

**Package mountaineer tourists holidaying in the French Alps: An evaluation of key influences encouraging their participation**

POMFRET, Gill <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1161-7703>>

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# **PACKAGE MOUNTAINEER TOURISTS HOLIDAYING IN THE FRENCH ALPS: AN EVALUATION OF KEY INFLUENCES ENCOURAGING THEIR PARTICIPATION**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the key influences that encourage mountaineer tourists, classified as a type of adventure tourist, to participate in package mountaineering holidays. There is limited understanding of why tourists take package adventure holidays, yet the demand for such holidays has grown dramatically in recent years. The author conducted in depth interviews with mountaineer tourists either during or at the end of their package mountaineering holiday in the Chamonix region of the French Alps. Interview findings provide an insight into package mountaineer tourists. Firstly, mountaineering was an important part of respondents' lifestyles. Secondly, contrary to previous research on experienced mountaineers, respondents did not consider risk as an important motive and they did not view themselves as risk takers. Thirdly, skills development and experience were key motives encouraging package mountaineering holiday participation. Fourthly, a major concern for respondents was to have a safe mountaineering experience in which the mountaineering organisation and the guide played a key role.

## **KEY WORDS**

mountaineering, package, adventure, lifestyle, risk, skills development, experience, mountaineering organisation, mountaineering guide

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Considerable research has been carried out on why people take part in mountaineering (e.g. Breivik, 1996; Cronin, 1991; Delle Fave, Bassi, and Massimini, 2003; Ewert, 1985; Rossi and Cereatti, 1993), and key influences on their participation are fairly well understood. This previous research, in which mountaineering is viewed as a form of adventure recreation, has usually focused on the motives and personality characteristics of experienced mountaineers. Less is known about mountaineering participation in an adventure tourism setting where groups of tourists take part in courses arranged through mountaineering organisations. It is suggested that these courses can be classified as package mountaineering holidays due to the use of guiding services and the tightly structured nature of such experiences. This current study focuses on those tourists who take package mountaineering holidays. Such holidays allude to 'organisation, structured, insulated experience and relaxation' (Kane and Zink, 2004, p.329) where tourists give up some of their independence to enjoy a problem-free guided trip (Schmidt, 1979).

The study aims to add new knowledge to previous work on mountaineers and it attempts to develop a fuller understanding of package mountaineer tourists. As mountaineering can be classified as a form of adventure tourism (Swarbrooke, Beard, Leckie and Pomfret, 2003), the research also intends to more broadly provide an insight into package adventure holiday participation as, although the adventure tourism industry is growing apace, there is a surprising dearth of research on package adventure tourists (see, for example, Beedie and Hudson, 2003; Kane and Zink, 2004). This paper has wider implications for the adventure tourism industry as it provides an insight into the main influences encouraging participation in a package

form of adventure tourism. Like many other special interest forms of tourism, adventure tourism has become increasingly commercialised (Buckley, 2007) and developed in such a way as to appeal to a wide range of mainstream tourists. In particular, adventure holidays which are often at the soft end of the hard-soft adventure continuum are developing at a considerable rate. This continuum involves different levels of 'challenge, uncertainty, setting familiarity, personal abilities, intensity, duration and perceptions of control' (Lipscombe, 1995, p.42). The soft end usually attracts beginner and less experienced adventurers who are perhaps more 'packageable' than their more experienced counterparts. Soft mountaineering activities use guides, and participants experience minimal levels of real risk (Hill, 1995). By contrast, hard mountaineering activities, whereby participants are experienced, committed and sometimes expose themselves to high levels of risk (Hill, 1995), include outdoor rock climbing, challenging treks and expeditions (Millington, Locke and Locke, 2001).

The study focuses on tourists who took part in package mountaineering holidays in the alpine region of Chamonix in France during the summer of 2007. Over a three week period, the author carried out thirty eight in depth, semi-structured interviews with tourists either during or at the end of their mountaineering holiday. The main element of each holiday was a taught mountaineering course in which tourists could develop new mountaineering-based skills and, in some cases, summit mountain peaks in the region. The holidays were organised by mountaineering companies who employ the services of locally based guides to instruct and train their clients to become more proficient in mountaineering. The researcher developed the interview questions using themes that emerged from past research on mountaineers and adventure recreationists. Firstly, the importance of mountaineering to

respondents' lifestyles is considered. The lifestyles that people lead influence their propensity to take part in mountaineering (Pomfret, 2006) and previous experience of mountaineering encourages future involvement in the activity and influences how participants are motivated (Ewert, 1985). Secondly, the role of risk in package mountaineering holiday participation is explored. Mountaineering is an adventure activity and its participation can involve uncertain outcomes, danger and risk, challenge, stimulation and excitement (Swarbrooke et al, 2003). Risk is thought to be an important motive driving mountaineering- and adventure activity participation (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989; Meier, 1978; Miles, 1978) and mountaineers are known to demonstrate risk taking tendencies (Breivik, 1996; Cronin, 1991; Rossi and Cereatti, 1993). Thirdly, the extent to which other motives, such as skills development and experience, encourage participation is investigated. Aside from risk, other multifarious motives and motivational dimensions encourage mountaineering participation. These include challenge, goal completion, creativity, developing one's ability, mastery and gaining control over one's environment (Ewert, 1985; Loewenstein, 1999). Fourthly, the role of the organisation and the guide in making safe the mountaineering experience is considered. It is the responsibility of adventure tourism organisations to provide 'a safe peak experience' (Morgan, Moore and Mansell, 1997, p.149) for their clients as poor risk management can damage its reputation and result in financial loss, disciplinary action on staff, reduced client confidence and subsequently loss of clients (Swarbrooke et al, 2003). The guide has an important role to play in risk minimisation and offers 'technical know how in equipment and rope choice and use; knowledge related to map reading, route finding, general safety and survival, self-reliance and sufficiency' (Beedie, 2003, p.154).

## **2 CONTEXT**

### **2.1 What is mountaineering?**

Aside from being a type of adventure tourism, mountaineering is a form of nature-based tourism (Whitlock, Van Romer and Becker, 1991) which involves trekking up mountains, and ice- and rock-climbing in mountainous regions around the world. As it entails a certain degree of real or perceived danger and unpredictability (Ewert and Hollenhorst, 1989), mountaineering has been classified as a risky sport (Jack and Ronan, 1998) and a risk recreation activity (Robinson, 1992). Mountaineer tourists, as a category of adventure tourists, enjoy visiting places 'that offer scenic beauty, unique natural formations and opportunities to experience activities in remote, wilderness environments' (Williams and Soutar, 2005, p.252). As such, mountaineering provides a perfect opportunity for such tourists. Mountaineering is also considered to be a form of ecotourism (Johnston and Edwards, 1994). Mountain environments offer people the opportunity to engage in 'serious leisure' due to the plethora of activities readily available in an adventure setting (Beedie and Hudson, 2003). Such a form of leisure concerns

'the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for a participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge' (Stebbins, 1992, p.3).

It is argued that mountaineering is becoming subsumed by tourism and new variations of climbing, scrambling and hill walking, for example, are emerging. One such sub-category of mountaineering is mountain adventure tourism, a 'business enterprise' comprising organisations which specialise in mountaineering for tourists (Beedie and Hudson, 2003, p.631). Mountain adventure tourism includes package mountaineering holidays, the focus for this current study.

Mountaineering participation offers many benefits. For instance, participants can reach the summit of a mountain and feel a sense of well being and rejuvenation and they can feel fulfilled through developing their technical skills and rising to the physical and mental challenges involved in climbing a mountain (Pomfret, 2006). Yet being in the mountains presents numerous risks and adversities including poor weather and associated consequences such as exhaustion, snow blindness and disorientation, altitude sickness, frostbite, avalanches and landslides (Loewenstein, 1999).

## **2.2 The demand for mountaineering**

People originally took part in mountaineering for practical reasons; for example, to carry out scientific experiments, to move animals to different grazing areas and to set national boundaries. Mountaineering evolved into a sport as it became associated with the fulfilment of certain needs: 'to refresh their [people's] spirit, to challenge their limits, to define the boundaries of survival, to live an adventure' (Johnston and Edwards, 1994, p. 461). Numerous factors have facilitated an increase in people doing mountaineering, including gear improvements, high-tech support systems, improved tourist infrastructure, easier accessibility and diminished risk levels. Intensified interest in adventure tourism, inclusive of mountaineering, has been spurred on by the use of technology in adventure environments, the availability of more promotional material and 'a deferring of control to experts' (Beedie and Hudson, 2003, p.627). Mountaineering has grown in popularity recently with organisations such as the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) seeing their membership almost double over ten years to 63,000 members (Intel, 2008a). In

2007 an estimated 4.9% of UK activity holidaymakers took a mountaineering holiday or climbing trip (Intel, 2008b). Worldwide, the International Federation of Mountain Guides Association (IFMGA, 2009) represents around 6,000 mountain guides, who have undertaken rigorous training over a number of years, from over 20 countries. The Association aims to bring into line the profession's work regulations across member countries and to improve safety conditions for clients. Although the global demand for guided, commercially organised mountaineering trips is unknown, the IFMGA statistics highlight a definite need for guiding services. Alpine Ascents, a US based guiding organisation, suggests that there has been a sizeable increase in mountaineering participation since the mid 1980s with more substantial rises in the 1990s, partly fuelled by films such as 'Into Thin Air' (Hales, 2006). The introduction of mountain-based literature such as *The Mountain Traveller's Handbook* (Deegan, 2002), published by the British Mountaineering Council, have also widened participation (Beedie, 2003). Intel (2008a) notes that there has also been a considerable increase in UK female participation in mountaineering from 16% in 2000 to 25% in 2006. Furthermore, according to the UK tour operator Rock and Sun, participation in indoor climbing has risen dramatically and this has fuelled more interest in outdoor climbing. Hales (2006) proposes that mountaineering adventure tourism has risen in popularity due to the increased availability of leisure opportunities, technological advancements in gear and equipment, and 'the embodiment of leisure in personal identity' (p.277). In the European Alps, recent trends indicate that package adventure holidays, which offer activities such as snow sports, rafting, and ice- and rock climbing, are more popular than ascents up mountains as the latter necessitate 'greater resources, time and expertise' (p.277).

### 2.3 Package mountaineering holidays

In their promotional material, mountaineering operators, which arrange package mountaineering holidays and courses, tend to focus on skills' development, guided experiences and opportunities to summit mountain' peaks. For example, the web promotional material of Icicle Mountaineering, a major provider of 'specialist ski and Alpine climbing courses', states:

'What sets our courses apart are the evening instruction sessions after each day of guiding, itinerary flexibility that is essential to maximise your summiting chances ... Alpine courses are all led by mountain professionals (IFMGA guides & UIMLA leaders), to maximise your learning experience and to ensure your safety' (Icicle Mountaineering, 2009).

Like many other mountaineering operators, Icicle Mountaineering offers a wide variety of holidays for its clients including summer and winter Alpine courses, weekend adventures in the Alps and mountaineering courses specifically for women. Courses range from beginner to advanced level, with the latter requiring participants to have substantial experience in ice and rock climbing, and very high levels of stamina and fitness.

Such holidays are typical of the process of commodification which tourism is undergoing generally (Beedie and Hudson, 2003; Johnston and Edwards, 1994; Varley, 2006). Tourism has been radically altered by commodification through which it 'is packaged, promoted, marketed, bought and sold - essentially consumed as a product' (Berger and Greenspan, 2008, p.92). The commodification process that adventure tourism is going through is evident; it has been labelled as a 'diluted commodity form' (Varley, 2006, p.174) of adventure in which the 'taken for granted meaning of adventure' (p.186) is eliminated from activities. One of the main challenges that climbing and other adventure sports face is their propensity to become predictable and routine through the participant's knowledge, equipment,

training and preparation (Heywood, 2005). A key element of adventure is its unpredictability (Miles and Priest, 1999; Swarbrooke et al, 2003) yet it is argued that any planned outdoor recreation activity cannot be considered an adventure because its outcome is certain (Price, 1978). Any form of package tourism alludes to a holiday experience that provides the tourist with a safely protected, organised, and relatively inactive experience (Qiroga, 1990). Indeed, 'there exists something of a paradox whereby the more detailed, planned and logistically smooth an itinerary becomes the more removed the experience is from the experience of adventure' (Beedie and Hudson, 2003, p.627). This implies that any form of package adventure travel cannot be deemed a real adventure due to the tight packaging, stringent planning, and risk avoidance strategies that adventure operators put into place. In relation to package mountaineering holidays, clients receive training programmes and detailed itineraries before they embark on their trip. They are fully 'trained up' through skills' development sessions, and receive full guiding services throughout their course. These holidays are 'usually packaged for maximum efficiency' (Beedie and Hudson, 2003, p.626). Mountaineering operators ensure that contingencies are in place for all scenarios and eventualities, and real risks to the client are reduced where possible. In addition to the protective elements that are seemingly integral to package adventure holidays, Beedie and Hudson (2003) suggest that the majority of people who live in developed countries have an urban frame, comprising factors such as heating, houses and electricity, which shields them from any negativity they are exposed to in the real world. People are continuously surrounded by these urban frames, even when they are on holiday; their 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1986) travels with them so that they never leave their frame behind and they expect certain home comforts when they are away on an 'adventure'.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was used to explore the key influences encouraging package mountaineering holiday participation as it was thought that this would result in the collection of data that could provide in-depth insights into respondents' behaviour. This exploratory technique allowed for a realistic and thorough exploration of the research theme (Robson, 2002) resulting in a set of 'non-standardised' data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003, p.378) which could be examined in a reflective way (Tesch, 1990). It facilitated understanding of why respondents in this research made the decision to take a package mountaineering holiday, through meaningful and thorough dialogue. This research employed a case study approach and as such, aimed to tackle "why" and "how" questions within the context in which they take place (Yin, 2003). Such an approach encouraged respondents to provide realistic accounts of the key influences encouraging their participation as the fieldwork was undertaken during or immediately at the end of their mountaineering holiday.

The fieldwork was carried out in the Chamonix region of the French Alps, a destination which is at the very heart of European alpine mountaineering. Many mountaineering companies base their clients here due to the abundant, almost unlimited, opportunities available for experienced and novice mountaineers alike. The region has a well established tourist infrastructure, to cater for adventure tourists, including cable car facilities, mountain huts and good public transport networks. It also has a long tradition of guiding which has been passed on through the involvement of local families over generations. Additionally, there is easy access

to the region for European tourists with low cost flights from other countries to nearby airports such as Geneva, and good rail networks from different parts of Europe, making it a convenient destination for short breaks or longer holidays. A considerable draw is Europe's highest mountain, Mont Blanc, which forms a backdrop to Chamonix itself; the Matterhorn is also within relatively close proximity, situated on the Swiss-Italian border.

### **3.1 Companies offering package mountaineering courses**

In spring 2007, the researcher e-mailed representatives from several mountaineering companies, outlined the purpose of the study and asked if they would allow their clients to volunteer to be interviewed, for the fieldwork element, assuming some would be interested in the nature of the study and hence be willing to help. Overall, the researcher received a positive response, and three companies agreed to be involved in the research, which were the British Mountaineering Council (BMC), Jagged Globe and Icicle Mountaineering. The companies organise and run courses for tourists wishing to develop their mountaineering skills and summit alpine mountain peaks. They operate various summer alpine mountaineering courses in the Chamonix region which run from June to September. As mentioned earlier in this paper, these courses are pitched at various different levels, usually introductory, intermediate and advanced, and hence are designed to appeal to both novice and more experienced mountaineers. Most of the courses last for one or two weeks and generally comprise a tightly packed itinerary - with an intensive programme of activities and very little free time - which includes mountaineering skills' development and, on many courses, mountain ascents. For example, Jagged Globe's eight day

Alpine Introduction course develops the following skills: glacier travel, crevasse rescue, route finding and navigation, rope techniques, ice axe and crampon techniques, movement on alpine terrain, belaying and protection, choosing the right clothing and equipment, and mountaineering on graded routes (Jagged Globe, 2009). All courses are fully guided and destination-based company representatives meet up with clients regularly throughout their holiday. Icicle Mountaineering provides evening instruction and social events for their clients. Both Icicle Mountaineering and Jagged Globe offer courses at comparable prices. The BMC's Conville course differs in that it is just three days in duration and it is heavily subsidised through the Conville Trust. The Trust was set up by the parents of Jonathan Conville, an alpine mountaineer who tragically died at the age of twenty seven on the north face of the Matterhorn (BMC, 2009). The course provides young, aspiring mountaineers with the opportunity to participate in a very competitively priced, short introductory alpine mountaineering course. Most of the course's participants are university students or recent graduates, who often have considerable UK-based mountaineering experience and who want to develop some alpine skills and experience.

### **3.2 Data collection**

The researcher carried out thirty eight in depth, semi-structured interviews with respondents in the Chamonix region either during their mountaineering holiday or soon after their trip had ended but before they returned home. The rationale for conducting the interviews at the holiday destination was so that respondents could talk more accurately about why they chose a package mountaineering course and

relate their responses to their current holiday experience. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted on average forty five minutes each. All respondents were interviewed on their own, at a convenient time and in a suitable venue, for example a locally based restaurant or café. The fieldwork research centred on the themes identified in the introduction to this paper - the importance of mountaineering to respondents' lifestyle, the role of risk in encouraging package mountaineering holiday participation, skills development and experience as key motives, and the role of the organisation and guide in making safe the mountaineering experience. The interviews were digitally recorded to ensure full transcripts could be made and the researcher took notes of salient points throughout.

At the start of each of the mountaineering courses, the researcher attended the clients' briefing session, introduced the research and asked if any client would be interested in being interviewed either during or at the end of their course. Those clients that were interested were asked to complete a form providing their contact details, the course they were participating in, and some demographic details such as their age group. Interviews were then set up and usually took place either early in the evening or late in the afternoon on the days that respondents were based in the resorts of Chamonix or Argentiere. On completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed these verbatim and certain themes emerged which were concerned with the motives, personalities and lifestyles of the respondents. The researcher examined the meaning of respondents' comments and the similarities and differences between each respondent.

Of the thirty eight respondents interviewed, the majority - 45% of all respondents - were holidaying with Icicle Mountaineering. The company representatives permitted the researcher to attend the welcome social event held on

the evening that new clients arrived in Chamonix and before their course started. This gave the researcher time, in an informal setting, to explain the research in more detail to the clients and to encourage their participation in the interviews. 37% of the respondents were with the BMC, participating in the Conville course and based in Argentiere. 18% of respondents were doing their course through Jagged Globe.

#### **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A number of themes materialized from the interview data which related to the key influences encouraging package mountaineering holiday participation. The first theme examines mountaineering as an important element of respondents' lifestyles. Many frequently talked about their involvement in mountaineering related activities in their home environment and often considered these to be integral to their lifestyles. The second theme explores the role of risk in package mountaineering holiday participation. Risk was not considered to be an important motive influencing participation and respondents did not generally view themselves as risk takers but accepted that they sometimes needed to take calculated risks in mountaineering. The third theme considers other key motives encouraging package mountaineering holiday participation. In particular, skills development and gaining experience were found to be important motives. The fourth theme examines the role of the organisation and the guide in making safe the mountaineering experience. Respondents commented on the importance of the mountaineering operators and guides in making them feel safe.

Following on from a brief overview of the respondents, subsequent sections will discuss themes one to four in turn. From the findings, it is clear that these

package mountaineering holidays - which offer a relatively safe, guided experience - attract a certain type of adventure tourist who seems to prefer a structured holiday which will develop their skills and experience. Such a holiday contrasts with those mountaineering trips in which the participant is perhaps more experienced and is able to operate independently in the mountains.

The majority of respondents in this study were aged between 18 and 45 years: 28% were aged 18-25 years old, 27% were aged 26-35 years old and 30% were aged between 36-45 years old. 12.5% of respondents were aged 46-55 years old and 2.5% were aged between 56-65 years old. 65% of respondents were male and 35% were female. Most respondents (53%) were educated to degree level and a small number (13%) had postgraduate or PhD qualifications. Given that 35% of respondents were on the Conville course, which attracts a large number of students and recent graduates, it is unsurprising that such a high proportion of overall respondents had undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications.

#### **4.1 Theme 1: Mountaineering as an important element of respondents' lifestyles**

Interview data suggests that many respondents took part in mountaineering or related activities in their home environment and whilst on holiday, highlighting the importance of mountaineering to their lifestyle. Although some respondents were on their first alpine mountaineering holiday, only a few considered themselves to be complete novices in mountaineering per se. Most respondents used their free time at home to regularly participate in activities such as indoor and outdoor climbing, walking and running, and to go on mountaineering short breaks at the weekends

within the UK, particularly to Wales and Scotland. The respondent's comments below reflect this pattern of mountaineering participation.

'About 3 years ago, I started hill walking more regularly, mostly in the Yorkshire Dales, and then I joined the university hiking club and started going to the Lake District and Wales ... Around that time I started climbing indoors as well and that winter, I went up to Scotland a couple of times and did some winter hill walking and a little bit of easy gully climbing, and it's really gone from there. Then, I moved to climbing outdoors and getting out to the mountains at weekends.'

Others, often in the older age groups participated in such activities less frequently, citing work and family commitments as constraints on their time. These respondents recounted times in the past when they were more frequently involved in mountain activities. For example, one respondent (age category 36-45 years) stated that because he had been raised in the Scottish highlands, he had done outdoor sports - including mountain walking - virtually all his life. He talked about how his interest in mountaineering developed, but highlighted how other demands on his time, notably the pressures of work and having children, restricted the regularity of his mountaineering trips:

'When I did my degree, I met a good friend, who's still my climbing partner, and he was more into climbing than walking so he taught me to climb, and we have just done walking, climbing, scrambling and Via Ferrata ever since ... When we were younger we used to go away for weeks, meet up for weekends and go camping, that sort of stuff. Then, we got into work and we had less time and more money so we went further away for shorter trips and then the last 5 or 6 years we've gone to Italy each summer for a week and we try and get a few weekends in but, to be honest, we don't do as much as we used to by far ... My wife and I have an agreement that I get a week a year without the kids [mountaineering] and she gets a week without the kids.'

A small number of older respondents demonstrated their commitment towards mountaineering despite certain restrictions discouraging their participation. One respondent (age category 46-55 years) expressed that 'it sounds a little grandiose but I have a mortgage on a cottage in Scotland and every time I go there I try and do

a Monroe (3,000m plus peak).' This respondent regularly did running and fitness training, took part in triathlon and marathon events, and completed trekking challenges despite being very busy with his own business which restricted his free time. He successfully reached the summit of Mont Blanc after completing his first alpine mountaineering course. He was thinking about organising another trip in the future to climb the Matterhorn, yet mentioned that the expense of such trips and the reality of funding his children through university would potentially prevent him from doing so.

In particular, the majority of Conville course respondents had started their mountaineering 'careers' early on in life and were usually active and experienced members of mountaineering clubs. Some of them had originally got involved via scouts' clubs or through their family's interest in mountaineering, and had continued the sport on joining their university mountaineering club. Given that securing a place on the heavily subsidised Conville course is very competitive and that one of the application criteria is that 'you are a keen mountaineer/climber with experience in the UK and intend to do some graded Alpine routes' (Plas Y Brenin, 2009), the well established mountaineering background that these participants showed is expected. One respondent's comments typify the upbringing of some of the Conville participants:

'I started off hill walking when I was seven with my dad. My dad has always been into mountaineering and is also a member of a mountain rescue team in north Wales. I joined the Beacon Kids when I was 10 and they introduced me to climbing and taught me how to do it ... I've done some Scottish winter stuff and some work with search dogs ... I've been doing bouldering competitions since the age of 13'.

Many respondents talked about how mountaineering made them happier and less stressed, and how integral it was to their general well being. Not doing

mountaineering regularly was seen as having adverse effects on the emotional states of some respondents. For instance, one commented 'I get kind of depressed if we haven't been out in the hills, like in the last year we haven't been out a lot - only 4 or 5 times - and to me that's not enough. If it's 3 or 4 months, it kind of gets to me, yeah.' Another expressed that:

'Mountaineering is pretty important to me. I'd get very stressed if I wasn't mountaineering in some way or doing some kind of climbing. I find actually that if I don't do anything for a week, I start to get really edgy. When I go out [mountaineering] it just seems to change me almost and relax me ... I find everything so much easier and I work a lot harder after being in the mountains.'

One respondent, who was doing an intermediate level mountaineering course including an attempt to climb up Mont Blanc, had had a mountaineering accident in Scotland a few years previously. She talked at length about how this event had made her momentarily lose confidence in the mountains:

'It was really weird because I was involved in quite a serious accident and I was helicoptered off and everything. When it first happened, I was a little bit shaken afterwards for a while and thinking maybe I should give up on this [mountaineering] a little bit. But then I actually had time out and that year I'd hoped to do Mont Blanc and couldn't so I went to Madeira on a sedate walking holiday. It was so boring and crap. I just thought, my life belongs in the mountains and it actually made me realise just how much the mountains mean to me basically. So, yeah, it might have put me off temporarily and I certainly forgot about doing Mont Blanc for a while.'

It is proposed that those respondents' who regularly participate in mountaineering activities at home, who view it as a fundamental part of their lifestyle, and who take mountaineering holidays on a regular basis, engage in serious leisure, as defined in section 2.1. Participation in serious leisure contributes to, and forms an important element of, identity construction (Stebbins, 1992). It is apparent that the need for identity construction and self renewal spurs some individuals to continuously participate in sports that are perceived as risky (Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993), such as mountaineering. Participants strive to change their identities so as to

become recognised as mountaineers through emulating the behaviour of guides and recounting stories about their own mountaineering experiences to others, for example (Beedie, 2003). Any form of serious leisure demands considerable dedication from its participants and this is illustrated through the interview findings. Many respondents showed commitment through following intensive training programmes, often designed by the mountaineering company, in preparation for their holiday. Whether these respondents showed such dedication in their mountaineering activities on a day to day basis is unknown, yet some of the Conville course respondents in particular alluded to extensive commitment to such activities at home. This was evident in the mountaineering-related qualifications several had achieved. For example, five of these respondents had achieved the Single Pitch Award (SPA) which qualifies participants to supervise groups or individuals outdoors on single pitch rock climbs. One had accomplished the Mountain Leader (ML) qualification, making her eligible to lead groups in the mountains, moor lands and hills of the UK and Ireland outside the winter season. Two other Conville respondents were also working towards their ML award and three were studying outdoor pursuits-related degrees at university.

#### **4.2 Theme 2: The role of risk in package mountaineering holiday participation**

Interview findings suggest that risk did not motivate the majority of respondents to participate in their package mountaineering holiday. Risk was thought to play either only a minor role or have no influence on their decision to experience such a holiday. Some respondents expressed an aversion to risk,

although they accepted that mountaineering was a risky activity, and implied that any risk would be effectively managed by their guides whilst on the course:

'I think risk and challenge go hand in hand really. I wouldn't have done it [the mountaineering course] had I thought I would be in proper danger. I wouldn't have gone by myself but it's nice to challenge yourself in an almost safe environment. There is risk but you're taught how to recognise it, for example, you look at the weather and think 'should we go out in this'? ... Having the guides around made me feel a lot safer.'

Such comments are anticipated given that various elements of the package mountaineering holiday interplay to reduce the real and perceived risks and make safe the experience. In particular, mountaineering organisations and guides, which offer this type of holiday, play an important role in risk' minimisation. Yet, like any adventure operator, the key challenge is to provide clients with a perception of risk taking, and a moderate level of sensation seeking, whilst simultaneously offering an acceptable probability of safety (Christiansen, 1990; Williams and Soutar, 2005).

Another respondent expressed that she didn't like risk but accepted that risks were an integral part of mountaineering. She commented:

'Climbing is inherently risky and alpinism in particular is. If you are crag climbing in the Lake District, you're pretty much in control of everything that happens. Out here there are avalanches, rock falls and lots of other things that might happen that you can't fully control. You can mitigate the circumstances which you put yourself into but there's always an element of things you can't control when you're in the Alps. I don't particularly like that aspect of it.'

This study's findings contrast with the view that risk is a fundamental and largely positive element of mountaineering (Ewert, 1985; 1989; Mitchell, 1983; Yerkes, 1985) and adventure recreation (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989; Meier, 1978; Miles, 1978). The findings also differ from the view that risk is strongly linked to how much experience adventure participants have. In one study, (Johnston, 1992) experienced mountaineers favourably associated risk with enjoyment and challenge. By contrast, inexperienced mountaineers viewed risk with some negativity and

associated it with danger. Therefore, experienced mountaineers respond more positively to risk than their novice counterparts. In this current study, respondents had differing levels of mountaineering experience and this was reflected in the type of course they took. All Conville course respondents (35%) and a small number of others (10%) participated in an introductory alpine course. 38% of respondents took part in an intermediate mountaineering course which culminated in an attempt to summit Mont Blanc. 17% of respondents went on an improver mountaineering course, which demanded a high level of fitness and well developed mountaineering skills, and included an attempt to summit the Matterhorn. Interestingly, even the more experienced respondents did not regard risk as a primary motive encouraging their participation.

Furthermore, most respondents did not consider themselves to be risk takers in their home environment despite being active participants in mountaineering and related activities, as discussed in section 4.1. Many accepted the role of risk in adventure participation but emphasised the importance of minimising this in such a way that the risks are calculated and decisions to participate are based on a comprehensive analysis of the potential risks involved, as demonstrated by the respondent's comments below about rock climbing:

'The things that I am confident with, I would take a calculated risk if the odds are not stacked against me, especially when out climbing. When I'm climbing trad [traditional: placing own climbing gear in the rock] I won't take risks. I've had quite a bad fall, not any serious injuries or anything, I just fell and I realised that from that moment that to climb like that, you've got to make sure you put your gear in properly. If you don't then you've got issues. Some people love the whole feeling of having no gear in and thinking 'man, if I fall I'm going to die' ... My parents don't climb and they don't really understand that it's not about taking risks but minimising risks; there's no real excuse for not having a back up.'

Such comments illustrate a degree of personal control over risk taking. This control is often achieved through careful preparation and advance planning prior to participation (Trimpop, Kerr and Kirkaldy, 1998). By doing this, adventurers may construct phenomenological or protective frames (Apter, 1992) which allow them to positively experience the danger element inherent in risky activities. For those individuals who have not built up these protective frames, participation in risky activities is likely to result in fear and anxiety. All respondents in this current study talked about the extent of personal preparation that they undertook in advance of their holiday. This largely involved participation in sport-related activities which would get them fit enough to cope with the demands of a mountaineering holiday. Some of the novice mountaineers talked about doing new sports, such as indoor climbing, to further prepare for their holiday. Other more experienced respondents showed considerable commitment to their pre-holiday training plan, as one respondent explained below:

'I trained to come on this holiday; it sounds a bit sad but I always do. I mean, if you didn't you'd come out and be unfit, and then just at the end of your holiday you feel like you're just getting good enough. I have a dog and I used to put a big rucksack on my back with books and cans and stuff in it and walk up and down hills. I'd walk with the dog in the morning. It adds to your enjoyment if you're fit.'

Linked with the idea of calculated risks and being in control, many respondents discussed their "comfort zones" and talked about how they wanted to stay in control of their mountaineering experience. Some expressed reluctance to step outside these during their mountaineering holiday. One respondent noted that he was 'too much of a control freak' to participate in adventure holidays which were perceived as too risky whilst another expressed her desire to remain within her self-selected comfort zone:

'I don't like being outside my comfort zone so this week I've been very much within my comfort zone. I haven't actually pushed myself out of that. Apart from pushing my physical fitness levels I haven't been out of that area. When I do, I get very kind of emotional. The first time I was on crampons I just didn't feel good. I get very nervous and my eyes start to water and then people ask "are you sure you're alright to do this?" It's that apprehension of the unknown. When I'm trying something new, I'm really nervous whereas the whole of this week, the crampon and ice work have been ok. There's only been a couple of times where it's been outside my comfort zone and then I think "well, it isn't that much further out" and I get on and do it, and for me that's been quite interesting.'

Such responses suggest that the provision of 'safe' experiences for clients is a critical consideration for organisations offering mountaineering courses and packages.

#### **4.3 Theme 3: Skills development and experience as key motives encouraging participation**

By their very nature, package mountaineering holidays focus on training and instruction and hence skills development should feature strongly in respondents' motives to participate in their course. Despite variable levels of mountaineering experience, virtually all respondents expressed more interest in the skills development element than in risk-taking. Many commented on their desire to build up their mountaineering skills through instruction and some aspired to developing proficiency and experience so that they could take such holidays independently or undertake bigger mountaineering 'projects' in the future. One respondent's words characterised some of the key reasons encouraging the decision to take a package mountaineering holiday. He noted that:

'I enjoyed the introductory course I did last year and I wanted to get more experience with knots and hoists. I've gained some really good practical experience so far and I guess that helps me to feel safer in the mountains and gives me reassurance to go out independently in the future. I want to learn as much as I can whilst I'm here and build up my confidence so I can climb on my own, safely.'

Respondents who were on courses which culminated in an attempt to climb a major peak, usually Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn, or one of the less lofty mountains surrounding these iconic peaks, were primarily motivated by reaching the top of the mountain. Furthermore, they regarded the skills development and experiential aspects of the course as crucial in helping them to prepare for the summit. One respondent talked about his past achievement of climbing up Mont Blanc and his aspirations to develop more mountaineering experience and to climb up the Matterhorn:

'I've got to the stage now where I want to do more advanced stuff in the Alps but I feel I can either try and learn it myself and maybe get hurt in the process or, you know, a few days guiding to see how the people here do things and that'll give me enough experience and further know how to go on to do more stuff on my own ... The Matterhorn, I've always wanted to do the Matterhorn. It's like one of the most easily recognised mountains; most people have heard of it. It would be a nice one to get under my belt so to speak.'

For the Conville course respondents, skills development and experience were often seen to be as important, or sometimes even more important, than successfully reaching the summit. Their ambitions to ascend up the mountaineering "career ladder" were frequently expressed during interviews. Most were keen to progress their experience so as to achieve further mountaineering qualifications, to do outdoor pursuit related degrees or to become more self-sufficient mountaineers who could cope without a guide in the mountains. These respondents tended to regularly participate in mountaineering activities both whilst at home and whilst on holiday. One Conville respondent talked about her mountaineering experience, her commitment to achieving related qualifications and her future career goal to become a fully qualified mountain guide.

'I haven't done any alpine stuff; just a couple of Scottish winters and I used to live in the Lake District so I spent a few winters walking and climbing up there but I haven't done any serious mountaineering. I now live at Glenmore Lodge [Scotland's national outdoor training centre] and I'm working on the Nightwatch Scheme, which is a year whereby you get all the outdoor qualifications that you want for free and you work seven days a month for the Lodge. It's really good. I've been there three months now and I've already got my Single Pitch Award, which means I feel confident in taking groups out.'

From the above discussion, it seems clear that risk is not a vital component for package mountaineer tourists and that skills development and experience are the primary motives. As such, parallels can be drawn between this study's findings and Walle's (1997) observation that adventurers are multifarious and whilst some are motivated by risk, others are driven by a desire to gain insight or enlightenment through interaction with nature. In the case of the latter, risk is an inevitable component of adventure which needs to be overcome yet it forms only a secondary element of the experience. As Walter (1984, p.73) notes, 'danger exists and minimising it is part of the skill in mountaineering, but danger has little to do with the motives of most climbers.' For experienced rock climbers, mastery through skills, experience and self-control during climbing are considered to be primary motives (Ewert, 1985; Kiewa, 2001; Slinger, 1997). In this current study, one of the more experienced respondents talked about the importance of self control and keeping calm in perceived dangerous situations.

'I like being able to keep my head when I am in a desperate [mountaineering] situation. When you're climbing, you're at the end of a rope thinking psychologically you don't really want to do this. Something primal says that it's dangerous but you know you're fairly safe. It's like a controlled fear of danger and it makes me feel a lot better if I can keep my head.'

#### **4.4 Theme 4: The role of the organisation and the guide in making safe the mountaineering experience**

From the interview findings, and the discussion above, it is apparent that the respondents' main concern was to have a safe mountaineering experience whereby the level of risk is much reduced. Promotional materials used by mountaineering organisations usually grade their holidays in the expectation that clients will self-select a trip that is suitable for their levels of competence and experience. In relation to package mountaineering holidays, the guide assesses clients' skills during participation and judges their ability to engage in further challenging and demanding activities throughout the duration of their course. The expectation of a risk managed experience is clear in one respondent's comments, when she was asked why she chose to book with the same mountaineering organisation, that she had previously used, to do her course.

'I've always been very impressed with the guides and the back up and support services that they provide ... I could've organised something with friends but I've got to the stage in life where I'd rather just give someone else the money and they've got all the hassle. It's a terrible admission but it's nice knowing that you are not totally responsible for yourself. I wanted to pay the money then someone else does the worrying for me basically. It's a bit of a sad admission but there we go.'

In this current study, interview findings highlight the importance of the mountaineering organisation in making the respondents feel safe both before and during their holiday. Many respondents were impressed by the thorough information they were sent from the organisation pre-holiday. They commented on the detailed e-mail responses they received from the onsite representatives prior to their holiday, and the comprehensive information available on the organisations' web sites and in their brochures. One respondent, on the Mont Blanc course, selected her holiday on the basis that firstly, she had the opportunity to go on an alpine acclimatisation weekend just before the course started. Secondly, she commented that

'The other thing that I really liked about them [the organisation] is that obviously you have various concerns and questions and you send an email and you get a really detailed response. They've got an office based in Chamonix and so they know the mountain conditions, they know all the local guides and everything whereas perhaps if I had done the holiday through another organisation, I wouldn't have got that level of information.'

On booking, clients received itineraries detailing the skills' development element of their course and, if relevant, the major peaks they would be climbing. Such information helped respondents to prepare themselves for the physical and mental challenges that they would encounter whilst mountaineering, and contributed towards the construction of protective frames (Apter, 1992), as discussed earlier.

In some cases, respondents had consistently used the same mountaineering organisation. Although repeat business was largely attributed to the high quality holidays experienced by these respondents, the organisational support and back up services, other specific reasons related to the safety element. For example, one respondent, who had climbed Kilimanjaro and had been on several other mountaineering trips with one particular organisation, talked about the 'kindred ship' he felt he had with the onsite representatives and mentioned that he stayed in contact with them between holidays. He wanted to do some trekking and ice climbing in the Alps and decided 'I'm going to see them'. In sum, a safe, stress free experience, in which the level of risk is minimal, seems to be a priority for most respondents.

Aside from the important role that mountaineering organisations and their representatives play in ensuring client safety, other factors affect the mountaineering experience. Guides are an essential element of the package mountaineering holiday. They are renowned for their expertise in the mountains and have substantial knowledge and experience in mountaineering. Essentially, guides know

how to cope in the mountains and how to look after their clients. As such, the participants of these holidays 'have their experiences defined for them' (Beedie, 2003, p.213). The guided element can be an important reason why tourists choose to holiday with a mountaineering organisation, although it should be noted that 'independent' mountaineer tourists - i.e. those individuals who organise their mountaineering holiday independently - also make use of guiding services. Respondents frequently talked about the benefits of having a guided mountaineering experience. Their decision to take a package mountaineering trip was significantly influenced by the guided element and the reassurance that this offered. For many, the guide could reduce any potential risks encountered on the mountain, and ultimately make the respondents feel safe. They alluded to how they could push themselves more in the presence of a guide because of their perceived diminished responsibility and lack of self sufficiency in the mountains. One respondent talked about her reasons for coming onto her chosen course, and commented on how the guided element was important. She wanted to

'...try and get a little bit further from hill walking and to try and take the next step, to get a bit higher. If you've got a guide, you feel as though you're a bit shielded. You've got someone else taking decisions that I just would not be happy to take myself ... being able to do adventurous things that I wouldn't have been able to do or felt confident about doing by myself.'

Another respondent, who was an experienced mountaineer, stated 'the course allows for more challenges in a safer environment because you've always got the guide there with you. It's a totally different experience with a guide. On your own, you need more self-reliance so you have to think for yourself a lot more.'

Paradoxically, the views expressed above contrast with the aspirations of some respondents whose ultimate goal is to become more self-sufficient as mountaineers.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This paper has explored some of the key influences encouraging package mountaineering holiday participation and it has attempted to address a gap in the research on just one type of adventure tourist. Previous research has mostly focused on 'hard' mountaineers whereas this study examines a softer form of adventure tourism. The interview findings suggest that there are some notable differences in participation influences between package mountaineer tourists and those more experienced mountaineers examined in past research. However, these differences were anticipated given that the former choose to participate in a course which focuses on skills development and offers a safe, guided mountaineering experience and the latter generally have a well established mountaineering background and are self-reliant on their skills and experience to cope in different mountain environments. The interview findings highlight that firstly, participation in mountaineering and its related activities were integral to respondents' home lives and indeed, involvement in a package mountaineering holiday provided an extension to some of their lifestyles. In particular, some of the Conville course respondents demonstrated such commitment to mountaineering in their everyday lives that they could be considered to be serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992) participants. Secondly, risk did not act as an important motive influencing package mountaineering holiday participation and yet respondents generally recognised that mountaineering was a risky activity. However, due to the highly organised and guided nature of package mountaineering holidays, it is unlikely that respondents would be exposed to extreme risks. Respondents expressed the need to be in control when facing potentially risky situations during mountaineering participation and most undertook considerable pre-course training so that they could positively react to any potentially perilous

situations during their holiday. Thirdly, respondents were primarily motivated by developing their skills and gaining experience in alpine mountaineering. This finding was anticipated given the strong focus that organised mountaineering courses have on training and instruction. Even respondents who aspired to summit iconic mountain peaks commented on the importance of skills' development. Fourthly, the organisation and guide played a key role in aiming ensure a safe mountaineering experience, taking considerable care to ensure that their clients did not come into contact with any major risks whilst out on the mountains. Respondents alluded to a preference for a carefully managed package holiday for which they are well prepared and during which they are safeguarded from potential perils due to the constant presence of professional, experienced guides. They felt protected throughout their holiday with the level of exposure to risk being minimal.

This study has attempted to contribute towards an overall understanding of package mountaineer tourists and what influences their decision to take such a holiday. However, it should be noted that there are certain drawbacks to this research which limit the degree to which its findings can be generalised. Although the respondents volunteered to be interviewed, the mountaineering organisations with whom they were taking their holiday were selected by the researcher from a relatively large number of companies operating mountaineering holidays in the Chamonix region. Interviewing clients who were holidaying with other organisations could have led to a different set of results. The BMC is the national mountaineering organisation and it 'promotes the interests of climbers, hill walkers and mountaineers and the freedom to enjoy their activities' in the UK (BMC, 2009). Aside from offering the Conville course, it has many other roles including conservation, access, organising climbing competitions, and running safety and skills' events. As such, this

organisation differs from Icicle Mountaineering and Jagged Globe whose focus is primarily on the provision of package mountaineering holidays. Furthermore, the Conville course respondents had a different profile compared to respondents from the two other organisations and they tended to be younger, well educated, committed and relatively experienced mountaineers for their age.

With these potential biases acknowledged, it is proposed that the findings offer some insights into the participation influences of package mountaineer tourists. It is suggested that other groups of adventure tourists who take physically demanding, commercially organised, guided trips such as multi-activity holidays, white water rafting expeditions, scuba diving trips or trekking journeys may be encouraged to participate in such activities by similar influences as respondents in this research. The current formula offered by mountaineering organisations - a tightly packaged mountaineering holiday with reduced levels of risk due to the constant presence of professional guides - seems to work well in addressing clients' reasons to participate in this type of holiday. Courses provide the opportunity for clients to develop their alpine mountaineering skills and gain experience in a risk controlled environment where potential perils are reduced considerably through a carefully organised experience arranged by the mountaineering organisation and its guides. The challenge for these mountaineering organisations is to provide holidays which will address each person's different needs and aspirations. People's perception of adventure varies and what is deemed to be an adventure for one individual may not be considered as such by another (Priest, 1999). This perception is strongly influenced by the individual's personality, lifestyle and motivation to take part in adventure activities (Pomfret, 2006). Whether the respondents in this study were truly seeking out an adventure is unknown given that the term is frequently

associated with feelings of excitement, fear, thrill, danger and adrenaline-inducing experiences.

The findings of this study start to tackle the gap in research on package adventure tourists but further research needs to be carried out on other types of adventure tourist who participate in commercially organised forms of adventure tourism to establish why these tourists choose to take the holidays that they do. Comparisons can then be made between different groups of package adventure tourists to ascertain any differences or similarities in participation influences. Similarly, further work could focus on examining both experienced and inexperienced groups of adventure tourists in a package holiday setting to ascertain if participation influences differ. Another theme is to examine respondents' perceptions of adventure and whether they consider participation in package mountaineering holidays as a real adventure. Further research on these aforementioned themes will lead to a better understanding of package adventure tourists, and package mountaineer tourists more specifically.

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