Britain Agent, Switzerland Travel Academy. The full list of the analysed eLearning courses can be seen in the Table 1.

As previously anticipated in the methodology section, 21 nations were taken into consideration as they do possess UNESCO cultural landscapes and their National Tourism Offices have created eLearning courses for the travel trade. These eLearning courses might potentially present UNESCO cultural landscapes to the travel trade who should sell the destination to the end client – tourists, who potentially might visit the destination and can be interested in the main attractions/ activities present there.

Among analysed 21 eLearning courses about tourism destinations at the national level, only 10 of them do tackle the topic of UNESCO sites overall, while other 11 ones do not even mention the existence and presence of enlisted cultural and natural heritage sites in the countries they promote.

It is interesting to mention where within the training structure of the eLearning courses for the travel trade UNESCO sites are being positioned. In half of the cases, hence in five eLearning courses about tourism destinations UNESCO is being mentioned in the introductory modules, where the destination overall is being presented while giving a general overview of the tourism offer in the country. The example of the introductory module of the "Canada Specialist Program" can be seen in Figure 1. The number of UNESCO-enlisted sites is being featured already in the first Module, on its introductory slide.

Figure 1. Canada Specialist Program

In other three cases, dedicated paragraphs were covering UNESCO World Heritage Sites, under the following sections: "History, Culture and Activities" (Scandinavia Specialist: Norway Knowledge and Sweden Specialist) and "Food and Drinks, Archaeological Sites, National Natural Parks" (Learn Colombia).

Figure 2. Scandinavia Specialist eLearning course

In the remaining two cases, there were dedicated modules to the topics related to the UNESCO sites:

- within the Switzerland Travel Academy there is a module titled "11 UNESCO World Heritage Sites and 2 Biosphere Reserves",
- within the course of the Austrian Certified Travel Specialist, there is a module called "World Heritage Sites". See Figure. 3.
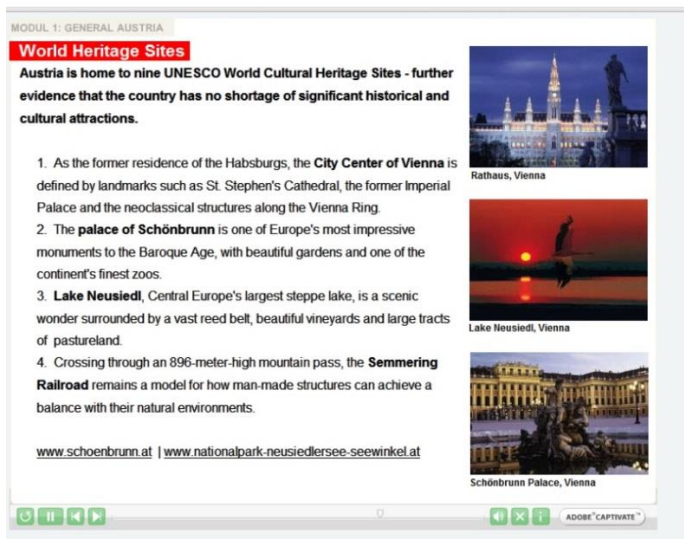

Figure. 3. Austrian Certified Travel Specialist

Another interesting fact is that only in the case of the Canada Specialist Program there is a link present to the UNESCO official website, while the other eLearning courses providers are missing the opportunity to provide travel agents with the link to the official information source.

In six cases out of ten, all enlisted World Heritage Sites (WHs) were presented in the online training course, while in other four cases, some WHSs were present, but not all of them were featured.

The number of existing Unesco Heritage Sites in the country has been also checked within the eLearning courses. Among ten existing mentioning of the WHSs, three were providing an outdated information on the number of the enlisted courses. These courses are: Canada Specialist Program, Magic of Mexica, and Scandinavia Specialist while presenting Norway as a tourism destination. This might be explained by the fact that the eLearning activities might have been developed before the WHSs were enlisted. On the other side, as travel agents are looking for the reliable information, course developments should keep online training activities current and updated.

Unexpectedly in none of the cases, UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes were indicated in the eLearning courses as such. Furthermore, the concept of Cultural Landscape has not been presented in the courses. Moreover, there were no indication on the sustainability or suggested sustainable behaviour at the UNESCO sites has been found.

Conclusions and limitations

The results of this study show that a very limited number of eLearning courses for the travel trade are actually presenting UNESCO sites. Even if they are mentioned within the online training courses, few of them are actually receiving needed endorsement within the training activities. Furthermore, none of the studied courses presented UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes as such.

Very few eLearning courses creators are providing the links to the official source of information about the outstanding values of the UNESCO sites. As such, they are missing out the possibility of providing knowledge to the travel agents and through them to the end clients – potential visitors of the destination. In this situation, tourism destinations could gain a lot not only by training travel agents directly, but also by giving them the right tools to find information by themselves.

Findings of this research suggest that eLearning course developers along with the various managing organizations of the UNESCO sites aiming to cover the promotion of WHSs in general and UNESCO-enlisted Cultural Landscapes in particular should:

- improve the coverage of the information about the nomination of WHS and its significance to the destination in the eLearning courses to the travel trade;
- provide links to the official source: the website of UNESCO, where travel agents can find further information on the enlisted property and its outstanding value;
- provide suggestions on sustainable tourism development and behaviour at and around UNESCO enlisted sites;
- make sure to provide updated and reliable information, so that travel agents can use it directly while presenting and promoting the destinations to the end clients.

This study might be of use for both academic community and tourism industry representatives, its results should be interpreted with a caution. The benchmarking and the review of the chosen eLearning courses was done only in English. Other linguistic versions of the eLearning courses were not analysed. Such an analysis might bring different results and enlighten new parameters, thus this might be suggested to be undertaken in the future research.

Furthermore, future research might look at if National Tourism Organizations are communicating UNESCO-enlisted Cultural landscapes on other online platforms, such as national tourism websites open for general public: tourists, visitors, and the like. In addition, if they are presented in such sites, it would be essential to evaluate in which way they are being portrayed and how such landscapes are being presented to travel agents and travellers coming from different markets, as they might have different perceptions of such places and different educational needs (Mele, De Ascaniis, Cantoni, 2015).

Another limitation of this study might belong to the fact that the topic of UNESCO sites in general and Cultural landscapes in particular might not be perceived as a relevant one in order to be introduces to the travel trade. Further qualitative studies can be suggested with the creators of the eLearning activities and managers of travel trade relationships in order to evaluate the content creation procedure and the decision making process within the eLearning development.

Table 1. eLearning courses offered by NTOs home to UNESCO enlisted Cultural Landscapes.
*Not a single course explicitly mentions the very name "Cultural Landscape".

Country	UNESCO enlisted Cultural Landscape	eLearning Course title	Covers UNESCO WHSs*
Austria	✓ Hallstatt-Dachstein / Salzkammergut Cultural Landscape ✓ Wachau Cultural Landscape ✓ Fertö / Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape	Austrian Certified Travel Specialist	All WHSs mentioned. Number of WHS is correct.
Brazil	✓ Rio de Janeiro: Carioca Landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea	Brazil Training Course	Some WHSs mentioned but not Cultural landscapes. Number of WHS is correct.
Canada	✓ Landscape of Grand Pré	Canada Specialist Program	All WHSs mentioned. Outdated numbers (16 instead of 17)
China	✓ Lushan National Park ✓ Mount Wutai ✓ West Lake Cultural Landscape of Hangzhou ✓ Cultural Landscape of Honghe Hani Rice Terraces	PATA Academy – China	-
Colombia	✓ Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia	Learn Colombia	Some WHSs mentioned, but not Cultural landscapes. Numbers are not mentioned.
Indonesia	✓ Cultural Landscape of Bali Province: the Subak System as a Manifestation of the Tri Hita Karana Philosophy	PATA Academy – Indonesia	-
Kenya	✓ Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests	Jambo Kenya	-
Laos	✓ Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape	PATA Academy – Laos	Some WHSs mentioned, but not Cultural landscapes. Numbers are not mentioned.
Mauritius	✓ Le Morne Cultural Landscape	Mauritius Destination Training Programme	-
Mexico	✓ Agave Landscape and Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila ✓ Prehistoric Caves of Yagul and Mitla in the Central Valley of Oaxaca	Magic of Mexico	WHSs mentioned. Outdated numbers (32 instead of 33)
New Zealand	✓ Tongariro National Park	Kiwi Specialist Programme	-
Norway	✓ Vegaøyan -- The Vega Archipelago	Scandinavia Specialist	WHSs mentioned. Outdated numbers (7 instead of 8)
Papua New Guinea	✓ Kuk Early Agricultural Site	Papua New Guinea Specialist	-
Philippines	✓ Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras	PATA Academy – Philippines	-
South Africa	✓ Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape ✓ Richtersveld Cultural and Botanical Landscape	South African Expert Training	-
Spain	✓ Pyrénées - Mont Perdu ✓ Aranjuez Cultural Landscape ✓ Cultural Landscape of the Serra de Tramuntana	Spain Specialist	-
Sweden	✓ Agricultural Landscape of Southern Öland	Scandinavia Specialist	All WHSs mentioned. Numbers ok.
Switzerland	✓ Lavaux, Vineyard Terraces	Switzerland Travel Academy	All WHSs mentioned. Numbers ok.
UK	✓ St Kilda ✓ Blaenavon Industrial Landscape ✓ Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew ✓ Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape	Britain Agent	-
USA	✓ Papahānaumokuākea	Visit USA Training	-

Viet Nam	✓ Trang An Landscape Complex	PATA Academy – Viet Nam	Some WHSs mentioned, but not Cultural landscapes. Numbers are not mentioned.

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