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Analysis of tourist safety in Eugenio Espejo town, in Imbabura province

Análisis de la seguridad turística en la parroquia Eugenio Espejo, Imbabura

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Abstract

Ecuador is considered one of the most touristic countries in Latin America due to its diversity of natural and cultural attractions. The government invests in adequate security measures to protect visitors and generate confidence and a positive reputation. Tourism security generates a good experience and enjoyment for tourists during their visit. The objective of this study is to analyze tourist safety in order to improve the perception of the services provided in the Eugenio Espejo in Otavalo town. The research is quantitative and qualitative, with a descriptive scope. The following techniques were used for data collection: observation at that place; multi-criteria evaluation with tourism safety indicators; key informant interviews; and surveys to determine tourists' perception of safety. The results contribute to directing the improvement of security and providing greater protection to tourism stakeholders and visitors to that town.


Keywords: tourism security, tourism security indicators, tourism security perception

Resumen

Ecuador es considerado uno de los países más turísticos de Latinoamérica por la diversidad de atractivos naturales y culturales que posee. El gobierno invierte en medidas de seguridad adecuadas para proteger a los visitantes y generar confianza y reputación positiva. La seguridad turística genera una buena experiencia y gozo del turista durante su visita. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo analizar la seguridad turística para mejorar la percepción de los servicios que se brinda en la parroquia Eugenio Espejo del cantón Otavalo. La pesquisa es mixta, con alcance descriptivo. Para la recolección de datos se utilizan las técnicas: observación de campo;

evaluación multicriterio con indicadores de seguridad turística; entrevistas a informantes clave, y encuestas para determinar la percepción de los turistas sobre la seguridad. Los resultados contribuyen a direccionar el mejoramiento de la seguridad y brindar mayor protección a los actores turísticos y visitantes de la parroquia.

Palabras clave: seguridad turística, indicadores de seguridad turística, percepción de seguridad turística

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the movement of individuals or groups outside their environment of residence for entertainment, recreation, culture and health purposes; it has become a social, economic and cultural phenomenon (Velasco et al., 2019). Several countries in the world can see the tourism as a key factor. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) states that 1 out of every 11 jobs in the world is created by tourism, considering this activity as a priority in the global context and as the future of green economies (Pereyra, et al., 2021).

A main element in the development of tourism is safety, which is understood as a subjective condition that allows perceiving free movement in spaces where there are real or potential risks that generate conflicts, struggles for values and rights that affect the sustainability of tourist destinations or products (Vargas, et al., 2021). When someone talks about tourism safety, is about take care the protection, safety and life of visitors (Montalván and Villacreses, 2018).

González and Acevedo (2021) argue that any event that could threaten the normal operation of the industry's business would cause a recession in the local travel with tourism economy and disrupt business continuity, reducing the number of tourists and they are spending. This confirms that a large part of the population does not recommend visiting a destination if it is considered unsafe despite having much to offer (Avila and Lara, 2022).

Guevara (2023) mentions that with security it is possible to measure the real risks that a destination may have in order to find options to help mitigate them. Knowing about security is important because it encompasses a range of ideas and actions aimed at preventing violence, promoting citizen security and improving access to justice (Salas et al., 2022).

Tourism safety can be evaluated through indicators and variables for protecting tourists during their visit to a tourist destination. In Ecuador, the evaluation aspects are found in the Comprehensive Tourism Safety Plan (PIAT, 2016). The plan has six indicators: citizen safety, road safety, economic security, health with hygiene, environmental and natural phenomena protection, human rights and social inclusion. Grünewald (2012) points out eight basic variables that demand takes into consideration during their stay in the place; these are: public safety; social safety; medical safety; information, facilitation safety; recreational events safety; road and transportation safety; environmental safety; and finally, the safety of tourist services.

Diagnosing compliance with tourism safety indicators in a destination allows the development of strategies to improve the tourism experience, as stated by Taris (2020) in his study entitled *Gestión y Seguridad Turística en la Ciudad de Riobamba en Ecuador* (Tourism Management and Safety in the City of Riobamba in Ecuador). Another similar study is that of Guamá (2022) who uses indicators to check out and make a proposal aimed at improving tourism safety in the San Pablo de Lago city.

In the of Eugenio Espejo town , located in the province of Imbabura, Ecuador, in recent years the levels of insecurity have increased at various points affecting tourist visits. Guevara (2023) affirms that tourism visitors do not have information on tourism security indicators that the state moves, so actions to manage this situation are poor.

The objective of this research is to elaborate an analysis of tourism safety in the Eugenio Espejo town. With the results, a proposal is made with security strategies focused on the protection of tourist actors, which will allow to recover and increase the number of tourist visits for improving the living conditions of the local population.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in the Eugenio Espejo town that is located of the urban area of the Otavalo city in Ecuador. The research presents cualitative and quantitative approach with a descriptive and cross-sectional scope. The research is developed in two consecutive stages, namely: 1) Diagnosis of tourism safety indicators) Visitor's perception of safety.

Stage 1.- Diagnosis of tourism safety indicators, carried out through field research. It uses the techniques of direct observation and personal interview. An observation sheet is prepared containing the tourism safety indicators set out in the Comprehensive Tourism Assistance Plan - PIAT (2016) of Ecuador, to which a weighting is assigned to determine the level of safety at the destination, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Tourism safety indicators

Tourism safety indicators	Description	Variables	Score
Public safety	It relates to crime prevention and the protection of tourists against any form of violence or crime.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Community alarm 2. Community Policing Unit 3. Video surveillance camera 4. Frequent patrolling 5. Visitor assistance and protection center 6. Political Leader 	18 points
Health & Hygiene	It involves the availability of medical services, the existence of sanitary standards in tourist establishments, food safety and access to drinking water.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Health Center 2. Drinking water 3. Sewage 4. Pharmacy 5. Doctor's offices 6. Restaurant operating licenses 	18 points
Financial security	Refers to the protection of tourists in financial terms. It implies the existence of measures to prevent fraud, scams and theft, as well as fair prices for tourist goods and services.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Banking services 2. Prices of regulated tourism services 3. Fixed collection point for boat rides. 4. Red zone prevention signage 5. Money exchange offices 	15 points
Road safety	It is about to road conditions, signage, infrastructure, and traffic regulations in a tourist destination.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Walkways in good condition. 2. Vehicular roads in good condition 3. Vertical signage 4. Horizontal signage 5. Lighting in the town center 6. Accessibility to attractions 7. Safe parking areas 8. Mechanics 	24 points

Environmental and natural hazard protection	It involves the conservation of natural resources, protection of ecosystems, and natural disaster preparedness and response.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Environmental care signage 2. Tourist attractions with frequent maintenance of facilities. 3. Areas safe from natural disasters 4. Signage at tourist attractions in the event of natural disasters. 5. Signage in restaurants and hotels in the event of natural disasters 	15 points
Human rights and social inclusion	Visitors should be treated fairly and equitably, without discrimination of any kind, with access to tourist facilities and services.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Protection from violation of rights 2. Accessibility for people with disabilities 3. Shelters 	10 points
Total			100

Note: Prepared by the authors based on PIAT (2016).

To determine the percentage of compliance achieved in each indicator in relation to the standard weighting, the following equation is applied:

$$\% \text{ of fulfillment} = \frac{\text{Result of values of the tourism safety indicator}}{\text{Standard score of the indicator}} * 100$$

Three levels of security are established for each indicator: high, medium and low, as shown in the table.

Table 2

Level of security

Level of security	Percentage of compliance with the indicator
High	65-100
Medium	35-65
Low	< 35

Note: Prepared by the authors based on Reyes y Sánchez Crispín (2015)

The analysis of the results is carried out from highest to lowest percentage corroborating the informant interviews and secondary research.

Stage 2.- Visitor's perception of security in the town, carried out through the application of surveys. The questionnaire is divided in two sections. In the first section, sociodemographic information of visitors is requested and in the second section, eight questions related to the six tourism safety indicators of the PIAT are asked. The questions are focused on what tourists expect during their visit and how they perceive their protection.

The total population was taken as visitors to Condor's Park, the most popular tourist attraction in the town, where 28,251 tourists arrived in 2022. A cluster sampling is applied, with a margin of sampling error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. From the sample application, a sample of 379 surveys was obtained.

Formula to determine the sample

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p \cdot q \cdot N}{NE^2 + Z^2 p \cdot q}$$

Note: Puentes (2023)

Z= Confidence level

N= Population-Census

p= Probability in favor

q= Probability against

e= Estimation error

n=Sample size

Table 3

Variable formula

N	Sample	379	
N	Total, population	28.251	
d2	Population Variability	0,25	
E	Margin of Error	0,05	5%
Z	Confidence level of the data	1,96	95%

The questions are entered into the Google Forms tool and the results are interpreted using descriptive statistics and SPSS version 21. The questions are taken from previous studies related to tourism safety such as Taris (2020) and Guamá (2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stage 1 – Diagnosis of tourism safety indicators

The diagnosis of tourism safety indicators in the Eugenio Espejo town generated the following results:

Table 4

Diagnostic results of tourism safety indicators

Tourism safety indicator	Score achieved	Percentage	Security level
Public safety	11	61,11%	Medium
Health and Higiene	9	50%	Medium
Human rights and social inclusion	5	50%	Medium
Financial security	6	40%	Medium
Environmental and natural hazard protection	5	33,33%	Low
Road safety	7	29,16%	Low

Note: Elaboration by the authors (2023)

That town does not have a Community Police Unit (UPC) in charge of crime prevention programs, as well as a center for the integration of neighborhoods and communities around security. The absence of police has facilitated the organization of criminal groups. Pedro Males, political leader of the town (Personal interview, January 20, 2023) mentions that insecurity is not caused by foreigners, but rather by residents who commit crimes.

Korstanje (2016) says that the local police are in charge of defining security programs or procedures and ensuring their effectiveness. In the case of this place under study, in the absence of a UPC, the residents choose for the community police or indigenous guide. Claudia Castañeda, secretary of the town GAD (Personal interview, January 20, 2023) affirms that the community members are constantly working to recover places affected by crime and have created vigilance brigades to prevent criminal acts.

There is no health center in the study area that carries out health promotion and prevention. Moreno (2020) suggests that tourist participants should take steps to implement a health center in order to be prepared for health emergencies. With respect to the sale of medicine, there is only a small pharmacy located in the town center. On the other hand, Claudia Castañeda (Personal interview, January 20, 2023) notes that the government is working to provide basic services to all residents to prevent illnesses in the community also with visitors.

In the territory, the people in charge of ensuring human rights and social inclusion in coordination with the National Police is the Political leader Office, a government agency where citizen complaints and denunciations are received. Pedro Males, political leader of the town (Interview, January 20, 2023) mentions that as a representative of the government in the territory, his function is to protect residents and visitors.

In relation to economic security, it should be noted that there are no offices of financial institutions; if the visitor requires banking procedures and withdrawal of money they should go to the nearest cities such as Otavalo or Cayambe. In some neighborhood stores there are Mi vecino, a service offered by Banco del Pichincha for withdrawing and depositing money. Even though, it is difficult to stock up on cash, because the money transfers in the neighborhood stores are extremely low. On the other hand, tourism service providers do not accept credit cards. These factors encourage tourists to carry cash when visiting the destination, increasing their vulnerability to assaults, robberies and swindles. Alberto Velásquez, president of the three associations of vendors at the Pucará dock (Personal interview, January 20, 2023) says that in some cases it is evident that there are different charges for national and foreign tourists despite several attempts to regulate prices.

The population is organized to clean natural areas with the cooperation of the Empresa Municipal de Agua Potable de Otavalo (EMAPAO) on an occasional times, so it is common to see deteriorated environments. At the San Pablo lagoon dock, the community association only cleans its work area. This means that there is poor control of solid waste management and sewage disposal around the lagoon, which could have a negative impact on the water body (Antesano et al., 2023).

There are no natural disaster prevention signs in the establishments that provide tourism services, perhaps because they are not legally registered with the competent agency. The only establishment with signage is Parque Cóndor. Boehmwald (2018) argues that environmental risks are potential factors that can cause catastrophes that cannot be controlled, so timely prevention against this type of event can help.

Road safety is the lowest scoring indicator because of several irregularities: The main streets of the town are in fair condition and need immediate intervention; the roads that connect the town center with the tourist attractions are also deteriorated; the public lighting system does not work regularly; and the road signs needs maintenance. Soto, et al. (2021) assert that local governments have scarce resources for road maintenance; as a result, there is a regular road system with monotonous and insufficient maintenance. This fact has negative effects on tourism, since roads are an indicator for the selection of a tourist destination.

Stage 2 – Visitor's perception of safety at the town

Table 5 presents the results obtained from the application of the survey to tourists visiting the town under study.

Table 5

Sociodemographic characteristics

Variable	Category	Porcentaje
Gender	Female	54,88%
	Male	45,12%
Age	18-30 years old	21,37%
	31-45 years old	33,51%
	46-60 years old	30,61%
	Over 61 years old	14,51%
Level of education	Primary	11,08%
	Bachelor's Degree	28,23%
	Superior	41,69%
	postgraduate degree	19,00%
Place of origin	Foreign	16,09%
	National	83,91%
If you are a national, choose your region of origin	Pacific coast	8,49%
	Andes	86,48%
	Amazonía	5,03%
	Galápagos	0%
If you are a foreigner, choose the continent you are from	north america	52,46%
	South america	36,07%
	Asia	3,28%
	Europe	8,20%
	Africa	0%
	Oceania	0%

Note: Elaboration by the authors (2023)

Tourists visiting the Eugenio Espejo town are mostly women (54.88%); the male gender occupies 45.12%, so the gap is not very wide. The predominant age range is between 31-45 years old (33.51%). The highest percentage of academic education is higher education (41.69%). 83.91% of visitors are nationals from the Andean region, with the province of Pichincha being the most popular. The influx of foreigners is low, with tourists from the United States and South America. Ruth Herrera (Personal interview, June 17, 2023) affirms that the presence of these visitors favors the destination's tourism development.

Table 6

Tourist perception of tourism security

Questions	Options	Percentage
1. Did you feel safe when visiting the different attractions in the town?	Not likely	6,33%
	Unlikely	12,14%
	Likely	38,52%
	Very likely	43,01%
2. Do you think it is necessary to stay by a national police officer during your visit?	Not likely at all	39,84%
	Unlikely	31,40%
	Likely	21,37%
	Very likely	7,39%
3. When you visited a food sales place, did you perceive the safety of the products? Safety is understood as the guarantee that a food will not cause harm to the consumer.	Not likely	9,50%
	Unlikely	11,08%
	Likely	57,78%
	Very likely	21,64%
4. In your opinion, was the quality-price ratio of the services and tourist attractions of the town adequate?	Not likely at all	7,65%
	Unlikely	20,58%
	Likely	31,66%
	Very likely	40,11%
5. Do you consider that the condition of the roads and traffic signs are adequate to reach the tourist attractions?	Not likely at all	82,32%
	Unlikely	8,97%
	Likely	5,28%
	Very likely	3,43%
6. In the sites you have visited, have you observed signs for the prevention of natural risks such as earthquakes, landslides, among others?	Not likely at all	58,31%
	Unlikely	26,12%
	Likely	9,23%
	Very likely	6,33%
7. Do you think it is important to maintain the natural spaces of the parish instead of constructing luxurious buildings that alter their condition?	Not likely	0,79%
	Unlikely	2,11%
	Likely	10,82%
	Very likely	86,28%
8. Do you consider that tourist attractions promote the inclusion of all people without any type of discrimination?	Not likely at all	7,12%
	Unlikely	9,50%
	Likely	27,70%
	Very likely	55,67%

Note: Elaboration by the authors (2023)

81.53% of tourists visiting that place feel safe, so they do not consider it necessary to be with a police officer during their stay. These data are favorable since the perception of safety in the destination is an indicator for trip selection. However, the remaining 7.39% feel insecure due to criminal acts that are increasing daily at the country level.

Visitors state that the food vending places are clean and adequate (79.42%). This is in spite of the fact that most of them do not have an operating license issued by the control agencies. This condition is frequent in this type of establishments since they are family businesses and do not have the economic resources to register. On the other hand, although the percentage of tourists (9.50%) who state that there is no food safety is low, it is necessary to motivate the owners to operate in a formal manner to ensure food safety for tourists.

In terms of value for money, it is observed that most of the group (71.77%) is satisfied with the cancellation of the rates charged by the tourist service providers. Despite the scarcity of over-the-counter ticket sales to use a tourist service, tourists have no objection to canceling directly, although there are those who express dissatisfaction, perhaps because they feel that there are different charges for domestic and foreign tourists.

The town access roads and signage are in fair condition. 91.29% of the visitors state that the condition of the roads causes damage to vehicles and increases the risk of traffic accidents. It also lengthens the travel time to the attractions and causes inconveniences.

84.43% of visitors believe that in the event of natural hazards, they would not have the necessary guidance on the procedure to follow to protect their lives because there are few prevention signs for this type of event.

In the places visited, 83.37% of the visitors affirm that they did not observe any type of discrimination on the part of the tourism service providers; rather, they felt included and appreciated and had a good experience during their tour of the town. This positive data reflects that the locals have an inclusive ideology, demonstrating their values towards visitors. The result is favorable for the development of tourism activity in the destination, since the good acceptance by the visitor can be a condition for recommending others to visit the destination.

DISCUSSION

Tourism safety is an essential multidimensional dimension for the management of tourism sites and is even a reason for the decision to choose a destination (Navarro et al., 2022). Safety is a transversal axis throughout the tourist experience (Gálvez, et al., 2020). Most visitors look for places where they can feel safe and where the risks they will face during their stay have been minimized, increasing the possibility of having a good memory of the site visited (Navarro et al., 2022).

Jiménez and Pérez (2018) state that the main types of risks that tourists run in a destination are: possibility of suffering an accident; being a victim of a crime; suffering a terrorist attack; disapproval by the destination's family; suffering a scam; getting sick; having a disappointing experience with the trip; and finally, that of natural disasters. Therefore, the search for tourism as risk-free as possible is a growing need for tourists and service providers who wish to carry out their activities in a safe environment (Gálvez. E., et al, 2020).

Mora, et al. (2020) argue that a security plan should be implemented to support tourism activity and allow its continuous growth. There should be a protocol with guidelines and preventive measures for any eventuality that may arise and thus generate a safe image of the destination for tourists. Emphasizing that security actions should be carried out in a controlled manner so that tourists' freedoms are not violated (Peter, 2016).

On the other hand, the method used to diagnose the indicators of tourism safety includes the number of criteria analyzed (citizen safety, health and hygiene, human rights and social inclusion, economic security, environmental protection and protection against natural phenomena, and road safety). The evaluation showed that the indicators of citizen safety and health and hygiene exceed 50% of the

standard weighting, while road safety is the lowest scored due to the deterioration of the parish's road system. Grünewald (2012) affirms that it is convenient to evaluate the tourist safety of a territory through the analysis of indicators that allow evidence of the conditions of the territory and the possible risks for the tourist. Both methodologies are valid since they evaluate indicators and criteria to which standard weights are assigned.

CONCLUSION

The diagnosis based on the six indicators of tourism safety in that town of Eugenio Espejo showed a large deficit in two of them: road safety and environmental protection and natural disasters. Although the other indicators did not show such negative results, they can affect tourist visits. The absence of a tourism safety plan has meant that there is no guidance for tourism service providers on the requirements needed to protect visitors during their stay.

Most tourists visiting Eugenio Espejo place, consider the conditions of the tourism safety indicators to be acceptable, with the exception of road safety, where rejection was evident due to the poor condition of the roads both in the town center and on the roads leading to the tourist attractions. There are opportunities for improvement in all indicators as long as it is done in an organized manner and with the participation of all tourism stakeholders.

The government in that town should develop a tourism security plan based on this analysis. It is important that tourism stakeholders know and participate in the development, implementation and monitoring of security actions in order to forge an increasingly safe destination. Likewise, the security actions and guidelines should be disseminated to the entire population of the town.

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