

**EXPLORING YOGA TOURISTS' PROFILE, MOTIVATIONS AND BEHAVIOUR: EVIDENCE  
FROM GREECE**

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**Abstract**

Yoga tourism is a niche within the wellness tourism market and a form of special interest tourism that has attracted global interest in recent years as it is considered that it can contribute to the sustainability of destinations. This paper focuses on the island of Lesbos in Greece, a rising yoga destination, and seeks to investigate and identify yoga tourists' profile, motivations and travel behavior, providing a better understanding of this segment of the wellness market. Survey was conducted via a structured questionnaire in a sample of 73 yoga tourists. The findings of the study revealed that yoga tourists have quality characteristics (highly educated, high income, long stay at the destination) that make them desirable tourists for any destination. Moreover, the three most important criteria when choosing a yoga destination are: (1) the yoga instructor, (2) the yoga programme, and (3) the safety in the destination. In addition, the main motivations for yoga practitioners to engage in yoga tourism are: (1) to acquire new knowledge, (2) to enhance mental well-being, and (3) to seek an authentic yoga experience. Findings and discussion of this study are useful to Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), tourism professionals and academic researchers interested in wellness and yoga tourism.

**Keywords:** Yoga Tourism, Wellness Tourism, Travel Motives, Travel Behaviour, Greece

**Introduction**

Yoga belongs to the category of mindful movements. In addition to yoga, this category includes other activities such as tai chi, qigong, Pilates, stretch and barre, which are exercise methods that combine movement with mental focus, body awareness and controlled breathing to improve strength, balance, flexibility, posture and alignment of the body, and overall health. Consumers typically turn to these methods for the purpose of improving mind and body health, mental focus, and for stress relief, mindfulness, recovery or pain management, as well as physical exercise (Global Wellness Institute, 2023).

Yoga boomed during the COVID-19 pandemic, as social distancing measures that led to the closure of gyms and other exercise spaces led consumers to seek alternative ways of exercising at home and dealing with stress (Global Wellness Institute, 2023). Yoga has become an increasingly widespread activity (Öznlbant & Alvarez, 2020) that led many consumers to travel to yoga destinations for practice (Telej & Gamble, 2019) and to seek more balanced vacations (Dillette, Douglas & Andrzejewski, 2019). This modern trend quickly turned into a distinct form of tourism called yoga tourism (Lehto et al., 2006). Yoga tourism is a niche within the wellness tourism market, whose value is estimated at \$651 billion in 2022 (Global Wellness Institute, 2023). According to Ali-Knight (2009, p. 87) yoga tourism is about "travel to a destination to engage in the practice of yoga and in related activities that will enhance the physical, mental or spiritual wellbeing of the tourist". It is a form of special interest tourism that has emerged and grown with the 'travel to feel well' trend (Lehto et al., 2006), and has experienced increased interest in recent years due to the changing landscape of spirituality in the western world (Dillette et al., 2019). It is also considered as a form of sustainable tourism,

due to the lifestyle and travel choices of yoga tourists, which have been innately sustainable as part of their belief system for a long time (Kaptan, 2020).

Yoga was born in India which is still today the epicentre and the most popular destination for yoga tourism (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). Since then, tourism businesses and destinations around the world are trying to attract this niche of the market by creating yoga retreats, seminars, festivals and other mindful activities. However, in order to successfully market or meet the demands of yoga tourists, a deep understanding of these group's unique characteristics and their key motivations when choosing a yoga destination is crucial. While the literature on yoga tourism is growing, there is little research on yoga tourism in Greece, as the country is not considered an established destination for yoga tourists. This chapter intends to partly fill this gap and contribute to the existing literature. In this context, the aim of this chapter is by focusing on the Greek island of Lesbos, to explore yoga tourists' profile, motivations and travel behaviour, providing a better understanding of this niche within the wellness tourism market. Lesbos is the third largest island in Greece and is located in the northeastern Aegean Sea, very close to the coast of Turkey. It has a total population of 83,755 residents (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2021). Tourism is not the main economic activity on the island, as its inhabitants are mainly engaged in the production of agricultural products, mainly olive oil. However, the island is considered an alternative tourist destination, which remains unspoiled from mass tourism (Trihas & Tsilimpokos, 2018). The tourism industry on the island has been developing in recent years and based on recent statistics there are currently 104 hotels of all categories operating (Hellenic Chamber of Hotels, 2023). Lesbos is considered a rising yoga destination. Every September in Molyvos – a popular tourist destination in the northern part of the island – the Lesbos Euphoria International Festival is taking place, which aims to promote Lesbos for its alternative character and unique energy through the advancement of mental and psychological health (Lesbos Euphoria International Festival, 2024).

The structure of the paper is as follows. This introduction is followed by the literature review and research methodology. The results of the research are then presented, and the paper concludes with the conclusion section, which discusses implications, limitations and provides directions for future research.

## Literature Review

Yoga tourism is a distinct form of special interest tourism and the literature studying it is constantly growing. Part of this literature focuses on the profile, characteristics and motivations of yoga tourists, which many authors have attempted to define. To begin with, adopting and adapting the Global Wellness Institute's (2023) definition of wellness tourists, we would say that there are two categories of yoga tourists: (a) Primary yoga tourists: Tourists who are primarily motivated by yoga and whose travel decisions regarding either destination choice or choice of experiences or other services are always influenced by yoga, (b) Secondary yoga tourists: Tourists who travel with different motivations than yoga, but who during their trips, whether leisure or business, are interested in maintaining their physical, mental or spiritual wellbeing. Although not primarily motivated by yoga, all their travel choices are influenced by their values and lifestyle as shaped by yoga; for example, during their travels they eat healthy food.

Bowers and Cheer (2017) argue that yoga travellers are more likely to be women, highly educated, professional, from developed Western countries. This profile matches the one outlined by Lehto et al. (2006), who describe the typical yoga tourist as a woman in her forties or older, working, with a high level of education and high income. In addition, they suggest that yoga tourists are spiritual rather than religious, follow the modern trend of vegetarianism

and prefer to eat organic food, and show an interest in alternative medicines. Kelly and Smith (2009) also are talking for tourists who are usually professional women in the 30 to 50 age group, with a high income and a high level of education. In the research of Ali-Knight and Ensor (2017), the typical yoga tourist is female, single or married, employed, middle-aged with high income.

A number of studies have attempted to shed light on the motivations of yoga travellers. For example, Bowers and Cheer (2017) argue that yoga travellers are mostly motivated by the chance to undergo fundamental life changes. According to Öznalbant and Alvarez (2020), yoga tourism is not a homogeneous activity and yoga travelers have different motivations. This means that in some cases they may have a spiritual motivation whereas in others they may have a wellness or a cultural motivation. Nautiyal, Albrecht and Carr (2022) suggest that the multiple motivations of yoga travellers allow them to be categorized to reflect distinct sub-segments of the yoga market. The authors propose a new typology of yoga travellers consisting of seven categories of travellers. Lehto et al. (2006) agree that the motivations of yoga tourists are multidimensional with the more important being: to renew themselves; to relax; to be more flexible in body and mind; to let go of stress from a busy life; and to help them gain a sense of balance. These motivations, according to the authors, are connected with the benefits which yoga practitioners seek through their engagement with yoga: spirituality, physical and mental health, and emotional balance. Similarly, Ali-Knight and Ensor (2017) found that the top five motivations for yoga tourists are: to increase their yoga knowledge; to have a deeper understanding of yoga practice; to enhance mental well-being; to interact with people with similar interests; and to let go of stress from a busy life. In the same direction, Jia (2018) concluded that yoga travellers' motivations include improving physical and psychological condition, gracing appearance and establishing social connection. According to Ince and Keskin (2023), yoga tourists travel for the purposes of self-improvement, mental and physical health, deepening the practice of yoga, and finding more inner peace. Finally, Kainthola et al. (2024) in their study on motivations for spiritual tourism, which is connected to yoga tourism, concluded on the following motivations: escape the pattern of life, find meaning, come closer to oneself or higher authority, and foster spiritual betterment through personal experiences.

## Methodology

As mentioned in the introductory section, the aim of this paper is to investigate and identify yoga tourists' profile, motivations and travel behaviour, providing a better understanding of this niche within the wellness tourism market. Based on the above, the main objectives of the paper are to examine:

- The demographic characteristics of yoga tourists,
- The travel behaviour of yoga tourists,
- The criteria for choosing a yoga destination,
- The motivations for engaging in yoga tourism,
- Yoga tourists' satisfaction from Lesvos as a yoga destination.

In order to meet this aim, a structured questionnaire was designed which consisted of 4 sections and 19 questions. In the first section, participants were asked to provide some information about their trip to Greece. The second section included questions about practicing yoga in their country of origin. In the third and main section, the questionnaire focused on yoga tourism and participants' travel behaviour. In the last section, participants were asked to describe their profile, providing some demographic information (i.e., gender, age, marital status, education, occupation, income and nationality). The survey was conducted between July 1st and September 30th, 2021, in the village of Molyvos in the island of Lesvos. The sample consisted

of yoga practitioners staying in the area at the time of the study. They were approached at random by two researchers in their accommodations and yoga seminars held at that time in the study area. After being informed of the purpose and nature of the survey, they were asked to take part in the survey. Those who accepted were interviewed in person by the researchers. Each survey lasted about 20 minutes. Finally, 73 fully completed and usable questionnaires were collected. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0 was used for the statistical analysis of the data.

## Results

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants. Female participants dominate with 86.3% versus 13.7% of men. More than half of the participants (54.8%) are over 55 years old, followed by the age groups 45-54 with 34.2% and 35-44 with 11%. Most participants are married (or in a civil partnership) (42.5%), followed by single persons (38.4%), divorced (13.7%) and widowed (5.5%). The educational level of the participants is remarkably high, as 45 of them (61.6%) hold a Master's or PhD degree, followed by another 32.9% that hold a Bachelor's degree. 33 of them are employed (45.2%), while the rest are either business owners (27.4%) or pensioners (27.4%). The majority of them have a high income, with 24.7% earning more than €50,000 per year, while 42.5% earn €30,000-50,000 per year. Finally, participants come from different countries, mainly from the USA (41.1%), Denmark (16.4%), Germany (13.7%), the UK (12.3%), or other countries (i.e., Austria, Australia, Iceland, Romania, Israel).

**Table 1:** Respondents' Profile – Demographic Characteristics

		N	%
Gender	Male	10	13.7
	Female	63	86.3
Age	35-44	8	11.0
	45-54	25	34.2
	55+	40	54.8
Marital status	Single	28	38.4
	Married / Civil partnership	31	42.5
	Divorced	10	13.7
	Widowed	4	5.5
Educational level	Basic	4	5.5
	Bachelor's degree	24	32.9
	Master / PhD	45	61.6
Occupation	Employed	33	45.2
	Business owner	20	27.4
	Retired	20	27.4
Annual personal income	< 15,000 €	2	2.7
	15,000-30,000 €	22	30.1
	30,001 – 50,000 €	31	42.5
	> 50,000 €	18	24.7
Nationality	USA	30	41.1
	UK	9	12.3
	Germany	10	13.7
	Denmark	12	16.4
	Other	12	16.4
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>73</b>	<b>100</b>

In the first part of the survey, participants were asked to provide some information about their trip to Lesvos Island. For most of the participants (80.8%) this is not their first trip to Greece, but for about half of them (47.9%) it is the first time they visit Lesvos. More than half of them (54.8%) are solo travellers, while the rest are accompanied either by friends (34.2%), a partner (5.5%) or colleagues (5.5%). The majority (61.6%) had planned to stay on the island for 8-14 days, while 21.9% of them would stay for a maximum of one week, 11% for 15 to 30 days and finally 5.5% for more than 30 days.

In the next part of the survey, the questions aimed to find out how experienced the participants were in yoga and yoga tourism. As their answers show, all of them practice yoga when they are in their country but with different frequency. 41.1% of them practice yoga 1 to 3 times a week, 27.4% of them 4 to 6 times a week, while 31.5% practice yoga every day. The vast majority are experienced in yoga, with 78.1% having more than 10 years of experience. Of the others, 2.8% have 6 to 10 years of experience, 8.2% have 3 to 5 years and 11% have up to two years of yoga experience. Moreover, most of them (67.1%) have made more than 3 yoga trips in the past. For only 16.4% (12 participants), this trip to Lesvos is their first yoga trip.

One of the main purposes of this research was to investigate how yoga travellers choose their destinations. As can be seen from their responses (Table 2), travellers have many different criteria on the basis of which they choose a yoga destination. The most important of these seem to be the yoga instructor (mean=4.89), the yoga programme (mean=4.56), safety in the destination (mean=4.44), attractiveness of the destination (mean=4.07), and facilities of the destination (mean=4.05). Other important factors include offering healthy food at the destination (mean=3.86), the price of the yoga trip (mean=3.60) and accessibility to the destination (mean=3.52). Less important factors seem to be the existence of a wide variety of activities in the destination (2.84), the geographical proximity of the destination to the travellers' country of origin (mean=2.59), and the familiarity of the destination (mean=2.34). How popular a yoga destination is (mean=1.90) and whether travellers have not visited the destination before (mean=1.90) do not seem to influence travellers' choice of yoga destination.

**Table 2:** Criteria for Choosing a Yoga Destination

	Mean	SD
Yoga instructor	4.89	0.315
Yoga programme	4.56	0.764
Safety in the destination	4.44	0.726
Attractiveness of the destination (climate, nature, attractions etc.)	4.07	0.694
Facilities of the yoga destination	4.05	0.780
Healthy food (e.g. organic, vegetarian, vegan)	3.86	1.084
Price of the yoga holiday	3.60	0.795
Accessibility of the destination	3.52	1.002
Wide range of activities (hiking, cooking, painting, etc.)	2.84	1.041
Distance from home / geographical proximity	2.59	1.103
Familiarity of the destination	2.34	1.366
Popular yoga destination	1.90	1.238
Not visited before the destination	1.90	0.900

Next, the reasons (motivations) that drive participants to travel to destinations in order to practice yoga were explored. As the results show (Table 3), there is no single motivation but the decision to participate in a yoga trip is driven by many different factors. Specifically, the main reasons why participants decided to realize this yoga trip to Lesvos are to acquire new knowledge (mean=4.26), to enhance mental well-being (mean=4.18), to seek an authentic

yoga experience (mean=4.15), to deepen their spirituality (mean=4.12), to relax (mean=4.11), to be more flexible in body and mind (mean=4.10), to renew to renew themselves (mean=4.08), and to remember to be happy and grateful (mean=4.07). Other important reasons for participating on this yoga trip are to better understand self and meaning of life (mean=3.96), to remain physically fit and improve their physical health (mean=3.95), to escape from the stressful everyday life (mean=3.86), to help them gain a sense of balance in life (mean=3.81), to help them not feel anxious and manage stress (mean=3.58), to attend yoga seminars that are not available in their home area (mean=3.44), to give them clarity in making decisions (mean=3.41), to help them control their negative emotions (mean=3.36), to get away from daily routines (mean=3.33), to meet and interact with people with common interests (mean=3.26), and to seek immersion in yoga culture (mean=3.08). Less important reasons for the participants are to retain their daily yoga routines during their holiday (mean=2.97), to keep them from overeating or to help them lose weight (mean=1.74), and finally to improve their status and prestige (mean=1.66).

**Table 3:** Motivations for Yoga Tourism

<i>One of the reasons I chose to come on this trip was...</i>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
To acquire new knowledge	4.26	0.834
To enhance mental well-being	4.18	1.072
To seek an authentic yoga experience	4.15	1.186
To deepen my spirituality	4.12	1.247
To relax	4.11	0.843
To be more flexible in body and mind	4.10	1.069
To renew myself	4.08	1.164
To remember to be happy and grateful	4.07	1.032
To better understand self and meaning of life	3.96	1.419
To remain physically fit / improve my physical health	3.95	0.998
To escape from the stressful everyday life	3.86	0.887
To help me gain a sense of balance in life	3.81	1.198
To help me not feel anxious / manage stress	3.58	1.053
To attend yoga seminars that are not available in my home area	3.44	1.527
To give me clarity in making decisions	3.41	1.289
To help me control my negative emotions	3.36	1.262
To get away from daily routines	3.33	1.167
To meet and interact with people with common interests	3.26	1.106
To seek immersion in yoga culture	3.08	1.431
To retain my daily yoga routines during my holiday	2.97	1.190
To keep me from overeating / lose weight	1.74	1.041
To improve my status and prestige	1.66	1.057

Finally, participants were asked to evaluate their experience in this trip to Lesvos compared to their prior expectations. The majority of them (37 persons) characterized their experience as expected, while the rest of the participants said they had a better (10 participants) or much better (26 participants) experience than they expected.

### Conclusions

Yoga tourism is a niche within the wellness tourism market and a form of special interest tourism which, especially in recent years, has attracted academic and business interest mainly because of the benefits it can bring to tourism businesses and destinations. Let us not forget that yoga retreats tend to be expensive and targeted at the premium tourist. However,

understanding the characteristics, motivations and behaviour of this group of tourists is considered critical for effective marketing by tourism businesses and destination management organizations (DMOs). In this context, this paper contributes to the existing literature by focusing on yoga tourists in an emerging yoga destination in Greece, the island of Lesbos.

Based on the results of the survey, the profile of the typical yoga tourist can be formulated as follows: female, middle-aged or older, married or divorced, highly educated, medium or high income, coming from developed countries in the West (USA or northern European countries). This profile matches that outlined in previous studies, whether they are specific to yoga tourists (Ali-Knight & Ensor, 2017; Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Kelly & Smith, 2009; Lehto et al., 2006) or tourists from other sectors of the wellness market, such as spa visitors (Trihas & Konstantarou, 2016). Most yoga tourists travel solo, it is not their first-time visiting Greece, however for many of them it is their first trip to Lesbos, where they have planned to stay up to two weeks. All of the above leads to the conclusion that yoga tourists are an attractive group of tourists: they are repeat visitors, have a high income and stay for a long time in the destination they visit.

Focusing on yoga, all of them practice yoga in their own country (1 out of 3 daily), and are experienced both in yoga, as most of them have more than 10 years of experience, and in yoga tourism as most of them have made more than three trips for this purpose in the past. These findings confirm those of Ali-Knight and Ensor (2017). Lehto et al. (2006) have shown that the more one practices yoga, the greater the chances are of travelling in the future with yoga as a primary motivation. One question that arises here, however, is what criteria do travellers use to choose their next yoga destination? The results showed that the criteria here are multiple and can be divided into two categories: (a) those related to yoga, which are the strongest (yoga instructor, yoga programme) and those that function more generally as pull factors (Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015) for all tourists regardless of their motivation (safety, attractiveness, infrastructure, cost, accessibility of the destination). Therefore, tourism businesses and DMOs should understand that it is not enough to have everything that makes a destination popular to attract the interest of yoga visitors, it is not enough to simply have a room for yoga sessions, but above all they should offer an attractive, unique, exciting, differentiated programme at a competitive price from an instructor who can give the practitioners more than they expect. According to Sharma and Nayak (2019), marketers should design a programme will create memorable experiences for yoga tourists, as these unique experiences will influence their level of satisfaction and shape their future travel behaviour. Of course, combining this programme with the provision of healthy food (e.g. organic, vegetarian, vegan) and other parallel activities in nature (e.g. hiking, cooking, painting, etc.) enhance its attractiveness. The destination also does not need to be a popular and established yoga destination. Even unknown and rising destinations can attract visitors for yoga as long as they have these features.

It is also important for tourism businesses and DMOs that want to attract visitors to yoga to know the motivations that drive this market segment to travel, and then try to satisfy them with appropriate facilities and services. The research revealed that these motivations are multiple. The top ten most important ones that primarily drive yoga practitioners to travel are to acquire new knowledge, to enhance mental well-being, to seek an authentic yoga experience, to deepen their spirituality, to relax, to be more flexible in body and mind, to renew themselves, to remember to be happy and grateful, to better understand self and meaning of life, and to remain physically fit and improve their physical health. These findings confirm those of previous researchers (Lehto et al., 2006). Lesbos as a yoga destination seems to satisfy these motivations of its visitors, as the experience they had while staying on the island and participating in yoga activities was either as they expected, or better or much better compared to their previous expectations. This is very important as the research of Leou and Wang (2023) revealed that when yoga tourists' expectations are met or even better exceeded, this increases

their satisfaction levels and influences their future travel behaviour.

This research has one major limitation. It was carried out on a relatively small sample of yoga visitors in a specific village on a specific island in Greece. This means that the survey participants may have specific characteristics that may not allow generalization of the results to the whole of this market segment. A new survey of a larger and more representative sample of yoga tourists could be conducted in the future. It would also be useful to carry out similar surveys in other yoga destinations in Greece, both established and emerging, both on the islands and the mainland, in order to compare the findings and have a more complete picture of the profile, motivations and behaviour of yoga practitioners visiting the country.

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