

Strategically positioning Europe as a destination for off-highway vehicle recreationists: some initial findings

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Abstract

The popularity of off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation has increased substantially in recent decades in the USA. The purpose of this study is to address the question of whether it might be a viable tourism strategy to position European destinations for such OHV recreationists. This study conducted a national survey of OHV recreationists in the U.S. The key finding is that 68.3 percent of those who have not previously ridden in Europe either strongly agree or somewhat agree that they would like to experience OHV riding in Europe if they had the time and money. Of those who had previously ridden in Europe, 100 percent either strongly agree or somewhat agree that they would like to return to Europe for more riding. Furthermore, this study finds that those with an interest in riding in Europe record an increased importance in the quantity of trail miles / large size of the OHV attraction in comparison to those with little or no interest in riding in Europe. These preliminary findings suggest that future research is warranted to further explore whether it could be worthwhile for European destinations to actively attract this large and growing segment of recreationists.

Keywords: ATV tourism; Off-highway vehicle recreation; OHV tourism; Quad tourism

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Introduction

In the past several decades, off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation has experienced tremendous growth in popularity in the USA (Hughes and Paveglio, 2019; Jakus, Keith, Liu, and Blahna, 2010; Kil, Holland, and Stein, 2012). This sector is characterized by the use of a variety of motorized vehicles [all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), jeeps, motorbikes, quads, sport utility vehicles (SUVs), snowmobiles, trucks] to ride off public roads and often on unpaved surfaces. In the U.S., OHV recreation is characterized as tourism if the participant travels a minimum of 50 miles (one-way) to participate.

The primary purpose of this study, therefore, is to present some initial findings pertaining to whether attracting an increased number of OHV recreationists from the U.S. at destinations within Europe could be a viable strategy to explore. The secondary purpose of this study is to test which OHV destination-related features (if any) are more desired by those with a strong interest in riding in Europe compared to those with less interest. From a practical lens, a number of situational variables deem this research ripe for inquiry. First, OHV recreationists have larger spending profiles than many other recreational segments (Magnini and Wyatt, 2017; 2019). Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased interest in rural holiday settings as opposed to metropolitan destinations (Vaishar and Šťastná, 2020; Wojcieszak-Zbierska, Jęczmyk, Zawadka and Uglis, 2020). Third, the large demographic cohort of baby boomers in the U.S. with both discretionary time and income is aging and is, therefore, increasingly limited in exploring natural areas through other recreational modes [hiking/bicycling/paddling/skiing] (Kil, Holland, and Stein, 2012) leaving OHV riding as a viable option.

Several key studies offer some theoretical anchoring for the OHV recreation literature. Wall (1997) details how two primary types of linear resources can exist at tourism attractions: those with linear characteristics, such as a waterway, and those that channel the flow of visitors such as routes and trails. From a basic point-of-view, OHV riders are attracted to such routes and trails, but the attraction is complex. For example, Mann and Leahy (2009), reported that connections to nature, to others, and to one's self are common motivations for participation in the OHV sector. Lime and Lewis (1996) also report not only the nature related aspects [e.g. natural scenery and wildlife viewing], but also the self-related facets [e.g. escaping demands of life], and the social dimensions [e.g. bonding with friends and family]. In a 2007 study, Baker, Schuster, and Cordell concluded that social bonding, adventure and challenge, and equipment and skill were key motivational factors for participation when OHV club members were surveyed in the U.S. Using these studies as a foundation, this current study seeks to extend these meaningful research contributions by exploring U.S.-based OHV recreationists' interest in and preferences for participating in the pastime in Europe.

Methodology

The Qualtrics® survey platform was employed to design and conduct an online survey of OHV recreationists throughout the United States during summer 2020. A total of 313 responses were collected by placing a nationwide call for those who participate in recreational OHV tourism outings. The data was then subjected to a purification procedure to screen for response quality and completeness. After the purification process, 288 responses remained. The demographic profiles of survey respondents are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profiles of Respondents

State of residence:		Gender:	
California	11.1%	Female	35.8%
Texas	10.8%	Male	62.5%
New York	6.9%	Prefer not to answer	1.7%
Florida	6.3%	Age:	
Virginia	6.3%	Range: 20 - 74 years old	
North Carolina	4.5%	Average: 37	
Nevada	3.8%	Income (US \$ before taxes)	
Arizona	3.5%	Under \$20,000	9.2%
Ohio	3.5%	\$20,000 - \$39,999	19.5%
Kentucky	2.8%	\$40,000 - \$59,999	18.1%
Michigan	2.8%	\$60,000 - \$79,999	20.9%
Pennsylvania	2.8%	\$80,000 - \$99,999	10.6%
Illinois	2.4%	\$100,000 - \$119,999	7.1%
Georgia	2.1%	\$120,000 or more	11.7%
Maryland	2.1%	Prefer not to answer	2.8%
Massachusetts	2.1%		
New Jersey	2.1%		
Tennessee	2.1%		
Utah	2.1%		
All other states	Less than 2% each		

In addition to the demographics questions, the survey contained the following items pertaining to interest in riding in Europe and in OHV destination preferences:

- Have you ever done any OHV riding in Europe? (Yes; No).
- Display if previous experience in Europe = Yes:

If you had the time and money, you would like to return to Europe to experience more OHV riding (strongly disagree = 1; strongly agree = 5).

- Display if previous experience in Europe = Yes:

Can you please tell us more about your OHV experience in Europe? For example: What country (countries)? What type of OHV? Guided or unguided? Type of terrain? Best aspect of the experience?

- Display if previous experience in Europe = No:

If you had the time and money, you would like to experience OHV riding in Europe (strongly disagree = 1; strongly agree = 5).

- Which of the following are important to you for an OHV riding destination?

(very unimportant = 1; very important = 5):

- Trails dedicated only to your user group (e.g. ATV trail for ATVs only)
- Quantity of trail miles
- Obstacle course with unique / creative obstacles
- Mud obstacle course
- Rock-based obstacle course

- Ability of a location to host competitions
- Large size of OHV park
- Availability of hotels / cabins
- Availability of camping
- Availability of nearby restaurants

Results and Discussion

In terms of previous experience, 5.6 percent of OHV recreationists in the U.S. who responded to this survey reported experience riding in Europe. As seen in Table 2, all (100%) of those respondents with experience riding in Europe either somewhat agree or strongly agree that they would like to return to Europe to experience more OHV riding if time and money would allow. As seen in the open-ended comments (bottom portion of Table 2), the within-Europe experiences included both all-terrain vehicle (ATV) and sport utility vehicle (SUV) usage on both guided and unguided excursions.

Table 2. *Desire to experience OHV riding in Europe*

OHV Recreationists <u>with</u> previous riding experience in Europe:	OHV Recreationists <u>without</u> previous riding experience in Europe:	
If you had the time and money, you would like to return to Europe to experience more OHV riding:	If you had the time and money, you would like to experience OHV riding in Europe:	Pearson Chi-square test of differences between groups:
Response:	Response:	
Strongly agree: 68.8%	Strongly agree: 27.3%	Chi-square value = 51.02
Somewhat agree: 31.3%	Somewhat agree: 41.0%	df = 4
Neither agree nor disagree: 0.0%	Neither agree nor disagree: 21.4%	P value = <0.001
Somewhat disagree: 0.0%	Somewhat disagree: 7.4%	
Strongly disagree: 0.0%	Strongly disagree: 3.0%	

Open comments of past OHV recreationists in Europe (Selected Examples):

"We were in Greece on an ATV unguided. It was hills and the best part were the views we could get to on our vehicle."

"I went to the Chateau Lastours in France. I used my SUV. It was guided. Mud terrain. Best aspect was bonding with my wife."

"It was a really fun life changing experience venturing and meeting new people."

"The country was Britain. The OHV was Jeep SUV. The experience was very exciting."

"Two day guided ATV Adventure Tour in Iceland"

"It was fun, it had good obstacle racing."

"UK. It was an ATV and unguided. It was a rocky environment with a lot of fun seekers and spectators."

Also listed in Table 2, of those who had not previously ridden in Europe, 27.3% strongly agree that they would like to do so if they had the time and money; 41.0% somewhat agree. Of those who had never ridden in Europe, only 10.4% recorded a response disagreeing with such an opportunity. A Pearson Chi-square test of differences between groups finds that those with previous riding experience in Europe

are more likely to desire more riding experience in Europe in comparison to those with no previous experience (see Table 2).

Regarding attributes of an OHV destination, interest in Europe was recalculated as a binary (grouping) variable and independent samples *t*-tests were calculated with the 10 destination attributes serving as the test variables. As seen in Table 3, such analyses reveal that recreationists with an interest in riding in Europe place greater importance on quantity of trail miles (importance of quantity of trail miles = 4.15) in comparison to recreationists with little or no interest in riding in Europe (importance of quantity of trail miles = 3.85). The above mean difference is statistically significant ($t = 2.33$, $p = .021$). Similarly, the large size of an OHV destination (importance of large size = 4.15) in comparison to recreationists with little or no interest in riding in Europe (importance of large size = 3.69). This mean difference is statistically significant ($t = 3.457$, $p = .001$).

Table 3. Importance of destination attributes relative to level of interest in riding in Europe

Destination Attribute:	Mean Importance: ^a	Sig (2-tailed):	t-value:
Trails / obstacles dedicated to your user group	High Interest: 3.81 Low Interest: 3.74	0.607	0.479
Quantity of trail miles	High Interest: 4.15 Low Interest: 3.85	0.021*	2.330
Obstacle course with unique/creative obstacles	High Interest: 3.86 Low Interest: 3.63	0.102	1.639
Mud obstacle course	High Interest: 3.51 Low Interest: 3.31	0.190	1.313
Rock -based obstacle course	High Interest: 3.28 Low Interest: 3.09	0.198	1.290
Ability of a location to host competitions	High Interest: 3.18 Low Interest: 2.91	0.129	1.524
Large size of OHV park	High Interest: 4.15 Low Interest: 3.69	0.001*	3.457
Availability of hotels / cabins	High Interest: 3.88 Low Interest: 3.88	0.992	0.010
Availability of camping	High Interest: 3.95 Low Interest: 3.73	0.148	1.451
Availability of nearby restaurants	High Interest: 3.88 Low Interest: 3.90	0.871	-0.162

^a 1= very unimportant; 5 = very important *Statistically significant mean difference

Conclusion

The key finding of this study is that there appears to be considerable interest among OHV recreationists in the U.S. in riding in Europe. Of those who had previously ridden in Europe, all (100 percent) either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that they would like to return to Europe for more riding. Furthermore, this study found that those with an interest in riding in Europe recorded an increased importance in the size of the OHV park / number of trail miles in comparison to those with little or no interest in riding in Europe. One potential explanation of this finding is that a large OHV attraction with a lot of trail miles might be more important when traveling long distances to arrive. This explanation is in concert with findings of previous studies that have examined various effects of travel distance on recreationists' preferences. For example, Kil, Holland, and Stein (2015) found that distant

visitors to passive recreation areas seek more environmental exploration than visitors who travel shorter distances to arrive. Similarly, Nyaupane and Graefe (2008) determined that distance visitors participate in more viewing activities at nature-based attractions than proximate visitors.

Like any study, the results presented in this research are subject to a number of limitations. These initial findings presented here are not intended to serve as a basis for strategic decisions but rather as a catalyst for further research. The current study had a limited sample size and did not include a number of potential moderating or mediating variables that could further enhance our understanding of various European markets as destinations for OHV recreationists. For example, OHV recreationists are not homogeneous (Albritton, Stein, and Thapa, 2009; Holmes and Englin, 2010). Segments, for example, exist within the sector with regard to travel patterns, benefits sought, and environmental views. Therefore, it would be informative to investigate how to market to various OHV segments. For instance, should coopetition networks be formulated in which a variety of OHV venues in a given region simultaneously compete and cooperate to attract inbound OHV recreationists?

Another limitation of the current study is that it does not address environmental sustainability or rider safety. Perhaps the two most frequent concerns / criticisms of OHV recreation are environmental degradation of riding routes (Enriquez-de-Salamanca, 2020) and physical injury or death resulting from rider accidents (Linnaus, Ragar, Garvey, and Fraser, 2017). Both of these issues can be mitigated through proper management and are sometimes less problematic if a site is open/managed as opposed to closed/unmanaged because local residents may ride illegally and less responsibly on closed/unmanaged routes [in the U.S. these are sometimes termed “outlaw” trails] (Brown, 2016).

Further research is also warranted regarding when/how it is appropriate to position OHV recreation as an incidental experience versus a focal experience. Based upon the open-ended comments previously listed in Table 2, it appears that some (or most) of the OHV outings that Americans consume in European markets are incremental add-ons/excursions that are experienced incidentally once already in Europe. Research is warranted that examines what conditions would be needed for inbound overseas tourism to be attracted in which OHV-ing is the focal pull factor to the European destination. Because social media rankings play a significant role in tourists’ decision-making processes for hotels (Alarcón, Palacín and Maspera, 2020), research extensions should examine the potential roles of such rankings for OHV venues. In addition, research should examine whether OHV-ing as the focal pull factor might be more viable in Eastern European countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania) where rural land is often more abundant in comparison to some locations in Western Europe.

Lastly, while data pertaining to respondents’ ethnicity was not captured in the current study, in the U.S., OHV recreationists are primarily of European descent (Caucasian) (Jakus *et al.*, 2010; Smith, Burr and Reiter, 2010). Thus, future research should consider whether Americans of a European descent would be more apt to consume tourism experiences in European markets than other demographic groups of Americans (e.g. African, Asian, Hispanic populations).

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