**Alpine summer tourism: the mountaineers’ perspective and consequences for tourism strategies in Austria**

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**Abstract**

Mountaineers are a core group in alpine summer tourism, their demands and expectations are an essential foundation for tourism development strategies in mountainous regions. This paper is based on a survey in the Austrian Alps conducted in the year 2005 (N = 1189). The image of mountain sports in the media is often influenced by the extensive coverage on activities such as extreme climbing, paragliding or canyoning. However, this does not reflect the actual use patterns, as hiking is still by far the most important activity. Mountaineers are a very conservative group, usually well educated and of higher income. They perform this activity frequently and are generally satisfied with the current situation, thus sceptical towards any changes and management measures. Mountaineers accept lower comfort levels, e.g. on huts, as compared to their every day's life as part of a back-to-the-roots experience. If tourism development strategies want to attract new user groups, they need to comply with the demands of this core group.

Keywords: alpinism, summer tourism, mountaineering, hiking, climbing, user survey, use trends

1 **Introduction**

The mountain ranges of the Alps offer a wide variety of opportunities for landscape based recreation and tourism. Traditional alpinist activities are hiking and climbing in summer and downhill as well as cross-country skiing in winter. These long established mainstream sports have been complemented in the past decades by numerous other activities such as mountain biking, canyoning, paragliding, snowshoeing, waterfall climbing, often subsumed as mountain-based adventure activities (POMFRET 2006). There is extensive media coverage of these trend sports, thus also shaping the public image of alpine sports as a whole: For lifestyle and leisure magazines it is much more attractive to report on extreme sports rather than on “old-fashioned” activities such as hiking. As most of the trend sports are highly commercialised, the media coverage is also often financed by tour operators or outfitters as part of their marketing campaigns (BEEDIE and HUDSON 2003). However, is this image consistent with reality?

This article specifically addresses issues of mountain tourism in the summer season. Since the mid 1980s there has been a significant change in many alpine regions regarding to the seasonal distribution of tourism, with winter tourism booming and summer tourism stagnating or in decline (LÜTHI and SIEGRIST 1996; PECHLANER and TSCHURTSCHENTHALER 2003). Since the early 2000s, summer tourism in the Alps seems to be slightly growing. Factors supporting this development are the insecure global situation, which leads many European
tourists to plan their holidays without the need of air travel (BAT Freizeit-Forschungs-
institut 2004), but also the media in cooperation with the sports goods industry promoting
outdoor activities as an adventure for everybody. Nevertheless, tourism boards in various
regions are concerned about the further development, as a two-seasonal utilisation of the
touristic infrastructure (hotels, restaurants etc.) is essential for the economic sustainability of
regions depending on tourism income. The mountain landscape itself will still play a major
role in all touristic strategies, but many mountain regions are currently aiming at developing
towards integrated wellness, sports- and entertainment destinations (BAT Freizeit-Forschungs-
institut 1999), where dependence on weather conditions can to a certain extent be
compensated by facilities for indoor activities.

So far, attention by researchers regarding tourism in the Alps has concentrated on visitors
to protected areas (BAUMGARTNER 1993; BLAZEJCZYK 2002; KÜPFER 2000; LOZZA 1996;
MUHAR and LEDITZNIG 2004), on alpine winter tourists (WEIERMAIR and FUCHS 1999) and
on residents of tourist resorts (KNIGHT 1996). Only few studies investigated summer tourists
in European mountain areas (FREDMAN and EMMELIN 2001; TESITEL et al. 2003). Although
there are regular analyses from tourism records in Austria, comprehensive information
about the demands and needs of mountain hikers and mountain climbers are missing,
despite of the fact that Austria has a long tradition in summer alpine tourism.

The project “Trends and Needs of Action in Summer Mountain Tourism” was commis-
sioned by the Tourism Section of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Economy and Labour
within the framework of the “Plattform Sanfter Bergtourismus” (Platform Soft Mountain
Tourism), a cooperation of major players of the Austrian tourism industry, such as alpine
associations and the national tourist office. The main goal was to identify the current activities
and behaviour patterns of the core group of mountain tourists, which is characterised by the
activities of hiking and climbing, further to detect significant needs for action and to provide
base information for the development of tourist strategies.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Target group

The target group of the study was the current population of mountaineers and mountain
hikers in the Austrian Alps. There are of course numerous other activities performed in
mountain landscapes (pleasure driving, sightseeing by cable car, promenading in the cultural
landscape of mountain resorts, cultural visits to alpine villages etc.), but mountaineers and
mountain hikers can be seen as an important core group of mountain summer tourism,
therefore any touristic strategy has to consider the needs and expectations of this group.
Many different terms are used to describe activities in this context, such as “hill walking”,
“mountain hiking”, “mountaineering” and “mountain climbing”. There are no universally
valid definitions for these terms, nor is it possible to separate them from each other without
overlaps. In the context of our study we use the term “mountain hiking” (in German:
“Bergwandern”) for walking in mountainous terrain on tracks or off track, usually without
the need of using the hands or any specific equipment to proceed. Opposed to that,
“mountaineering” (German: “Bergsteigen”) often involves the use of the hands as well as
technical equipment such as ropes, ice axes or crampons (MUNTER 1988; LORCH 1995;
BRÄMER 2001). Therefore, mountaineering requires more specific knowledge, skills and
training than mountain hiking. Both activities have in common a high dependency from the
environment and actual conditions such as weather and natural hazards.
2.2 Study design

The study was conducted via on-site interviews using a structured questionnaire. In order to separate the target group from other mountain visitors, e.g. tourists accessing summits by cable cars, interviews were conducted in mountain huts which to access involves at least two hours of walking from the closest starting point such as roads or lift stations. In total, 1189 interviews were accomplished on 44 huts in different ranges of the Austrian Alps between 700 and 3300 m above sea level, covering both the more easily accessible lower mountain ranges of Eastern Austria and the higher and in parts also heavily glaciated ranges of Western Austria, which are usually visited by more experienced and well equipped mountaineers. The interviews were conducted in afternoons, which is the time when mountaineers return from the tours to the huts and when they are usually open to discussions. The eight-page questionnaire was handed out to be filled out by the persons individually. If necessary, the interviewers were available to clarify questions. Informal discussions between the mountaineers after finishing the questionnaire were recorded in the interviewers’ diaries as an additional qualitative source of information. The rejection rate was relatively low, less than 20 % for overnight visitors and less than 30 % for day visitors, who needed to descend down to the valleys on the same day and therefore had less time for an interview.

2.3 Reference data

The results from the survey were compared and evaluated with data from other sources, such as demographic data and other touristic survey studies, in particular the Tourism Monitor Austria 2004 (GRABLER and FISCHER 2004), the most important general tourism survey in Austria with a data base of about 15,000 interviews. Comparisons were also made to studies from other alpine countries, e.g. Switzerland (SAC 2004a) and Germany (BRÄMER 2006; BAT Freizeitforschungsinstitut 2004).

3 Results

3.1 Demography of mountaineers

Country of origin: The largest group of mountain tourists in our study are visitors from Germany (43 %), followed by domestic tourists (35 %) and tourists from the Netherlands (12 %), thus reflecting the general visitor structure of Austrian tourism outside the major cities (GRABLER and FISCHER 2004).

Age: Comparing the data from the survey with the general age distribution of the population in the countries of origin, it can be observed that the age group under 24 years is significantly underrepresented. The age distribution has a broad maximum between 30 and 60 years. Mountaineering and mountain hiking can not really be seen as a typical activity of the younger generations, which it had been traditionally (BEEDIE and HUDSON 2003). In particular, mountain hiking is not really an activity for the generation between 15 and 19 years (ZELLMANN 2001). Whilst rock climbing is a popular sport throughout the alpine countries, attracting large crowds to competitions and show events often staged indoors, it does not seem to promote nature based mountaineering for the younger generations. Figure 1 shows the age distribution of the groups from which the interviewees were selected, thus it also includes children which were not interviewed.
Gender: Mountaineering and mountain hiking has for a long time been a male domain (Frohlick 2005). In our survey we had 60% male and 40% female interviewees, indicating a still unbalanced gender distribution. This refers in particular to the age group over 60 years, with 78% males in the total hut population on the interview day, while in the younger age groups a relatively higher proportion of females could be observed.

![Age and gender distribution of the groups of hikers](image)

Fig. 1. Age and gender distribution of the groups of hikers, from which the interviewees were selected.

Education: The survey sample had a surprisingly high percentage (41%) of persons with completed tertiary education, compared to the general mean of about 15% in both Germany and Austria. This result proves findings from other studies which also report a very high proportion of highly educated persons engaging in hiking and mountaineering (Brämer 2006; Grabler and Fischer 2004).

Income: Questions about the interviewees’ income were not included in the survey, however, as education is often correlated to income, it can be assumed that many mountaineers are also in income levels above the average. This is in line with the fact that participation in outdoor activities is often positively correlated with household income, independent from the actual costs of performing an activity (Cordell et al. 1997).

Group size: Mountaineering and mountain hiking is a typical activity of small groups. 93.5% of all test persons were hiking in a group on the interview day, the median group size was 3.

Membership in alpine clubs: 62% of the persons interviewed are members of alpine clubs, however, only a small group of mountaineers are actually active members engaging in the club life (group tours, social events etc.). Most mountaineers join alpine clubs only to receive discounts on huts and to benefit from the mountain rescue insurance which is usually included in the membership fee. For the alpine clubs this also means that the number of members volunteering e.g. in trail maintenance or political campaigning is very limited, thus causing a need for hiring professional staff or contracting services.

### 3.2 Motivations for mountain hiking

The main motivations for hiking are “recreation (motion, fresh air)” and “landscape experience” which has a high importance for most of the interviewees (93%). Other studies report comparable results for this question. In Brämer (2006) the main motivation “landscape and nature experience” is important for 91% of the interviewed persons.
Also of big importance are motives like “nature observation” (78%), “to become acquainted with a new region/tour” (78%), “sporting challenge/adventure” (72%), “training” (72%) as well as “to be among family/friends” (63%).

3.3 Character, frequency and organisation of tours

Days spent in the mountains: Most mountain hikers and mountaineers have a high commitment to alpinism, as they perform their activities frequently, spending in average 17 days per year in the mountains, which covers a considerable part of the individual leisure time budget. This also means that there are only a few “occasional hikers”, and for the outsiders mountaineering might appear as a closed community.

Length of tours: About 70% of the persons in the sample have been interviewed during overnight tours; the average duration of the tours was between three and four days. There are of course large regional differences in the sample, as many peaks in the Eastern part of the Austrian Alps can easily be reached in day tours, which is not the case for the higher peaks in the mountain ranges of the West. However, there are only minor differences concerning activities and demands between day visitors and overnight visitors.

Activities: Mountain hiking without climbing is the dominant type of activity, although 40% of the interviewees also occasionally perform rock climbing or glacier tours. A specific activity of the Eastern Alpine mountain ranges is Via Ferrata climbing, i.e. rock climbing in routes provided with wire ropes, iron handrails, ladders etc. enabling less skilled climbers to experience the atmosphere of exposed climbing terrain. There is a large range of Via Ferrata tours in Austria, Slovenia and Italy, and about 70% of the persons interviewed climb such routes at least occasionally, indicating that Via Ferrata climbing is performed more often than classic rock climbing.

Alpine activities other than mountaineering: Other alpine sports that are relevant for mountain hikers are mountain biking (24%) and ski-touring (26%). Only a very small part (less than 10%) of the persons interviewed have experiences with activities such as canyoning, white water kayaking or paragliding. This is of course in contrast to the image communicated in media and in particular in touristic marketing campaigns.

Reasons for this small number are the high cost for equipment (e.g. for paragliding or hang-gliding) and the higher-than-average risk of injuries (BÄSSLER 1997). Many of these trend and action sports also require a very good constitution. Considering that the mean age of the interviewees is 41 years it stands to reason that the group of mountain hikers is not a young dynamic group searching for a challenge in action sports. In general, “trend sports” are rarely reaching a mass-market of sportspersons (ZELLMANN and HASLINGER 2004).

Organisation mode: Most mountaineers and mountain hikers prefer to organise their tours individually (85%). Larger groups are usually only found on huts where training courses are held by alpine clubs or by professional mountaineering schools. There is little demand for all-inclusive tour packages. Hiring professional mountain guides is much less common in Austria compared to the situation e.g. in the Swiss Alps.

Travel mode: Mountain sports in Austria rely to a great extent on access by car. Less than 15% of the persons interviewed travelled to the starting point of their tour by public transport. Only 13% of the interviewees travelled by public transport to their actual tour, while in Switzerland 45% of the mountain hikers use public transport facilities to come to their tour starting point (SAC 2004b).
Therefore car traffic and the related effects can be seen as the major environmental impact of mountain sports, thus also challenging the image of mountaineering as nature sports.

Fig. 2. Alpine activities other than mountaineering.

3.4 Equipment

Interviewees were asked about safety and emergency equipment. Some results were surprising, in particular the relatively low use of GPS technology for navigation as opposed to traditional navigation instruments such as compass and altimeter (Fig. 4). More than 80% of the persons interviewed indicated that they had never used a GPS device, and there is no difference between younger and older persons.
While most mountaineers carry some first aid kit with them, bivouac sacs, which can be essential in sudden weather changes in high alpine areas, are obviously not seen as part of the standard equipment. With the wide spread use of mobile phones and improved reception conditions in many mountain ranges, mountaineers seem to assume that rescue services can easily be alarmed in emergency situations.

3.5 Service levels of alpine huts

The most important expectation of service on alpine huts is the affability of the hut personnel (important for 87% of the interviewees) followed by the cleanliness of the premises (77%). Other important factors are the condition of the rooms (59%) as well as comfort and atmosphere (69%).

Opposed to these aspects, possibilities of using a shower were rated less important, interestingly with no significant difference between overnight visitors and days visitors. Staying in alpine huts is obviously seen as back-to-the-roots activity, where the expected comfort levels are much lower compared to the usual environment of the above described wealthy user group.

3.6 Satisfaction levels and conflict potentials

A number of questions referred to specific demands concerning facilities and services e.g. on huts, and to conflicts with other touristic user groups such as mountain bikers or other land uses such as farming or forestry. It could be observed that the general satisfaction level is very high, and only few conflicts with other uses were reported. In particular, the conflict level concerning nature protection is very low, as conservation regulations usually do not impose restrictions on alpinist activities. This is in contrast to the situation e.g. in rock climbing areas in Germany, where there is a long history of conflicts between conservation and climbing.

3.7 Disturbances

When asked about disturbances and annoyances that compromise the tour experience, only a few aspects were specifically mentioned by the interviewees, such as garbage on trails, ringing mobile phones, crowding and noise from other groups. Compared to other studies
such as Brämer (2003), fewer aspects were mentioned. This might be due to the study design, as the interviews took place in remote locations where disturbances e.g. from car traffic were absent.

3.8 Need for action in the alpine region

Corresponding with the general satisfaction level mentioned above (e.g. demands for tourist infrastructure; disturbances), the core group of mountain visitors does not recognise a significant demand for action concerning changes in infrastructure and services. Short-term improvements regarding online information and booking services were mentioned in particular by younger mountaineers.

With regard to transport infrastructure, the opinions were widely scattered with no clear direction. This makes it hard to estimate the potential for public transport facilities in alpine regions.

In general the interviewees expressed a demand for continuation or improvement of the current maintenance level of the alpine infrastructure (trails, signage etc.), however, there is a strong rejection to finance such activities from use fees. Mountain hikers want public authorities and/or alpine clubs to finance the alpine infrastructure. There seems to be little awareness of the costs attached to such maintenance.

4 Discussion: Consequences for touristic strategies and needs for action

Tourism is an important factor in many alpine regions, and essential for the livelihood in many peripheral regions (Pechlaner and Tschurtschenthaler 2003). As mentioned before, summer tourism in the Alps has been stagnant or in decline for many years, threatening the economies in many regions depending on tourism income. Touristic strategies to stabilise or moderately increase the visitation must of course respect natural conditions, which limit the development options, but they also have to consider the needs and demands of the current visitor population. Based on the results of our study, the following recommendations can be given:

Focus on core activities

In recent years, “adventure activities” such as canyoning, paragliding or white water rafting have been in the centre of touristic marketing concepts. The Alps have been advertised as an adventure ground. Our data show that hiking is still a dominant activity, and it can be assumed that this will not change in the future, in particular in the context of an aging society (Opaschowski 2004). Therefore, marketing strategies should rather focus on the core activities than on activities which obviously are attractive only for a very small group of tourists. For the traditional mountaineers in the Austrian Alps, the emergence of mountain-based adventure tourism can not be stated, even when looking at the activities of the younger generation interviewed.

Activation of potential visitor groups with similar expectations

Mountain huts, where most visitors spend their nights, are a very sensitive social environment, as they accommodate a relatively large number of visitors in a small space. Introducing new, fun- or adventure-oriented user groups to this environment would most probably cause conflicts with the current population.
Female mountaineers as welcome visitors
Touristic strategies in alpine areas rarely target female hikers or mountaineers. The traditional image of mountaineering as a male domain might deter potential visitors, and from the authors’ personal experience it must be said that male chauvinism can still be found on some huts. Our survey showed, that the proportion of female mountaineers is slightly growing in the younger age classes (around 30 years), but male hikers are still dominating. A marketing campaign to attract more female visitors would therefore also need to be complemented by awareness training for persons working for the mountaineering community such as hut wardens.

Coordination of information sources on the internet
Currently there is a plethora of websites for mountaineers offering tour information, discussion forums, GPS tracks etc. Some of the platforms are purely commercial, others managed by regional tourist boards, alpine clubs or just by amateurs. Even for experienced web users it is often difficult to identify the most relevant information sources for a specific region. The creation of a joint portal for relevant information is a future challenge for the major players in alpine tourism.

Reduction of entry barriers
Mountain hiking and in particular high alpine mountaineering require a certain level of fitness, skills and experience as well as special equipment. The current visitor population is very much dedicated to this sport, however, the non-mountaineers seem to perceive a high entry barrier. This needs to be overcome by low-level offers such as guided one-day tours rather than talking candidates into full-week training courses.

Intensification of youth work
Youth work in alpine clubs is obviously successful in the context of sport climbing, which more and more develops into an indoor sport. However, traditional nature-based activities seem to be less attractive for young people. In former times, mountaineering was one of the few affordable touristic activities for young people in alpine countries, today’s more affluent youth also has much more options. It also appears, that people pursuing outdoor activities on a regular basis in their childhood, tend to continue these activities as adults (WARD THOMPSON et al. 2005). The fact that outdoor activities of children generally decreased in the past decades therefore is a big challenge for designing outdoor programs for young people and children.

Development of comprehensive mobility concepts for alpinism
The survey shows a massive dominance of individual car traffic to access the starting points of hiking tours in Austria. However, transport modes vary significantly throughout the alpine countries: In Switzerland there is a dense network of railway and bus lines providing access even to remote valleys. The use of public transport is actively promoted by alpine clubs (MATTI et al. 2004). Opposed to that, in Austria and Italy the accessibility of alpine regions by public transport is minimal. If mountaineering in these countries wants to be recognised as a sustainable form of tourism, integrative mobility concepts need to be developed, considering that traffic is one of the most significant threats to the environment in mountainous regions (Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Jugend und Familie 2000).

There are many good examples for local or regional initiatives to improve public transport throughout the various regions of the Austrian Alps; however, they cannot compensate the lack of a general concept for mobility in mountain sports.
In this case, the alpine clubs are particularly challenged to adopt a key role in this process as demonstrated by the “Schweizer Alpen-Club” (SAC) with the project “Alpen retour” (SAC 2004a).

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5 References

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