

A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MOBILITY PASSAGE¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today the Alpine region is one of the most important tourism destinations in Europe (Bätzing 2003, EEA 2003). Some 100 million tourists visit the Alps each year for a holiday (Becken & Hay 2007, see also Pechlaner & Tschurtschenthaler 2003, Siegrist 1998). About 10% of the Alpine villages are tourism destinations which depend on the economic revenues of Alpine tourism (Bätzing 2003 in Alpenkonvention, 2007). Next to the economic relevance of tourism for this region, at the same time –and partly because of the high tourist arrivals– the environmental relevance of Alpine tourism becomes more and more apparent. The Alps have therefore been identified as a ‘climate-tourism hotspot’ (Becken & Hay 2007); it is an important tourism destination that is at the same time faced with environmental challenges. Since the consequences of climate change have already affected tourism activity and economic benefits in the Alpine region, there is a growing interest in sustainability strategies. Böhler et al. (2006) argue that sustainability strategies must include, among other things, a shift towards environmental-friendly transportation modes (cf. Gössling et al. 2005, Peeters & Schouten 2006).

In this light it is interesting to have insights in the current use of public transport networks in the Alpine region. The European Environment Agency (EEA) estimates that “up to 80% of all tourist journeys to the Alps, where public transport is crucially lacking, are by car” (EEA 2003: 86). Additionally, these tourists use their cars frequently during their holiday as well. In several Alpine villages car travel has increased with 45% in the last ten years (Alpenkonvention 2007).

Therefore, several communities in this region aim to reduce the transport-related environmental impacts (e.g. air pollution as a result of congestion and greenhouse gas emissions), for example by implementing improved environmentally sound transport connections (for both journeys to and from the destination and local/regional transport), shuttle services, availability of alternative vehicles in the communities and electronic travel information systems that cover all modes and (inter-)regional services of transport (Becken & Hay 2007). In this paper our attention goes to the network of Alpine Pearls villages which takes the above and other measures. The municipalities and tourism boards of 22 tourism destinations in the Alpine region are united in the Alpine Pearls (AP) association². In aiming for a sustainable development of Alpine tourism (i.e. environmental-friendly, profitable and high-quality), they stimulate tourists to travel to, between and in the Alpine tourism destinations in an environmental-friendly manner.

In a certain way, the aim of the AP association to enable tourists to travel environmental-friendly to and in the Alpine region is comparable with the aim Thomas Cook had in 1840 to enable tourists to travel by train to make a day-trip or to go on a holiday. Thomas Cook offered holiday packages including

train tickets, route information, accommodation, and activities to undertake, in a period when people perceived travelling by train as expensive and difficult (Peters 2003, 2006, see also Brendon 1991). Comparable, the AP association aims to develop an Alpine Pearls holiday: a more sustainable Alpine holiday. Their special focus is on stimulating the use of less-polluting transport modes such as trains, buses, or electric vehicles. The Alpine Pearls holiday is however not exclusively focused on mobility aspects. The Alpine Pearls holiday considers the whole tourism chain, as in the case of Thomas Cook, and also involves accommodation and activities. To facilitate environmental-friendly travelling, the AP association aims to create a 'passage' among parts that make up the holiday.

When examining the aim of the AP association in light of the accomplishments of Thomas Cook, the question comes to mind to what extent a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays has been developed; a passage comprised of environmental-friendly travelling to and in the Alpine region, and, to a lesser extent, hotel accommodations and activities. This paper is hence focused on the creation of a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays which might contribute to a sustainable development of Alpine holidays.

To elaborate on this topic, participant observations were performed in the Alpine region, complemented with interviews with informants (see section 3). The results from this qualitative study will be presented in section 4, followed by the conclusions and some issues for tourism policy. Before going into the collected data in more detail, we will first give attention to the theoretical framework behind our analysis.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 A contextual approach to the Alpine Pearls holiday

With respect to the development of an Alpine Pearls holiday, the Social Practices Approach (SPA), a contextual approach to consumption behaviour, offers a useful framework (see Spaargaren 1997, 2003, Spaargaren & Van Vliet 2000, Verbeek & Mommaas 2008). A central notion in SPA is the concept of social practices. Social practices are conceived as being routine-driven configurations of activities, situated in time and space, and shared by groups of people (Spaargaren 1997, 2003, Spaargaren & Van Vliet 2000). In this paper, the Alpine Pearls holiday can be conceived as a 'holiday practice'. Analysing the Alpine Pearls holiday from a practice-perspective implies that holiday behaviour is considered as a result of the dynamics between tourists and providers of tourism services and the (mis)fits in their interrelation. Furthermore, it is emphasized by SPA that such dynamics take place in a specific structural time-space context. In other words, sustainable development of tourism should be considered in its context; i.e. the Alpine region as a spatial context, and in the time-context in which environmental issues are high on the political and societal agenda, and in which the effects of climate change are already apparent in the Alpine region.

In light of SPA's emphasis of focusing on the interrelation between tourists and providers of tourism services in holiday practices, the attention in this paper goes to the accomplishments and the difficulties faced in developing a

passage for Alpine Pearls holidays that encompasses both mobility, accommodation and activities, and to what it entails to travel along the passage of the Alpine Pearls holiday.

2.2 Passages for environmental-friendly travelling

In order to comprehensively analyse the development of the Alpine Pearls holiday, SPA's central notion of social practices is complemented with insights from research that specifically considers travelling behaviour in its time-space context. The Alpine Pearls holiday practice concerns a sequence of behaviours taking place in different settings, in constantly changing contexts, involving changing dynamics between tourists and providers of tourism services. To gain more insight in the character of practices 'on the move', in this paper, the notion of 'passages' taken from Peters (2003, 2006) is introduced as a specific form of practice theory. According to Peters, for every movement or journey, a passage should be created to reduce the uncertainty and unpredictability of travelling. Passages imply an order which contains material as well as immaterial elements (ibid.). To illustrate, a passage for train travelling to and in the Alpine region consists of certain network elements, implies certain travelling experiences, and requires skills for train travelling.

In this line of reasoning, creating a coherent order of material and immaterial elements for Alpine Pearls holidays implies the creation of a cross-border passage for environmental-friendly travelling, that enables tourists to experience smooth, comfortable and problem-free Alpine Pearls holidays. Applying the concept of passages to the goal of the AP association to create a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays, this would imply a passage that encompasses the whole holiday, including different time-settings (e.g. before, during and after the holiday), different spatial-settings (e.g. home, on the road, at the tourism destination), and different behaviours (e.g. gathering information, travelling, undertaking activities, sleeping, eating).

3. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHOD

The Alpine Pearls holiday is about environmental-friendly travelling to, between and in the Alpine Pearl villages. This implies the creation of a passage that enables a smooth and fluent journey using environmental-friendly transport means. To investigate the passage for environmental-friendly travelling to and in the Alpine region, necessary for Alpine Pearls holidays, attention will be given to what it comprises to go on an Alpine Pearls holiday and to what extent passages have been developed. In this respect, the research question of this paper is formulated as follows:

"To what extent have passages for going on an Alpine Pearls holiday been developed, and what does this passage entail?"

In order to be able to answer this research question, two qualitative research methods were used: participant observation and interviews. In participant observation the researcher collects data by taking part in the setting and activities that are the object of research (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002). The time-space context of the 'Alpine Pearls holiday', the travellers travelling along the

Alpine Pearls passage, and the availability of (information on) environmental-friendly tourism and travel services herein, have been discovered by conducting participant observation. By travelling through the passage, participant observation was performed 'on the move'. The participant observation took place in June 2007 during SuperAlp³ and in July 2007, and covered 13 of 22 Alpine Pearls villages.

Whereas participant observation considers everything that happens in time-space settings, the processes 'behind the scene' that do have their influence on the setting have been discovered through interviews with informants. In July 2007, 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with policy makers, mayors, tourism directors, and mobility managers that are involved with Alpine Pearls⁴.

The field notes of the participant observation and the transcriptions of the interviews have been systematically grouped and coded. A priori categories drawn from the theoretical framework gave a practical structure for organizing a topic-by-topic analysis of the notes and transcriptions. Furthermore, the interview transcriptions were included in a matrix in which the rows represent the topics and the columns represent the participants of the interviews.

Using the results of the participant observation and the interviews, the next section will elaborate on whether and how, within the scope of aiming for the sustainable development of tourism mobility in the Alpine region, a passage for Alpine Pearls holiday practice has been generated.

4. RESULTS

4.1 A passage for the Alpine Pearls holiday practice

Considering the development of the Alpine Pearls holiday practice and its passage for environmental-friendly travelling, the interviews and participant observation revealed that the political climate, the technologies, the market, and the users all strive for sustainable tourism mobility in the Alpine region. This is promising in light of the development of complete and continuous passages. Political bodies have performed several governmental projects on sustainable tourism mobility in the Alpine region. From this political climate followed the founding of the AP association (22 municipalities and tourism boards). The interviews and participant observation revealed that tour operators, transport companies, and hotels are also important actors in the creation of a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays. Railway tour operator Ameropa has chosen to market their holiday packages as Alpine Pearls holidays, and hotels in several villages are committed to Alpine Pearls. Furthermore, Alpine Pearls holidays encompass innovative technologies for environmental-friendly travelling (e.g. electric bicycles) that tourists can use during their Alpine Pearls holiday. Finally, although most tourists who go on an Alpine Pearls holiday do this because of other than environmental reasons, they appreciate that it is at the same time environmental-friendly. The fact that Alpine Pearls holidays are also undertaken by persons who do not have environmental-friendliness as their single or most important concern shows that Alpine Pearls holidays are attractive to more tourists than environmentalist tourists only. The fact that users, technologies, politics, and

markets are all involved makes a valuable contribution to the development of the Alpine Pearls holiday practice and its passage for environmental-friendly travelling.

Furthermore, it appeared that this Alpine Pearls holiday and its passage are characterised by a unique 'storyline'. Storylines are narratives that give meaning to specific phenomena and provide actors with a set of symbolic references (Hajer 1995). In the storyline of the passage of the Alpine Pearls holiday environmental-friendliness goes hand in hand with comfortable and convenient travelling, with enjoyable, fun and high-quality holidays spent in beautiful landscapes and finally, with economic success. This storyline shows the environmental component of the Alpine Pearls holiday is not concealed (i.e. 'behind the back of the consumer'), but is explicitly communicated. Moreover, the storyline proves that the ecological advantage is not the single selling point; rather, it is the unique selling point of Alpine Pearls holidays. Because of comfort, high-quality, pleasure, fun and enjoyment and environmental-friendliness, the Alpine Pearls villages differ from other tourism destinations in the Alpine region, and the Alpine Pearls holiday is different from an Alpine holiday. The Alpine Pearls holiday offers a storyline that connects benefits for tourists, benefits for Alpine tourism destinations, and benefits for the environment.

Besides the fact that there are many actors involved in the Alpine Pearls holiday practice and that it is characterised by a unique storyline, the participant observation demonstrated that there are several accomplishments in creating a passage for car-free Alpine Pearls holidays. In light of the association's aim to let tourists spend a holiday at a Pearl without a car, the manager of the AP association stated:

"Whether you choose to go to an international, well-known and train-connected large tourism town like Arosa or whether you go to Sauris, being a small Pearl embedded in the mountains in the region Friuli Giulia Venezia, you still don't need your car. We get tourists to these villages without their car and provide excellent environmental friendly mobility at the spot."

From the participant observation it appeared that indeed Alpine Pearl villages offer their guests a wide range of environmental-friendly travelling services (e.g. buses, bicycle taxis, electric bikes, cable cars, horse-drawn carriages, dog sleighs) and facilities for environmental-friendly activities (e.g. for mountain biking, cross-country skiing, alpine skiing, ice skating, hiking, climbing, snowshoe walking, Nordic walking, and horseback riding). Guests can furthermore make use of luggage transport services, stay in soft mobility hotels, do the groceries in biological farmer shops, gather information on public transport options from the mobility centre, or buy the 'Alpine Pearls ticket', which is valid for all buses and trains in Austria and has been developed by the AP association in cooperation with OBB (the Austrian railway company). These services make it easier and more comfortable to go on an Alpine Pearls holiday and leaving the car at home, or, at least, to not use the car during the Alpine Pearls holiday. Therefore, it can be said that these services contribute to the creation of a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays.

Next to the availability of services for environmental-friendly travelling and the tailor-made services for Alpine Pearls holidays, the participant observation

revealed that information on Alpine Pearls holidays and environmental-friendly transport modes is available throughout the Alpine Pearls holiday. When people are gathering information to decide on their next holiday, they can run into information on Alpine Pearls on the website of Ameropa, a German railway tour operator that offers Alpine Pearls package holidays. Furthermore, since it is obligatory for every Pearl village to provide information on Alpine Pearls both on their websites and in their catalogues, information can be found here as well. This information concerns the goals and background of Alpine Pearls, how to reach the village by environmental-friendly transport means, and the bookable 'Alpine Pearls package holidays'. Information on these topics is also provided on the website of the AP association. Furthermore, the AP association publishes a tourism brochure of Alpine Pearls holidays. Information is however not only provided before the holiday, it is woven into the Alpine Pearls holiday by way of information on Alpine Pearls in hotel rooms (if the hotel is committed to Alpine Pearls), at bike rental stations, in mobility centres, and in the tourist offices of the Pearl villages. These results show that to a certain extent a green Alpine passage has been created. From choosing the holiday destination and the transport mode with which to travel, to the journey itself, the stay in the Alpine region and finally, the return journey, the provision of (travelling) services on the one hand, and information on the other creates a passage to enable smooth and comfortable environmental-friendly travelling (see more in Verbeek forthcoming).

4.2 Barriers in developing the Alpine Pearls holiday practice and its passage for environmental-friendly travelling

However, environmental-friendly travelling in the Alpine region is not always smooth and comfortable. The statement that "travelling is about solving problems" (Peters 2006) appeared to be a recurrent theme. During the Alpine Pearls holiday, people run into situations in which they can not travel as expected. People miss connecting trains, are faced with closed cable cars, or can not easily reach the village from the nearest railway station. All such events obstruct a smooth journey in the Alpine region. Whether problems can be prevented or easily solved, depends on the quality of the passage.

The participant observation revealed that there are two important factors that restrict the creation of a passage for the Alpine Pearls holiday practice; the nationally organised transport infrastructures, and the sectorially organised tourism industry.

Nationally organised transport infrastructures

The participant observation of the Alpine Pearls holiday showed that a difficulty of organising a passage for an Alpine Pearls holiday is the fact that the Alpine region is spread over six countries. This complicates the creation of the cross-border infrastructures enabling a smooth passage for the Alpine Pearls holiday. Every country has different train and bus companies, transport networks and ticketing systems. This country-specific system of provision complicates the creation of a passage to and between Alpine Pearls villages.

Furthermore, some Alpine Pearls villages are well connected to the public transport infrastructure and have many environmental-friendly travelling options in and around the village, whereas other Alpine Pearls villages are

difficult to reach without a car. In other words, some Alpine Pearls are originally designed for public transport and are perfectly situated in the passage for Alpine Pearls holidays. Other Pearls are however designed for car mobility and are not properly included in the passage for Alpine Pearls holidays. In line with Peters (2006: 97): “there is a tension between passage and place, which stems from the fact that the way a destination is made accessible cannot be separated from the design of the place itself”. As a result, the passage of the Alpine Pearls holiday that connects the 22 Pearl villages is not yet as uninterrupted, smooth and comfortable as is hoped for. Finally, OD-transport facilities for Alpine Pearls holidays lack behind the availability of environmental-friendly travelling services in the villages, which reveals that the passage for environmental-friendly travelling to the Alpine Pearl villages is ‘under construction’. There are some difficulties in trying to overcome this problem. To give one example, the national railway companies Trenitalia, SNCF, SBB, and DB are not convinced of the relevance of a cross-border Alpine Pearls ticket that is valid for all trains and buses in the whole Alpine region. An explanation might lie in the fact that the system of provision of railway companies is different from the system of provision that is beneficial for Alpine Pearls holidays. The core business of transport companies is to transport people from A to B. Their focus is not on the holiday for which the journey is undertaken. The embeddedness of travelling in the holiday practice is not taken into account. When transport providers would take up the viewpoint of passages and cooperate on the level of holiday practices, then the development of an Alpine Pearls ticket that gives access to all environmental-friendly transport means in the whole Alpine region and can subsequently be used for OD-transport, would be more obvious. The creation of such a cross-border Alpine Pearls ticket would fit really well to the concept of an Alpine Pearls holiday. Currently, the nationally organised transport industry complicates the development of a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays (see more in Verbeek forthcoming).

Sectorially organised tourism industry

Another difficulty in organising a passage for the Alpine Pearls holiday is the compartmentalization of the tourism industry. The AP association is the obvious organisation to be in charge of creating a smooth passage of transport, accommodation, and activities, but is dependent on other actors (e.g. villages, train companies, bus companies, hotels, tour operators) to organise these elements. The association is not in the position to enforce these providers of the Alpine Pearls holiday to take action.

The participant observation revealed that the inclusion of hotels in the passage strengthens the passage for Alpine Pearls holidays. Although hotels are currently included in the passage of the Alpine Pearls holiday in diverging ways, each of them demonstrates that this inclusion makes the passage stronger and more fluent. Tourists have more information and more environmental-friendly transport modes at their disposal. However, since hotels are private companies, the AP association can not oblige them to offer their guests shuttle services, to provide them information on Alpine Pearls holidays, or even to provide them information on how to reach the hotel by public transport.

Furthermore, the AP association lacks the authority to convince railway and bus companies to organise for instance the above-mentioned Alpine Pearls ticket. Tour operators are therefore essential in organising passages for Alpine Pearls holidays. Railway tour operator Ameropa has chosen to market their holiday packages as Alpine Pearls holidays. There are however also railway tour operators that are hesitant to become a partner of Alpine Pearls and to market their holiday packages (consisting of a train trip and a stay in an Alpine Pearl village), as Alpine Pearls holidays, or even to inform on the availability of Alpine Pearls-related travelling services in the Pearl villages.

The Pearl villages are the only actors involved in the passage of the Alpine Pearls holiday that the AP association has some control over. The villages are member of the association and therefore have to commit to several criteria regarding the provision of environmental-friendly travelling options and of information about it.

In short, the results reveal that the cooperation of several actors is needed to organise the Alpine Pearls passage. The lack of authority of the AP association and the sectorially organised tourism industry hampers the development of a passage for the Alpine Pearls holiday (see more in Verbeek forthcoming).

5. CONCLUSIONS

With regard to the generation of a sustainable Alpine Pearls holiday practice and its passage for environmental-friendly travelling, our analysis revealed that a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays has been developed. There are ongoing developments in creating a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays: environmental-friendly travelling options have become available, as well as other services for Alpine Pearls holidays (e.g. hotels, environmental-friendly activities), information on environmental-friendly travelling services is present during the whole holiday, and this represents a single storyline. Environmental-friendliness is connected with the comfort, quality and ease of travelling without a car in the beautiful landscapes of the Alpine region. This storyline contributes to the unique character of the Alpine Pearls holiday.

However, the passage is still 'under construction': sometimes travellers are faced with a lack of information on public transport options or with a lack of public transport options to reach the Pearl villages.

In this respect, our analysis revealed that the creation of a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays is complicated because of the fact that the Alpine Pearls holiday is characterised by a different system of provision compared to the current transport and tourism industries. National border problems hamper the organisation of a passage on the level of the Alpine Pearls holiday practice. Overcoming the problems of cross-border travelling (i.e. country-based information, country-based infrastructures, and country-based ticket systems) would benefit the creation of passages for environmental-friendly travelling and might therefore contribute to a sustainable development of Alpine holidays.

Furthermore, the development of a passage for the Alpine Pearls holiday practice is hampered by the sectorially organised tourism industry. This contextually organised system of provision of Alpine Pearls holidays does not

interrelate with the sectorially and nationally organised system of provision of the tourism industry. One way to take a contextualised approach is to consider mobility as embedded in the holiday instead of as an isolated activity. In this line of thinking, we recommend to develop tourism products on the level of holiday practices, thereby reforming the sectorially-organised tourism industry to an industry organised around specific holiday practices. As mentioned above, this implies that a passage is created for the whole holiday, including different time-settings, different spatial-settings, and different behaviours.

Another conclusion with regard to the creation of passages of the Alpine Pearls holiday practice is that the AP association lacks the authority to organise a complete passage. Besides the important role of the AP association, the results of our analysis emphasize that the cooperation of established players is necessary. For instance, railway- and bus companies could decide to develop a more encompassing Alpine Pearls ticket. Or more tour operators could offer Alpine Pearls holiday packages. Tour operators buy services from transport companies at a large-scale which gives them power of expression when dealing with, for instance, the national railway companies. Furthermore, tour operators have expertise in creating new markets, in reaching tourists and in marketing new tourism products. This suggests that tour operators might be better in organising a passage for the Alpine Pearls holiday than a non-profit association of villages and local tourism boards. Indeed, both the history and current organisation of the tourism industry show that passages are successfully created by tour operators. Thomas Cook, for example, was faced with country-based, sectorially organised industries as well, but still, he was successful in accomplishing a cross-border passage for railway holidays. As a tour operator, or by cooperating with several tour operators, the AP association might be more powerful in organising a passage for Alpine Pearls holidays and hereby contribute to a sustainable development of Alpine holidays.

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NOTES

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² Les Gets, Morzine-Avoriaz, Villard-de-Lans, Chamois, Collepietra, Tires, Nova Levante, Nova Ponente, Pieve di Cadore, Forni di Sopra, Feltre, Sauris, Funes, Racines, Arosa, Interlaken, Werfenweng, Hinterstoder, Neukirchen, Berchtesgaden, Bad Reichenhall, Bled

³ SuperAlp was the closing activity of the EU Interreg Project Alpine Awareness. A group of journalists was invited to travel through the Alps using environmental-friendly transport means.

⁴ Austrian Ministry of Economic Affairs-Tourism department, Austrian Ministry of Innovation and Transport, CEO of the AP association, Mayor of Werfenweng, Mayor of Berchtesgaden, Mayor of Hinterstoder, Tourism director of Berchtesgadener Land (i.e. two Pearl villages), Tourism director of Rosengarten-Latemar (i.e. four Pearl villages), Tourism director of Hinterstoder region, Manager of Movelo, Manager of mobility centre in Hinterstoder, Manager of mobility centre in Pongau region, Trafico Consultancy.