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**Identifying adventure tourism product signatures:  
A case analysis of guided mountain bike tours**

Adventure tourism is a growing subsector in the global tourism marketplace. While adventure tourism maintains a growing body of knowledge, little attention has focused on associated product structure. As such, this research note outlines a product signature for commercial mountain bike tours as a case example within the broad adventure tourism product milieu. Analysis of 282 guided mountain bike tours resulted in a recognizable mountain bike tour product signature based on four characteristics: cost; duration; skill and fitness requirements; and riding style. Signatures of adventure tourism products, as reported herein, are valuable to tourism planners, consumers, and (potential) entrepreneurs.

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## **Introduction**

Critical to understanding particular tourism types is examination of baseline characteristics of associated products (e.g. price, duration, location) (Buckley, 2007). As outdoor recreation is increasingly commercialized and on offer in tourism destinations worldwide, adventure tourism products have grown rapidly in both size and scope (Travel Industry Association of America, 2005; UNWTO, 2015). While extensive literature exists regarding adventure tourism (Buckley, 2006), scant attention has been paid to the structure and composition of the actual saleable products offered by adventure tourism operators (Buckley, 2007). While the structure and composition of such products has been described by others (mountaineering: Beedie, 2003; general adventure tourism: Cloutier, 2003), none have focused primarily on the requisite tours as saleable products. As such, this study examines destination-based mountain bike tourism – specifically guided, multi-day commercial tours – as a case example of a growing niche market within the adventure tourism product milieu. This is undertaken to show the potential of identifiable adventure tourism product signatures – i.e., the actual composition of the saleable products on offer – based on activity type. Traditional variables used within tourism research to characterize structure and composition of travel experiences were evaluated (e.g., cost, duration, season). In addition, variables specific to adventure tourism products (e.g., skill level, fitness level, riding style) were also assessed. Drilling down on the relevant structural components of saleable adventure tourism products provides insight valuable to tour operators, potential customers, and other related stakeholders (e.g., community members and land managers).

Mountain biking as an outdoor recreation activity is large, growing, and relatively diverse (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender) (Bowker and English, 2002; Cordell et al., 2004; Outdoor Industry Association, 2013). Accordant specialization toward certain riding styles, desired terrain, and increasing challenge has resulted in mountain bikers' willingness to travel long distances in search of favored riding opportunities (Schaefers, 2006). The creation of a

distinct and strong niche market of mountain bike tourists within the broader umbrella of adventure tourism can be seen as the result of two factors. One, the specific (specialized), contextual (landscape), attribute-based (terrain) motivation as prompt for increased willingness to travel amongst adventure tourists; and two, that the average adventure tourist has “the desire, money and basic fitness for outdoor recreation in remote areas, but not necessarily the time, skills, equipment or experience” (Buckley, 2007, p. 4).

## **Methods**

From January 2014 to August 2014, a database was created and populated based on information collected from 35 commercial mountain bike tour providers (based out of 12 different countries) constituting 282 individual tours (Table 1). Tours used in analysis were restricted to those offered in the 2014 calendar year (n=1097) and represented departures from 54 different countries. A content analysis of tour related material found on operator websites was undertaken to populate the database; limitations on data accuracy, largely as a result of using secondary data should be considered when assessing findings. Nonetheless, the collection and analysis remains valuable for establishing a product signature inclusive of a range of variables.

Answering the call for analysis of activity composition (More and Averill, 2003) and as complement to Buckley’s (2007) broad-scope, first-hand adventure tourism product audit, over 60 variables were evaluated for each tour. Descriptive analysis presented below focuses specifically on trip cost; duration; seasonality, skill and fitness requirements; and riding style. Variables were chosen to collectively provide an initial understanding of “considerations that may affect purchasing decisions in various ways” (Buckley, 2007; p. 1429).

**Table 1: Mountain bike tour operators (alphabetical)**

<b>Tour Company</b>	<b>HQ Country</b>	<b>Tours</b>
All Mountain Venture	Spain	1
Alps Mountain Bike	France	15
Basque MTB	Spain	2
Bicycle Adventures	USA	1
Big Mountain Bike Adventures	Canada	15
Bike Greece	Greece	2
Biking in Turkey	Turkey	4
Boreale Mountain Biking	Canada	4
Cog Wild	USA	11
Colorado Backcountry Biker	USA	2
Cycle Active	UK	10
Desert Sports	USA	2
Endless Biking	Canada	2
Global Epix	USA	3
Go Where	Scotland	1
H&I Adventures	Scotland	11
Holiday River Expeditions	USA	5
Island Hopping	Germany	5
Island Mountain Rides	Canada	3
KE Adventure Travel	England	12
Pure Vida Adventures	USA	1
Rim Tours	USA	22
Sacred Rides	Canada	37
Saddle Skedaddle	England	15
Seward Bike Tours	USA	2
Singletrack Safari	UK	4
SpiceRoads Cycle Tours	Thailand	25
Switch-Backs	Spain	2
Teton Mountain Bike Tours	USA	1
Trail Addiction	France	4
Trek Travel	USA	2
Tyax Adventures	Canada	6
Unique Trails	Nepal	16
Up and Downhill Holidays	Austria	1
Western Spirit Cycling Adventures	USA	33

*Note:* Countries indicate location of headquarters; tours indicates number used in analysis

Basic coding of data was completed for variable consistency and to allow for empirical analysis. Reported monetary data was converted to US\$ based on the currency exchange rate average during the sampling period. Riding style was coded to the following categories based on a modified typology of mountain bike disciplines developed by Tourism

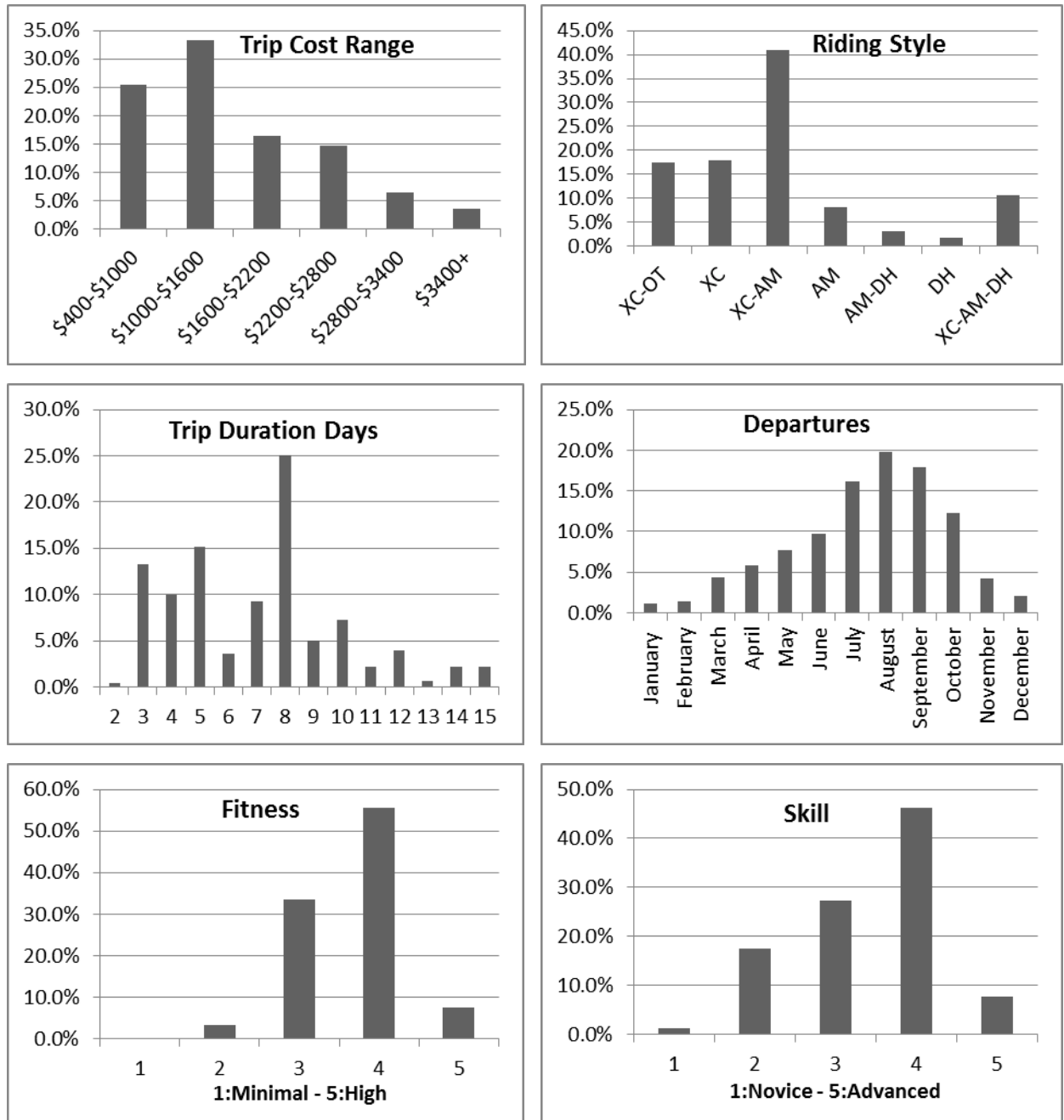
British Columbia (2008): cross country (XC), all mountain (AM), downhill (DH), and other (OT). While some tours were marketed within one or two of these categories specifically, others were coded-in based on the descriptions of the riding that would be undertaken during the tour. While many of the descriptions were textually based, others showed empirical data such as ascent versus descent statistics or ride distance on singletrack versus double track versus road that helped the researchers more confidently code into the requisite category of riding style. Fitness and skill variables were standardized onto five point scales: minimal to high and novice to advanced, respectively. While this was reflective of a majority of scales used amongst tour operators, some recoding had to be done. In cases where different scales were utilized (e.g., a 3-point versus 5-point scale), textual descriptions of expected levels found within tour information were used to recode into the most appropriate category. Similarly, a small number of operators (4) representing 11 tours did not use a standardized scale for either skill or fitness; in these cases the relevant tour descriptions guided coding on these variables.

## **Findings**

### *Tour characteristics*

Mean tour characteristics provide a starting point to identify a basic signature of the mountain bike tour product (Figure 1). Across all tours analyzed the average trip cost is \$1620.28, lasts seven days and six nights, includes a group of 4-12 people, and covers 16-35 miles on the bike during riding days. Broken down to cost per day the variance across duration ranges and riding types stays relatively consistent. For the former, 6-10 days has the lowest (\$225.00) and 0-5 days the highest (\$238.23); for the latter, XC-OT has the lowest (\$216.52) and DH the highest (\$266.44). While these differences are not statistically significant, they do potentially reflect logistic requirements for each, i.e. XC-OT riding often

taking advantage of rail trails and other free access routes as opposed to DH riding requiring additional purchase of lift passes.



**Figure 1: Proportions in trip cost range, trip duration days, fitness, riding style, departures by month, and skill.**

*Skill and fitness requirements*

Skill and fitness requirements were examined categorically by riding style (Table 2). Results point to increasing skill and fitness requirements over the progression from XC-OT to DH riding styles. It is logical to conceive that less skill is required for XC riding, consisting of singletrack, roads, and preference toward long continuous routes, versus DH riding, characterized by relatively steep trails, various trail features (berms, jumps, etc.), and overall increased risk (Tourism British Columbia, 2008). Similarly, fitness requirements show a general upward progression of means along the same progression of riding styles, however, there is a major drop in mean from AM-DH to DH. One can envisage DH riding that often uses lifts (chair, gondola, vehicle, etc.) for returning to the start of the trail as being less taxing physically than AM-DH riding that implies pedaling back up to the start instead. From the tour provider perspective, it is important to match skill and fitness level requirements to trip itineraries and even more crucial to convey those requirements to customers while encouraging honest self-assessment of abilities. Anecdotally, many of the companies evaluated had some form of skill and/or fitness assessment built into the itinerary early in the tour.

**Table 2: Mean skill and fitness requirement scores by riding style on a 1-5 Likert scale.**

Riding Style	Skill	Fitness
XC-OT	2.48	3.31
XC	2.70	3.35
XC-AM	3.79	3.99
AM	3.81	3.52
AM-DH	4.40	4.25
DH	4.50	3.00

*Tour cost*

The last tour variable examined was tour cost, a critical variable in most travel decision making (Table 3). Total average tour cost by ride style ranged from a high of \$2,087 for DH to a low of \$1,436 for XC-AM. Cost per day, regardless of riding style or trip duration remained relatively consistent (i.e. \$217-\$266); when calculated as a cost per ride

day that range increases (\$257-\$343) as some days are likely off bike, particularly as trip duration increases. In other words, shorter trips where all days are commonly used for riding have lower costs per ride day relative to longer duration tours with likely more off-bike time.

**Table 3: Mean cost by ride style and duration day ranges for the tour (total cost), per day of the tour (cost per day), and per day of riding during the tour (cost per ride day).**

<b>Ride Style</b>	<b>Total cost</b>	<b>Cost per day</b>	<b>Cost per ride day</b>
XC-OT	\$1,904	\$217	\$306
XC	\$1,528	\$246	\$306
XC-AM	\$1,436	\$229	\$276
AM	\$1,784	\$227	\$294
AM-DH	\$1,793	\$240	\$327
DH	\$2,087	\$266	\$343
XC-AM-DH	\$1,641	\$222	\$270
<b>Duration Days</b>			
0-5	\$959	\$238	\$257
6-10	\$1,823	\$225	\$310
11-15	\$2,901	\$227	\$314

## **Discussion**

The results provide a well-defined commercial signature for guided, destination-based mountain bike tours based on variables of cost, riding style, tour duration, fitness and skill requirements, and departure dates. Evident and distinct tour characteristic patterns are likely important variables for (potential) mountain bike traveler decision making, as has been shown for other packaged adventure tour products such as mountaineering (Pomfret, 2011; Pomfret and Bramwell, 2014). These patterns are critical for understanding responsible development and promotion of tourism products locally and regionally (Benur and Bramwell, 2015). This is best illustrated in an example from the data: trip durations are concentrated around 3-5 days and 8 days, the latter representing 25% of the tours analyzed. Target markets for these trips could differ accordingly, with the former oriented around extended weekend getaways may implying closer origination proximity relative to the latter. For tour



operators and associated tourist services this would mean seeking different target markets geographically based on trip duration.

While this article provides a basic descriptive analysis of the guided mountain bike tour product, a more robust statistical analysis (i.e. application of standard multivariate techniques) remains lacking. The requirement of a larger set of data that was primary source generated across a broad spectrum of adventure tourism products remains the definitive challenge for broader application of this type of research. Such analysis of other products, particularly tour-based experiences, can add to this body of knowledge and become collectively valuable to tourism planners, consumers, and entrepreneurs seeking entry into the growing adventure tourism market.

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