

# TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVE OF THE BRAND IMAGE OF MAURITIUS

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## ABSTRACT

*Brand image is a prominent marketing tool for many destination marketers. A strong brand image is equivalent to a rise in first-time customer purchase, positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and customer loyalty. Mauritius is a popular holiday destination for Europeans, however, there is a lack of research on the perceptions of its brand image among tourists visiting the island. The current study aims to fill this gap by investigating the brand image of Mauritius among European tourists. A conceptual framework that enables to establish the link between destination positioning, brand image, tourists' expectations and perceptions, customer value, word-of-mouth and destination loyalty is proposed. Descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA are used to analyze the results. The results reveal that the brand image of Mauritius is associated mostly with the Sun, Sea and Sand (3S), a peaceful and relaxing environment, and the hospitality of Mauritians. In order to consolidate the brand image of Mauritius, the weak brand image attributes have to be redressed. Results also reveal positive relationships among perceptions, customer value, loyalty and WOM. The ANOVA analysis reveals that gender and repeat visit have various degrees of influence on brand image, while age show no indication of significant impact.*

**JEL:** M31

**KEYWORDS:** brand image, destination, Mauritius, tourism, word-of-mouth, repeat visit

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the brand image perceptions among European tourists to determine the importance of brand image attributes in destination positioning. Tourism contributes significantly to the economy of Mauritius. In 2006, tourism receipts amounted to Rs 31,942 million and provided direct employment to 25,798 individuals. In the same year, 788,276 tourists visited Mauritius and the projection is 2 million by the year 2015. Europe is the most important market where 510,479 tourists visited the island in 2006 (Central Statistical Office, 2007). Mauritius, an island covering 1,860 square kilometers (720 square miles) with 1.2 million inhabitants is a well-known holiday destination for beach-resort tourists. It has a range of positive features upon which its tourism appeal is established including its tropical climate with beaches, lagoon, tropical fauna and flora, as well as a multi-ethnic population. The brand image of Mauritius has been predominantly shaped by the marketing efforts carried out by the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA) which is the national organization responsible for promoting the tourism product in internationally in selected markets. The principal asset underpinned in the communication tools is that of the Sun, Sea and Sand (3S) which depicts Mauritius as a paradise island with friendly multi-cultural inhabitants. The branding efforts in the European market attempt to position Mauritius as a unique luxury destination. The marketing efforts are also increasingly being placed on the history of the island, spas, therapeutic centers, various sports activities and safety of the destination. Although the MTPA spends considerable efforts in creating and maintaining the brand, it is not guaranteed that the European tourists are positively influenced by these marketing efforts. The purpose of this paper is to present the concept of brand image from the tourists' point of view. This study investigates the brand image attributes that Europeans use to depict Mauritius as a tourism destination and whether there is a gap between the expectations and perceptions in relation to the brand image attributes.

The paper is organised as follows: the introductory section gives a brief description of the brand image of Mauritius. This is followed by relevant literature on branding, destination branding and brand image. The conceptual framework is then presented. The research methodology and the empirical analysis are described, followed by conclusions and limitations of the study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Branding has been used extensively due to the variety of benefits it offers to a product. Aaker (1991) defines a brand as a distinctive name and/or symbol such as a logo or trademark used to recognize the goods/ services of one seller, or group of sellers, and to differentiate them from competitors attempting to provide similar products/services. Gregory (1993:39) argues that a 'strong brand sticks out in a crowd' and hence, owns a place in the customer's mind. A strong brand reduces the factor of risk experienced by consumers (Berthon, Hulbert and Pitt, 1999), diminishes the marketing and search costs (Assael, 1995), enhances the quality of the product (Erdem, 1998), and differentiates the product from competitors (Gregory, 1993; O'Cass and Lim, 2001). Branding is the best way to make consumers aware of the added value that a product has, and hence largely contributes to customer retention and loyalty.

Although Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO) can spend a lot of effort in creating and sustaining the destination brand, it is not guaranteed that the consumers will be positively influenced by these marketing efforts. Prebensen (2007) argues that many destinations struggle to build a powerful brand as they are often unable to distinguish themselves from competitors. Branding a destination is complex due to the characteristics of intangibility, inseparability and interdependence of several components of the destination that represents the holiday experience. Consumers evaluate the holiday experience and spread positive or negative word-of-mouth (WOM) depending on the extent to which they are satisfied with the different elements associated with the holiday destination. Since the intangible nature of the destination implies that such a 'product' cannot be seen or experienced prior to purchase, a successful brand is one where the destination is depicted to target markets in a manner that can persuade tourists to think and react positively to the destination (Martinez and Pina, 2003). Every product has a perceived image and a set of attributes in the consumers' minds, which is the product, service or brand positioning (Dibb and Simkin, 1993). The brand developed is based on the position that a destination seeks to hold in the market place (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). A tourist attaches significant importance to the position of a brand as the latter influences her/his decision-making process when s/he considers alternative destinations to choose from. Effective positioning of a brand entails that the destination needs to attract tourists from other countries or regions to become competitive.

Brand image is defined as the consumer's mental representation of the offering (Dobni and Zinjkan, 1990) where symbolic meanings are associated with the specific features of a product (Padgett and Allen, 1997) or destination. With a clear and powerful brand image, destinations are able to position their products and directly appeal to the needs of their consumers (Aaker, 1991; Baloglu and Brindberg, 1997; Cai 2002). Brands generate sets of quality expectations or images of the destination that individuals usually desire prior to consumption (Metelka, 1981). Since the consumers cannot experience the destination's products and services sold to them before purchase, they can solely trust the brand image and value communicated to them through planned marketing communications. In order to develop a strong brand image, it is essential that the communication efforts be carried out over the long-term (Martinez and De Chernatony, 2004). The result is that the desired message about the product/service will reach the consumers and the benefits associated with the former will be vividly present in their minds in the form of images.

The literature reveals that the definition of brand image is complex and creates confusion. Crompton (1979) contends that destination image comprises of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a tourist has of a destination. Ahmed (1991) uses the term tourist image to define the tourists' mental picture of a

destination through a representation of what they 'see' and 'feel'. In this study, the concept of brand image is defined based on the definitions of tourist image and destination image and acknowledges that these terms can be used interchangeably. The brand image is developed largely from marketing stimuli provided by formal marketing communication tools. The brand image is also influenced by informal promotional tools being WOM (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991) and the consumers own experiences [of the destination] (Berry and Seltman, 2007). These numerous factors create mental pictures representing what tourists observe and feel/experience about the destination. Several studies have also focused on the brand image attributes of destinations (Embacher and Buttle, 1989; Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993). Attributes have been defined as the 'descriptive features' typifying a product or service (Keller, 1998: 93). The brand image attributes can be separated into functional and psychological dimensions (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993). The functional aspects are associated with the tangible or measurable attributes whereas the psychological/emotional aspect comprises of the more symbolic or intangible attributes. The brand images attributes position the destination in the marketplace and distinguish it -from competitors.

### **THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

A framework is developed to illustrate the relationship between destination positioning, brand image attributes, expectations and perceptions, WOM, customer value and destination loyalty (Figure 1). The framework suggests that both the functional and psychological brand image attributes are fundamental aspects of destination positioning. Brand image attributes create tourists expectations largely through marketing stimuli used by DMO in the forms of traditional promotional tools. Customers' are influenced to visit the destination based on the attractiveness of the portrayed brand image attributes. After their purchase, customer perceptions are deduced based on their experience of the destination. A high perception will create customer loyalty, generate customer value and contribute to positive WOM. The brand image attributes has been adopted from the work of Echtner and Ritchie (1993). They suggest an attribute-based scale to measure tourist perceptions of the destination and argue that a destination should make a comprehensive analysis of its image by combining together the different image attributes in order to identify the most functional and psychological characteristics of the destination.

The conceptual framework also highlights the importance of measuring the gap between expectations and perceptions which needs to be identified to know if the brand image attributes being projected prior to the visit are aligned with the actual experience. Research that reveal the link between expectations and perceptions have been numerous and originally carried out by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) to measure service quality by using the gap model. In this study, this technique has been borrowed from the service quality methodology and applied to the measurement of a destination's brand image attributes.

The framework depicts the impact of perceived brand image attributes on customer value. Customer value has been described as the perceptions of customers regarding the trade-off that they experience between the benefits they receive from a service and the sacrifice components (Cretu and Brodie, 2007). For the purpose of this study, customer value is defined as a destination experience which represents value for money.

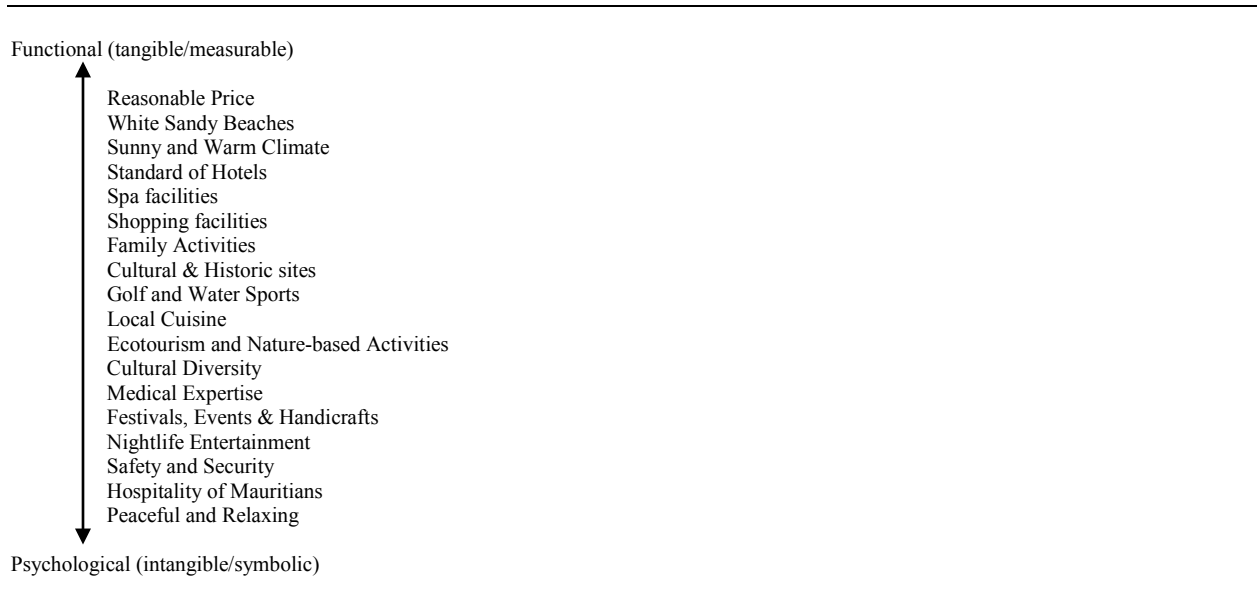
### **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

The study is based on the design and administration of a survey questionnaire. An 18-attribute scale is used to measure customer expectations and perceptions. Figure 2 refers to the brand image attributes identified in the literature which has been amended to include specific features of the destination that is presently under scrutiny. The intention is to measure if the perceptions of the tourists are similar to the desired images that have been used to position Mauritius. The respondents were asked to rate their



planned short vacation trip with their family due to limited working holidays. 97.1% of the European tourists would recommend Mauritius as a tourist destination to their friends and relatives. 97.4 % felt that their holiday experience was value for money.

Figure 2: List of Brand Image Attributes



*Functional and Psychological brand image attributes used in the study.*

Tourists were asked to rate their expectations of the brand image attributes prior to their visit on a Likert Scale (1 very poor – 5 excellent). The mean value obtained was 3.79 for their overall expectations across all attributes (Table 1). The mean values for functional and psychological dimensions were 3.7 and 4.4 respectively. The highest mean value among the functional attributes related to “sunny and warm climate” and “white sandy beaches” with mean values of 4.6 and 4.4 respectively. These were followed by “local cuisine” and “standard of hotels” both with mean values of 4.3. However, relatively low expectation scores (3.0) were found for “family activities”, “spa facilities” and “festivals, events and handicrafts” (3.1). The highest mean scores for the psychological attributes were 4.6 for “peaceful and relaxing” and 4.5 for “hospitality of Mauritians”.

The findings also revealed- that the functional attributes mostly appreciated by tourists during their stay were 4.5 for “white sandy beaches” and “sunny and warm climate”, followed by 4.3 for “standard of hotels”. These attributes indicate that Mauritius as a tourist destination is well positioned in the European countries for its beaches, quality of hotels and service delivered by the hotel staff, who are extremely polite and ‘pamper’ the tourists. However, there was a relatively low perception score of 3.2 for “family activities” followed by “festivals, events and handicrafts” (3.3).

Tourists were also required to rate their perceptions of the brand image attributes after their visit on a Likert Scale (1 very poor - 5 excellent). The most appreciated psychological attributes were “hospitality of Mauritians” with a mean value of 4.6. This is supported by the opinions of tourist obtained from the qualitative responses generated from the survey. The hospitality aspect played a crucial role in the respondents’ experience and satisfaction at the destination. They felt that their presence on the island was most welcome by ever-smiling friendly people, who build up a sense of security and reduce their uncertainty about the destination. This may influence the purchase behavior of tourists as they may develop an emotional attachment with the destination. Another important psychological attribute was

“peaceful and relaxing” destination which scored 4.5. Visitors stated that Mauritius is “a getaway, free of stress and suitable for rest”.

Table 1: Gap Scores for Expectations and Perceptions

	Expectation Mean	Perception Mean	Gap	t-values
<b>Functional Dimension</b>				
White Sandy Beaches	4.4	4.5	+0.1	2.9*
Cultural and Historical Sites	3.3	3.6	+0.3	6.2*
Ecotourism and Nature-based Activities	3.2	3.5	+0.2	4.5*
Family Activities	3.0	3.2	+0.2	5.5*
Standard of Hotels	4.3	4.3	+0.0	-0.7
Local Cuisine	4.3	4.1	-0.2	-1.2
Festivals, Events and Handicrafts	3.1	3.3	+0.2	4.1*
Medical Expertise	3.6	3.4	-0.2	-2.5*
Cultural Diversity	3.7	4.0	+0.2	4.8*
Nightlife	3.2	3.4	+0.2	2.4*
Spa Facilities	3.0	3.4	+0.5	8.3*
Reasonable Price	4.2	3.9	-0.3	-5.9*
Golf and Water Sports	3.5	3.7	+0.3	5.3*
Shopping Facilities	3.6	3.5	-0.1	-1.9
Sunny and Warm Climate	4.6	4.5	-0.1	-2.8*
Dimensional Scores	3.7	3.4	-0.3	-9.2*
<b>Psychological Dimension</b>				
Safety and Security	4.2	3.9	-0.2	-5.4*
Hospitality of Mauritians	4.5	4.6	+0.1	0.6
Peaceful and Relaxing	4.6	4.5	-0.1	-1.4
Dimensional Scores	4.4	4.3	-0.1	-3.7*
<b>Overall (combined scale of 18 attributes)</b>	<b>3.79</b>	<b>3.84</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>2.50*</b>

Table 1 presents the perceptions, expectations and gap scores for tourists’ perceptions of brand image of Mauritius. Gap mean is defined as perceptions mean – expectations mean. \* Items significantly different between expectations and perceptions scores at probability < 0.05 (two-tailed tests).

They also perceived the destination to be a paradise tropical island which resulted in making their holidays, enjoyable, relaxing and pleasant. The respondents stated that although they have to travel a long distance and spend at least 12 hours to reach Mauritius, it is a privilege to be in a calm and restful environment surrounded by beautiful beaches and wonderful local people. This shows that the destination setting is vital for the tourist experience and consolidates the brand image. The least performing psychological attribute was “safety and security” with a score of 3.9 as a few tourists were robbed during their stay. The largest gap scores were found with respect to functional attributes, such as “spa facilities” (+ 0.5) and “reasonable price” (- 0.3). This indicates that tourists were more sensitive about tangible attributes. Regarding the psychological attributes, tourists felt that “safety and security” (- 0.2) was the largest gap.

Paired *t*-tests were carried out to investigate if there was a statistically significant difference between the expectations and perceptions scores. The paired-sample *t*-tests between the two sets across all attributes indicate a statistically significant difference on 13 of the 18 items examined. Within these 13 attributes, only four attributes, “medical expertise” (-0.2), “reasonable price” (-0.3), “sunny and warm climate” (- 0.1) and “safety and security” (-0.2) have negative gap scores. The attribute regarding “sunny and warm climate” was below the expectations of tourists as Mauritius was under the influence of a cyclone and this has had an impact on the climate. The results indicate that in most cases, tourists perceived the destination brand image as being higher than they expected it to be. In addition, the overall gap score (defined as Perceptions minus Expectations) was +0.05 (Sig. 0.013), which indicates that the destination performed better as compared to the expectations of visitors.

Correlation analysis is used to examine the rationale that high perceptions will lead to creation of customer value, generate WOM and destination loyalty. Thus, as a preliminary step the simple

correlation coefficients for these variables are examined (Figure I). The findings show that there are positive relationships between perceptions and customer value ( $r=0.12$ ), perceptions and WOM ( $r=0.25$ ), perceptions and destination loyalty ( $r=0.52$ ), customer value and WOM ( $r=0.34$ ), WOM and destination loyalty ( $r=0.26$ ). Though indicating a weak relationship, this shows that the tourists perceived that the destination represented value for money and are likely to spread positive WOM. Hence, WOM is a factor which influences brand image and is an integral part in consolidating the brand image of a destination. The perceptions of brand image attributes also strongly determine tourists' repeat purchase intentions.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze if the mean values of brand image dependency were significantly different in relation to gender, age and repeat visits (Table 2). It is important for DMO to understand the effect of key demographic characteristics on tourists' perceptions on brand image. Results showed that there are significant differences in relation to gender ( $F = 2.291$ ;  $p < 0.000$ ) and repeat visit ( $F = 13.987$ ;  $p < 0.000$ ), while age show no indication of significant impact. The results suggest that tourists' repeat visit have a higher influence on brand image than tourists' gender.

Table 2: ANOVA results

Independent variable	Gap scores	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F-value	Significance
Gender	Between Groups	26.390	1	4.039	2.491	0.000
	Within Groups	57.563	341	0.289		
	Total	83.953	342			
Age	Between Groups	0.690	1	0.172	0.572	0.683
	Within Groups	78.535	341	0.301		
	Total	101.535	342			
Repeat visit	Between Groups	4.039	1	0.498	13.987	0.000
	Within Groups	98.186	341	0.200		
	Total	102.225	342	0.498		

Table 2 shows tourists' perceptions of brand image in relation to their gender, age and repeat visit. The demographic variables gender and repeat visit have significant influence on tourists' brand image perceptions ( $p < 0.000$ ). Df = Degree of freedom

The comparison between expected and perceived image reveals that the brand image of Mauritius as depicted by destination marketers is largely confirmed by the European tourists. The results confirm that no repositioning of Mauritius is needed as the brand image reflects that the destination has been strongly positioned in the European market. The brand image addresses the needs of the Europeans and motivates them to travel a long distance to reach the destination. The findings support view of Echtner and Ritchie (1993) that both the functional and psychological attributes are important in evaluating the brand image of the destination.

The strongest brand image attributes are the "white sandy beaches", "hospitality of Mauritians" and "standard of hotels". It should be acknowledged that these strong attributes are synonymous to the Mauritian brand. They are images that have been extensively portrayed through numerous marketing efforts over decades. Therefore, it supports the literature which reveals that creating a brand image is a long process and successful brand images are carefully conceived over a period of time (Martinez and De Chernatony, 2004). It has been found that the motivation behind European travel was for peace and relaxation. They sought calm, restful and relaxing environment for their holidays and so prior to their visit, this specific attribute was highly important as they valued it the most after the beaches, sunny climate and hospitality of the locals.

Although Mauritius is famous for its 3S and perceived as a friendly destination, tourists have had experiences which may impinge on its future brand image. A positive image may continue even long after the factors that molded it have changed (Fayeke and Crompton, 1991: 10) and therefore although the

present image is one where the local inhabitants are hospitable, the negative incidents such as tourists being victims of robbery and exploited in their shopping activities are likely to spoil the brand image of the destination over the long-term. Another factor which impinges on the brand image is unclean environment and litter which should be managed by sensitizing the locals about environment issues, such as not protecting the environment will result in damaging one of the most important brand attribute underpinning the destination's tourism appeal.

More resources should be directed towards improving the weak image attributes and maintaining the strength of the existing attributes. The majority of tourists have stated that family activities are not strongly depicted in the marketing efforts in Europe. It is recommended that promotion of family activities should increase as many tourists after their visit believe that Mauritius is ideal for families. The study also revealed that improvement should be made in the following areas: road networks, road signage, traffic congestion, pollution and wreckless taxi drivers. It is also crucial for local inhabitants of a tourism destination to know what the brand image of their destination stands for (Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 2003) as it largely influences the brand image of a destination. The DMO depicts the brand image which is a promise about the holiday experience but it is essential for the visitors to enjoy an experience that 'corresponds to their needs and matches the image that they hold of the destination' (Joppe, Martin and Waalen, 2001: 252).

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the brand image perceptions of Mauritius among European tourist. Descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA were used to analyze the results. The study shows that no repositioning of Mauritius is needed as both the functional and psychological brand image attributes reveals that Mauritius has been positioned as a distinctive destination. These attributes are highly important to Europeans and likely to determine their decision-making process and repeat purchase intentions. The strong relationship between perceptions and destination loyalty reveals that the destination has succeeded to match the tourists' actual experience with the promises made to the consumers prior to travel. Nevertheless, efforts are needed to address the weak image attributes and consolidate the overall brand image of Mauritius perceived by the European tourists. Destination marketers should continue to focus on developing promotional campaigns that highlight both the functional and psychological attributes as they are ubiquitous in consumers' decision-making process. The study reveals that there is a relationship between the perceptions of brand image attributes and WOM in the context of tourism destinations. Since Mauritius has a high rate of loyal customers and repeaters have established expectations, it is important to identify the perceptions of tourists after the first visits and determine if efforts should be carried out to enhance the perceived attributes of the destination. Therefore, focusing on WOM and continuing to improve the features of the destination is imperative for the destination (Joppe *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, a careful appraisal of the weak attributes of the destination needs to be performed. This is further supported by the ANOVA model which indicated significant differences among gender and repeat visit on brand image perceptions. As repeat visit has a greater impact on brand image, therefore DMO must continuously measure tourists' perceptions of brand image so that they are able to device more effective marketing strategies to restructure their markets for better competitive advantage.

### Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of the study must be noted when interpreting the results and developing future research. It must be acknowledged that the respondents' opinions may be somewhat influenced by the fact that they were already in Mauritius when completing the part questionnaire related to expectations. The sample may not fully reflect the perceptions of Europeans. The survey was conducted in March 2007 and thus the sample may not be representative of the European tourists who visited the destination during other periods of the year. Another study analyzing cross-cultural perceptions and expectations would be



valuable in enhancing knowledge on how best to position the destination in different European countries based on brand image attributes. For future studies, tourists from different countries should be included, and additional studies should be conducted during different seasons and at different destinations.

**APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE**

Directions: Please write down your answers in the space provided or place a tick in the box where appropriate.

1. (a) is this your first visit to Mauritius?      Yes     No
  
- (b) If No, how many times have you visit Mauritius before?
 

Once          Twice          Thrice          More than three times
  
2. Using the table below, please indicate what you expected from the destination before your visit. Your expectations reflect your opinions about the following attributes prior to visiting Mauritius. Please encircle the appropriate answer: 1-Very Poor, 2- Poor, 3- Neither good nor poor, 4- Good, 5- Excellent.

Attribute statements	Very Poor	Poor	Neither good nor poor	Good	Excellent
White Sandy Beaches	1	2	3	4	5
Cultural and Historic sites	1	2	3	4	5
Ecotourism & Nature-based Activities	1	2	3	4	5
Families Activities	1	2	3	4	5
Hospitality of Mauritians	1	2	3	4	5
Local Cuisine	1	2	3	4	5
Festivals, Events & Handicrafts	1	2	3	4	5
Sunny and Warm Climate	1	2	3	4	5
Cultural Diversity	1	2	3	4	5
Nightlife Entertainment	1	2	3	4	5
Peaceful & Relaxing	1	2	3	4	5
Standard of Hotels	1	2	3	4	5
Reasonable Price	1	2	3	4	5
Safety and Security	1	2	3	4	5
Medical Expertise	1	2	3	4	5
Shopping Facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Spa Facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Golf and Water Sports	1	2	3	4	5

3. After your visit to Mauritius, please indicate your perceptions for the following attributes. Encircle the appropriate answer: 1-Very Poor, 2- Poor, 3- Neither good nor poor, 4- Good, 5- Excellent.

Attribute statements	Very Poor	Poor	Neither good nor poor	Good	Excellent
White Sandy Beaches	1	2	3	4	5
Cultural and Historic sites	1	2	3	4	5
Ecotourism & Nature-based Activities	1	2	3	4	5
Families Activities	1	2	3	4	5
Hospitality of Mauritians	1	2	3	4	5
Local Cuisine	1	2	3	4	5
Festivals, Events & Handicrafts	1	2	3	4	5
Sunny and Warm Climate	1	2	3	4	5
Cultural Diversity	1	2	3	4	5
Nightlife Entertainment	1	2	3	4	5
Peaceful & Relaxing	1	2	3	4	5
Standard of Hotels	1	2	3	4	5
Reasonable Price	1	2	3	4	5
Safety and Security	1	2	3	4	5
Medical Expertise	1	2	3	4	5
Shopping Facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Spa Facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Golf and Water Sports	1	2	3	4	5



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