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CYCLING AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPROVING HEALTH TOURISM IN İZMİR

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Abstract

Izmir has been a traditional tourism destination for holiday, culture and history seekers for many years, and however the city has many advantages for some other alternative tourism options. Cycling, as one of the major sport activities for health and a kind of special interest tourism, is getting popular among the city dwellers recently. Convenient and long cycling routes help to meet the basic requirements of local and external bikers in the region. The city has already been a member of the European Cycle Route Network (*EuroVelo*) with its projected 491 km long cycle routes. The basic objective of this study is to examine the bicycle tourism as an opportunity for local tourism. This study was designed as a qualitative descriptive research by interviewing some professional cyclists, experts and professionals in Izmir province in order to have their ideas about the development potential of bicycle tourism and then the effects of EuroVelo membership of Izmir. The results of the study explain that the bicycle tourism in Izmir has not sufficiently been developed yet, but the interest of local people and foreigners is still raising and bicycle tourism has much potential for the development of local tourism.

Keywords: *Cycling, Bicycle Tourism, Health Turizm, Special Interest Tourism, Eurovelo*

Özet

İzmir uzun yıllar boyunca tatil, kültür ve tarih meraklısı turistler için önemli bir ziyaret merkezi olmuştur. Bununla birlikte, bu şehir diğer birçok alternatif turizm seçenekleri için de önemli olanaklara sahiptir. Bisiklet kullanma ve bisiklet turizmi, önemli bir sağlık aktivitesi ve özel ilgi turizmi türü olarak son yıllarda kent sakinleri arasında popülerliğini artırmaktadır. Düzenli ve oldukça uzun bisiklet yolları bölgedeki ve bölge dışından gelen birçok bisikletçinin temel beklentilerini karşılamaya uygundur. İzmir aynı zamanda toplam 491 kilometreye ulaşacak olan uzun bisiklet rotaları ile *Avrupa Bisiklet Rotaları Ağı*'na (EuroVelo) katılarak bu ağın üyesi olmuştur. Bu çalışmanın amacı da, bisiklet turizminin bölge turizmi için önemli bir olanak ve fırsat olarak değerlendirilmesi olanaklarını araştırmaktır. Çalışma tanımlayıcı nitel bir araştırma olarak tasarlanmıştır ve veri toplama aracı olarak hedef kitleyi oluşturan profesyonel bisikletçiler, uzmanlar ve bölgedeki bisiklet sektörünün profesyonelleri ile yapılan *yüz yüze görüşme tekniği* uygulanmıştır. Bu görüşmelerde uzmanların bisiklet turizminin bölgede gelişme olanakları ve EuroVelo üyeliğinin bölge bisiklet turizmine katkıları konusunda düşünceleri alınmaya çalışılmıştır. Sonuçlar İzmir'de bisiklet turizminin ve bisiklet kullanımının henüz istenen düzeyde olmadığını, ancak önemli bir potansiyele sahip olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Bisiklet Spor, Bisiklet Turizmi, Sağlık Turizmi, Özel İlgi Turizmi, EuroVelo*

INTRODUCTION

Bicycle tourism has displayed fast development in recent years as a healthy and sporty alternative tourism across Europe with its efficient infrastructure. As a recent example, Germany is building a 100 km long Bicycle Superhighway, connecting 10 Western cities in the country, and this highway will give access to easy commuting for about 2 million people (fastcompany.com). Most popular 3 European Cycling routes are known as Romantic Road (Germany 440 km), Orleans to Nantes (Fr.400 km), Passu to Vienna (Ger & Aust.300 km) (theguardian.com). Izmir, as a developing health tourism destination, is planning to increase existing bicycle route in the forthcoming years, becoming EuroVelo member.

Health tourism has been used for medical tourism for a long time. However, under this concept, travel purpose is not only the treatment for illnesses, but it may also be protecting health and maintaining a healthy life. In order to do this, exercising is the best way, and one of the best and cheapest sport to exercise is cycling for all the people from children to aged ones. This a preliminary study which aims to investigate the bicycle tourism potential as a complementary product for health tourism in Izmir from the experts' point of view, as an initial part of a detailed further research.

Literature Review

Bicycle tourism is not a new phenomenon, but it is a fast developing special interest tourism all over the World. A brief literature review shows that the earlier articles about bicycle tourism were written by Beioley (1995), Schuett & Holmes (1996), Snelderwaard (1996) Lumsdon (1996). Ritchie (1998), Simonsen & Jorgenson (1998). Ritchie & Hall (1999), Ritchie (1999), Lumston (2000), and Solly (2003), respectively, discussing mostly planning and sustainability issues. The recently published articles in leading journals can be listed as, Taylor, S. (2010), Lamont & McKay (2013). Lee et al. (2014), Han et al. (2017), Buning & Gibson (2016), Simeoni & De Crescenzo (2018) emphasizing and reporting the cycling as a niche market with its different aspects.

Main topics discussed in these recent articles are, *bicycle tourism motivations, sustainability, profile of participants, economic benefits and travel conditions*. There is almost no study examining health and bicycle tourism in destinations, despite there are some studies emphasizing cycling as a competitive sport and/or as a hobby. Only low number of studies on health and medicine emphasize the importance of sports on human health (Hall, 1992; Hillman, 1993; Pucher and Dijkstra, 2003; and Oja et al, 2011). Some of the researchers studied this phenomenon and its participants as a type of special interest tourists. This study differs from others by emphasizing the importance of cycling and bicycle tourism as a *complementary product* for health tourism.

Theoretical Background / Health Tourism

As mentioned earlier, the objectives of health tourism may be protecting health (thermal spa), diagnosis the illness, medical treatment, preventing physical and mental diseases (fresh air) and developing health (Munoz & Munoz, 2013). Hall (1992) and Ormond (2011) claim that the health tourism destinations are developing because of two main reasons;

- The first, as a pull factor (*external motivation*), some destinations offer *medical services, thermal facilities, natural sources and adequate infrastructure at relatively low prices*.
- The second, as a push factor (*inner motivation*), is inadequate and or *expensive medical services* in tourist generating countries / destinations where health tourists come from.

In this context, Ormond (2011) explained that the following 4 major reasons for those visitors who want to travel overseas for individual health concerns and to reach efficient health services outside their country of residence.

- The high costs of medical services in their country of residence,
- Very long waiting lists for treatment in their country of residence,

- The strict regulatory controls imposed by the laws for some medical processes in their country of residence,
- Potential patients may feel a lack of cultural sensitivity exists at home.

According to the experts, regular physical activity provides a wide range of health benefits. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a minimum of 150 minutes of reasonable physical activity per week. But, in spite of vital benefits, increasing proportions of societies fail to achieve recommended levels of activity. Integrating cycling into daily routines provides a promising accomplish to increase their physical activity, given the many people who spend 30 minutes and more commuting daily, however effort to find the extra half-hour to exercise. The integration of mobility and physical activity is also inexpensive and does not require major skills, making it suitable for large segments of the population. The main pathway for health benefits from cycling is physical activity. Other beneficial pathways include improvements of quality of life through mobility and access gained through cycling (Götschi et al, 2016). Therefore, cycling is considered as one of the best way to protect the health of population contributing to local air quality indirectly, if it is used for urban transportation purpose.

Izmir has convenient climate conditions and investment opportunities for multiple tourism purposes including health and sport tourism in addition to existing tourism products. Historically, Asklepiion which is known as the first hospital located in Bergama (historic Pergamon) town nearby Izmir. For many centuries, Izmir had been a center for efficient treatment of diseases and the city has long been known as “*the place where the death never enters into and testaments cannot be opened*”. The city has a potential in this field with adequate infrastructure and quality of experts and doctors. Izmir also has many opportunities for sport activities in order protect health, including cycling. For this reason, the opportunities of bicycle tourism in the region needs to be investigated.

Theoretical Background / Bicycle Tourism

Bicycle Tourism has been defined as “*travels of individuals or groups by bicycle as essential and important part of visit to a specific destination*” (Australian Tourism Commission, 2005) and “*recreational visits, either overnight or day visits away from home, which involve leisure cycling as a fundamental and significant part of the visit*” (Sustrans, 1999). *Holiday cycling* is where visitors choose to cycle on one or more days while on holiday. *Day cyclists* refer to those who cycle from home to enjoy a day excursion (Downward & Lumsdon, 2001). It is also a culture (Whitaker, 2005) and a sport (Standeven & de Knop, 1999). The purposes of bicycle tourism participants may be *holiday, entertainment, recreation, sport, exercise, fun, pleasure and health*. This definition is supported by Lamont (2009), describing the bicycle tourists as “*those people who are relocating from their place of residence to destinations with the purpose of active or passive participation to bicycle related activities*”. As a result, the fundamental factor is that cycling is an activity that is perceived by the visitor as an integral part of a day excursion or holiday. It is essentially a tourism experience, a positive way to enhance leisure time at a destination involving a visitor, a bicycle, a route and a range of support facilities (Downward & Lumsdon, 2001). In this tourism, there are not only daily and short tours, but also there may be long distance tours covering more than a day, sometimes with large number of participants.

Like many other tourism categories, Izmir offers many opportunities for bicycle tourism because of its flat land structure and quite long bicycle routes in the city and surroundings. As seen on Table 1, there are more than 52 km long bike routes already used, and 44 km additional routes projected and planned by local (*municipal*) government in the city. Moreover, 100 km out of total 135 km planned routes in “*2009 Transportation Master Plan*” have been built, in the city surroundings. Finally, the city has already been a member of the European Cycle Route Network (*EuroVelo*) with its projected 491 km long cycle routes. All these data show that the city of Izmir can easily welcome bicycle tourists, and bicycle tourism may be an important revenue source for local people and regional economy.

Table 1. Izmir Bicycle routes

BICYCLE ROUTES (km)		
Available Bicycle Routes	Gulf crossing (Between Uckuyular & Sasalı)	40.0
	Ulukent	6.6
	Yeni Foca Seaside	1.2
	Adnan Kahveci Crossroad	1.4
	Eski Foca Seaside	0.5
	Sarnic	1.8
	Total	51.5
Projected Bicycle Routes	Narlıdere Dilek Street	3.5
	Çeşme Çiftlikköy	9.3
	Üzelbahçe Maresal Fevzi Cakmak Avenue	3.9
	Urla Ahmet Besim Uysal Avenue	2.5
	Sahilevleri Gürler Avenue	1,5
	Cross Sections on the Route	4.6
	Total	25.3
Bicycle Routes to be Projected	Karsiyaka Girne Avenue	1.6
	Cigli - Egekent	3.4
	Menemen – Seyrek - Koyundere	6.6
	Alsancak Cumhuriyet Boulevard (2. Kordon)	0.9
	Adnan Kahveci Crossroad - Bornova	7.6
	Total	20.1
Grand Total		96.9

Source: Erten (2016)

Table 2. Bisim Stations – Number of Bicycles and Bicycle Parking Lots

Stations	Number of Bicycles	Number of Free Parking Lots
Ahmet Adnan Saygun Center	15	5
Alaybey Tersane Cafe	0	12
Ali Çetinkaya Boulevard	7	5
Alsancak Train Station	7	8
Alsancak Seaport	9	11
Bayraklı Seaport	10	5
Bayraklı Nikah Salonu	7	5
Bostanlı Seaport	6	6
Bostanlı Center	16	8
Bostanlı Sport Facilities	0	40
Natural Life Park	8	16
Göztepe Bridge	15	15
İnciraltı City Forest	19	21
İnciraltı Recreation Area	38	2
Izban Turan Station	7	5
Karantina District	0	12
Karataş District	10	5
Karşıyaka Evlendirme Dairesi	0	12
Karşıyaka Seaport	9	3
Konak Seaport	18	20
Konak Metro Station	5	15
Köprü (Bridge) District	8	7
Sasalı Bird Paradise Harbour	12	18
Harbour	6	6
Mavişehir District	0	12
Mavişehir Fisherman Shelter	6	6
Meles Recreation Area	8	14
Pasaport Seaport	12	8
Sahilevleri 1	14	26
Sahilevleri 2	12	28
Susuzdede	3	12
Uckuyular Seaport	18	2
Vasıf Çınar	13	7
Yunuslar (Dolphins-Karsiyaka)	8	4
Total	326	381

Figure 1: BISIM Stations and Parking Lots in Izmir

Source: <http://www.bisim.com.tr/istasyonlar.aspx>

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as a descriptive qualitative research in order to investigate the bicycle tourism development potential in Izmir. The interview technique was used as data collection tool. The target population is the local experts and professionals of cycling in the city. A semi-structured interview technique was used to collect information from the participants. The basic objective of these interviews was to identify the efficiency of bicycle transportation in Izmir and the potential of bicycle tourism. This research was completed in two months (August – September) 2018 in Izmir. Time, target group and limited research area are the main constraints of research.

RESULTS

The questions/topics asked to the participants (6 person, one lady who organizes *Fancy Women Bike Ride* activity, and other 5 are professionals and experts) and answers are as the following;

Question/Topic -1: “What are the major benefits of riding bicycle and cycling as a sport?”

Answers(combined):

- It relieves stress of daily life and bicycle users (riders) forget daily-life problems and move away them for a while (P1, P3)
- They concentrate on riding bicycle only, nothing else (P1, P5, P3)
- They are more careful about their health and diet (P1, P2)
- They think that their body shapes physically getting better as they use bike (P1, P6, P3)
- This activity contributes to their physical and mental health better (P3, P6).
- Cycling can be organised daily or weekly, even some specific days more participants can be seen, therefore this can be considered as a social sport (P3)
- People are socializing in this way and participants consider that cycling brings happiness (P3, P6)
- One participant (P5) explained that this activity is very beneficial to his asthma, even his doctor confused this result and asked him if he increased the dose of his medicine or not, whereas he had reduced it.

- Cycling is one of the best way to integrate with the nature (P1, P2, P5, P6)

Question/Topic - 2: "bicycle transportation facilities in Izmir"

Answers (combined):

- The bicycle transportation facilities in Izmir are unfortunately inadequate yet, like many other cities. However, the bikers in Izmir are relatively lucky, since physical infrastructure and number of rental bikes are much more than other cities have (P2, P4, P6).
- Bicycle transportation in Izmir city center is almost impossible, due to the lack of routes specifically allocated to bikers, while there are adequate routes for bikers for sport purposes not for transportation (P2, P4, P6).
- Only coastal areas of Izmir Gulf can be used for transportation by bikers (P6).

Question/Topic-3:"How to develop the bicycle transportation in Izmir - ideas/suggestions"

Answers(combined):

- Bicycle routes needs to be improved and integrated to city roads (P1, P2, P6).
- Local people should be aware of the benefits of cycling and as an alternative more efficient transportation mean, they need to be trained about cycling and bikers (P1, P2, P3).
- There are some foldable bicycles which are widely used in most parts of the World. If any problem occurs when traveling by bike, such as a flat tire, bikers can fold it and get in the public bus to continue their travel (P1).
- However, the public busses in Izmir, have no permission to accept bikes even they are foldable (P1).
- The local people consider that these vehicles are only for pleasure and a tool for sport activity on weekends, not as a vehicle for efficient transportation (P1, P3, P5).
- There should be new bicycle routes from city center to nearby settlements in 50 km away, for some participants, these routes can be extended to settlements in 100 km away (P2, P3).
- Local people should be motivated to use bicycle and other drivers on traffic must respect to bikers on the roads, especially bus, minibus and taxi drivers (P2, P4, P5, P6).
- They needs to be trained about the bikers on the traffic (P4)
- Media and outdoor advertisements may be used effectively in order to create public awareness for cycling (P2, P3).
- There are some difficulties to find a rental bike on BISIM Stations because of intensive demand on weekends, the solution is to increase these stations disseminating to larger geographical areas in the city (P3)
- Foreign bikers who visit Izmir, usually ride outside the city (P5).
- When they head towards countryside, they stop the villages, meet local people, take photos with them and share these photos on their social media pages (P5).
- This is the most effective way to advertise the destination to potential visitors and international bikers (P5).
- Geographical structures of Izmir's hinterland do not permit to build long-range bicycle routes. Therefore, it should be paid more attention to qualitative dimensions than physical investments (P6).

Major Findings

According to the results of interviews with the participants who are the pioneers and experts of cycling in Izmir, the most prominent findings can be listed as;

- Cycling as a sport is so beneficial for health that it can be a relieve for asthma as well.
- Bicycle should be an integral part of local transportation
- Cycling is very helpful for environmental sustainability
- Bicycle tourists may become an efficient advertisers and voluntary representatives for destination.
- As people know the benefits of cycling, the more people will probably participate to this activity.

CONCLUSIONS AND COMMENTS

Studies show that bicycle, *as a sport, as a culture and as a travel mean*, is a perfect vehicle that provide benefits to mental and physical health of participants. Bicycle is very much part of population; it has contributed significantly to today's communities, and it continues to contribute to societies' wellbeing. This activity is present at the levels of both practice and representation, in the cities and the countryside, in work and recreation, in the past, present and future. Lots of benefits from physical activity dominate the public health impacts of cycling. Many approaches to promote cycling also arrange well with efforts to reduce risks. A key reason to maintain day-to-day cycling as a strategy to improve public health is its feasibility for large parts of the population and all age categories. Bicycle tourism offers a great potential to keep elderly people active and mobile if conditions are safe.

Izmir, as a new member of EuroVelo, should built all the planned bicycle routes soon for long-range travels of bikers. As local people more familiar with the cycling, they will probably more helpful to bicycle tourists. Bicycle tourism should be considered as an important and integral element of local tourism supply, especially as a complementary product to health tourism. Finally, as mentioned earlier, this study is a preliminary investigation of a further and more detailed research on domestic and foreign potential bicycle tourists in major cities and countries. There is always a need for some further studies to be investigated by researchers in this new area.

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