

## TEQUILA TOURISM AS A FACTOR OF DEVELOPMENT: A STRATEGIC VISION IN MEXICO

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The main objective of the paper is to establish that Tequila Tourism can be a tool in the economic development of the Jalisco region, linking the product, tequila, the agave landscape, and the fact that the tourist route can be a sign of identity for this tourist market.

**Design** – The need to achieve sustainable rural development, taking into account respect for the environment, along with the creation of wealth and jobs, is would involve both public administrations and companies through the promotion of complementary activities in this rural region; thus, this paper advocates the consolidation of the Tequila Route.

**Methodology** – The proposed methodology develops a theoretical contextualization of the subject of this study –Tequila Tourism – using a Delphi approach with a panel of experts, leading to a SWOT analysis.

**Approach** – This study has been developed using the interpretative approach Expert opinion has shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of the Tequila Route as endogenous factors for progress in these rural areas.

**Finding** – This research has established that the enhancement of tequila as a product shows great potential for the development of new tourism practices such as gastronomic tourism.

**Originality of research** – The originality is found in the analysis of the economic potential of introducing Tequila tourism routes in the region of Jalisco, Mexico and providing guidance and ideas for further improvements and research into this important sector of tourism.

**Keywords** Tequila, Cultural Heritage, Rural Development, Agave Landscape

### **INTRODUCTION**

Globalization produces similar tastes and trends worldwide; it also affects tourism. Recently new destinations have been emerging as complementary pathways that generate wealth and new jobs. Thus, along with classic cultural or rural destinations, new ones are emerging and presenting innovative products that respond to the demand in certain segments of the population. These occurrences lead to the creation of tourist routes, including those of wine and tequila (mezcal wine). Thus, tequila and tourism (together with local cuisine) appear in perfect symbiosis to allow visitors to enjoy a distinctive tourism product, promoting the economic development of tequila-producing regions, both through sales of their products in the wineries themselves and as a source of new business opportunities. Thus, studies on the topic of tequila tourism (Gonzalez 2008, 327; Cabrales and Gonzalez 2009, 399) suggest and promote the idea that food and tequila could be the main reason for traveling to this particular region, and not necessarily merely a secondary trip activity. These products become an instrument for

promoting cultural tourism and a gastronomic alternative to the tequila industry, improving the quality of life for inhabitants and generating additional income.

A touristic destination proposes a selection of products and services to be consumed or experienced in a given offer (Brice et al. 2012, 50). A destination can be considered as extremely similar to a brand and can be marketed as a brand per se: Kerr (2006, 277) proposes defining a destination brand as follows: “[. . .] name, symbol, logo, word or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of destination experience.”

Tourism linked to tequila presents a complete sensory experience: any tourist, regardless of his knowledge of tequila and wine, appreciates the palate of different tequilas, the smell of the wine, drinking a sample at a tequila tasting, the vision of a winery that is sometimes centuries old, or the pleasure of opening a bottle of a hundred proof ‘agave tequila’. Thus a cultural trip becomes a journey of history, knowledge and tastings that attracts an increasingly more selective population eager to learn the production processes of these liquors. Also this situation involves the need to accommodate this particular demand, creating a new tourist offer with professionalized tourism marketing based on the needs of this sector (tourism and wine market).

In this sense, the clustering of activities and attractions and the development of tourist routes encourage cooperation and relationships among different enterprises in rural areas. Thus, tourism is an alternative to develop strategies and economic and social regeneration of rural areas. Tequila tourism, as a model of sustainable and inclusive economic development in certain areas, is able to boost the competitiveness of a territory and increase tequila production and its quality, without affecting the environment and while improving the living conditions of citizens.

This paper is intended to analyze tequila tourism and it shows how rural settings can be organized in the geographic area of Jalisco (Mexico), in order to draw conclusions that might be useful for other similar geographic areas.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The wine of mezcal (tequila), from the agave plant, is a highly commercialized product from the point of view of tourism, and one of the best known symbols of Mexican culture and the region of Jalisco. It can be included in the wine tourism sector as it has the characteristics, from the point of view of the customer, to be treated as a tourist product.

The definition and conceptualization of the term wine tourism is not uniform and it can be analysed from different perspectives (Mitchell & Hall 2006, 310), such as marketing or even the motivation of travellers. Therefore, according to Getz and Brown (2006, 79), wine tourism is simultaneously a consumer behaviour, a strategy to develop a geographic region and the wine market in that area, and an opportunity to promote

wineries in order to sell their products directly to consumers. In this sense, Mitchell and Hall (2006, 300) identify seven different fields in the study of wine: the product itself, tourism and development, regional development based on the wine, the size of the wineries to be visited, the segmentation of wine related visitors, tourist behavior, the analysis of visitor experience, and a final field of research on the risks caused by visitors related to healthcare quality controls.

In this sense, Tequila Tourism has been configured in recent years as a complementary path to job creation and wealth generation in rural areas. The creation of new destinations competing against traditional sun and beach sites like Puerto Vallarta in the region of Jalisco, allows for increased revenues in inland areas and prevents the migration of the rural population. In this sense, Hall et al. (2000) analyses the development and management of wine tourism in the world and its impact on the development of rural areas. O'Neill and Charters (2000) point out that wine tourism attracts ethical and responsible tourists who interact well with locals and spend a great deal of money. The importance of wine tourism in recent years in different parts of the world has been well documented in countries like Australia (Hall & Macionis 1998, and Jolley, 2002), Canada (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2003), Chile (Sharples, 2002 and Muñoz, 2010), France (Frochot, 2000), Greece (Tzimitra-Kalogianni et al., 1999), Hungary (Szivas, 1999), Italy (Brunori & Rossi, 2000), New Zealand (Beverland, 1998; Hall & Macionis, 1998, and Hall et al., 1998), Portugal (Correia et al., 2004 and Pereira et al., 2012), South Africa (Bruwer, 2003 and Preston-White, 2000), the U.S. (Skinner, 2000), the United Kingdom (Howley & Van Westering, 2008) or even Spain (Gilbert, 1992; Hall & Mitchell, 2000 and Millán, 2012).

Even so, very few tourism studies on Tequila have been carried out (Gómez, 2011; Marmolejo, 2011; Venegas, 2011; Gonzalez-Torreros, 2008; Hernández, 2009; Cabrales & González, 2008; Gonzalez, 2008).

In Mexico, the tequila industry is of great importance as it can be considered a global industry that is strongly linked to international economy through partnerships with importers and distributors throughout the world. Some tequila production companies are owned by American multinational companies (example Herradura by Brown-Forman), which has helped to give this beverage renown as a high-end liquor like whiskey, cognac or brandy.

Tourist activities emerge in the region of Tequila in 1997, with the first initiative to create the "Tequila Express", a pioneering product supported and operated by the National Chamber of Commerce, Transportation Services and Guadalajara tequila companies. It involves a train ride tour created for this purpose, which takes nine hours (round trip) from Guadalajara to Tequila, allowing tourists to enjoy the Agavero heritage scenery, culture and cuisine. This is considered to be among the world's top five train rides. Also, tequila road routes have been created, allowing tourists the chance to enjoy the cultural, recreational and agave landscape of Jalisco in the foothills of the Tequila Volcano.

## METHODOLOGY

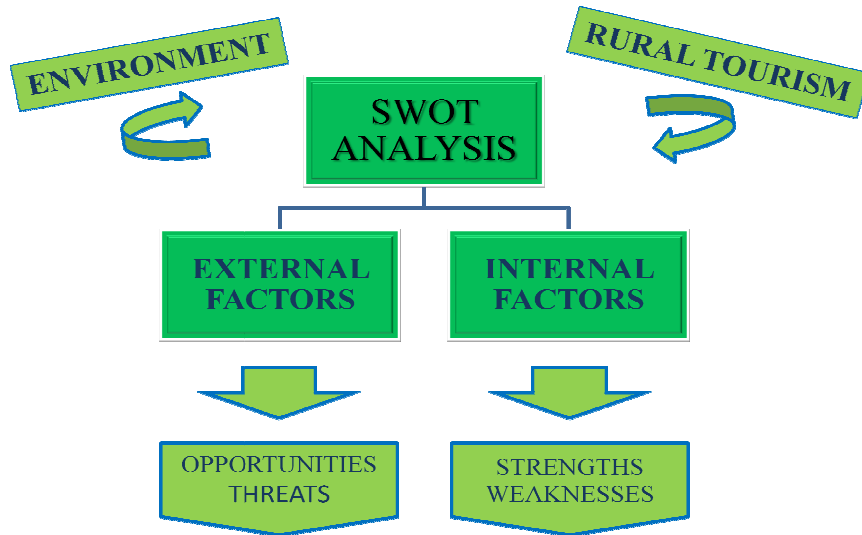
Professors Kenneth Andrews and Roland Christensen created a new analysis tool in the 70's for company management, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). Its objective is to evaluate the strong and weak points in the sector along with any outside threats, postulating that a strategy should achieve a good fit between its internal capacity and any outside competition. This technique is an instrument to diagnose the potential and limitations of a sector and how it interacts with its environment, in order to define strategies that lead to interaction. The SWOT matrix will help to organize decision-making by taking advantage of opportunities that present themselves, while not forgetting existing strengths and weaknesses. The most complex part of the process lies in distinguishing between threats and weaknesses in order to set appropriate actions into motion, converting them into strengths and opportunities. SWOT has been chosen as the instrument to study rural tourism in rural zones with the denominations of origin that are our object of study. It is a well-chosen method for carrying out an analysis of the strategic situation and opportunities in the sector with respect to the surrounding competitive environment. Through the SWOT analysis, four factors are identified: threats, opportunities, strengths and weaknesses.

Threats and opportunities are two factors that are conditioned by the environment. Threats would be any force in the surroundings that can hold back the implantation of a strategy or reduce its effectiveness, or increase any risks or resources needed to put it into effect, or even reduce expected revenues or yields. Opportunities are anything that can introduce a competitive advantage for the sector, or provide a chance to optimize the profitability of the venture. To identify these factors it is necessary to know the economic, legal, political, social and technological milieu this sector occupies.

Weaknesses and strengths comprise intrinsic aspects of the sector itself. They represent respectively restrictions that should be overcome, since they could limit development or, on the other hand, they could be factors to maintain and potentiate, since they could facilitate survival and expansion. Weaknesses are aspects that limit or reduce the ability to perfect the company strategy effectively, comprising a threat for the organization and should, thus, be examined and overcome. Strengths are capacities, resources, positions achieved and, consequently, competitive advantages that should and can help to exploit opportunities.

A SWOT matrix allows a series of strategic lines of action to be drawn up, to try to resolve weaknesses and take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the environment by potentiating the strengths of the sector in the areas that are the object of our study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Map of the SWOT Analysis.



Source: the authors

### CREATING AND ESTABLISHING THE TEQUILA ROUTE IN MEXICO

The development of tourism in the Tequila area is a recent phenomenon that took off after 2006 as a result of UNESCO recognition of World Heritage in the Cultural Landscape for "the Agave Landscape" and "old Tequila facilities". Although tequila production goes back to the sixteenth century with the arrival of Spanish settlers who began distilling the fermented juice of the agave plant, it was not until 1959 that the National Chamber of the Tequila Industry (CNIT) was created to further the business interests of tequila producers who united to face the challenges of the sector. The aims of these new tourism activities are to promote the economic and social development of the territory in a sustainable way to improve inhabitants' quality of life. The objectives can be summarized as follows:

- The increase of tourism and the number of visitors to the region of Tequila, and identifying the evolution and dynamics of the tourism system based on the initiative of the agents involved.
- The creation of wealth through an activity that complements local traditions and visitor flows, qualifying and studying their spatial and temporal logics.
- The improvement of the infrastructure in the region, which ultimately affects the quality of life of those living in these areas.
- Diversification and the correction of the seasonality of tourism.
- To critically assess the impact of the activity on local development, by incorporating economic, social, cultural and environmental facets.

To achieve these goals, several agents involved in the development of Tequila's tourism have been consulted, including: producers, hotel managers and companies dedicated to selling tequila and related products. Their opinion is a necessary source of information about their implication and interest in about the creation of tequila tourist routes, and to formulate a SWOT analysis to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats involved in the process. This is necessary to establish a set of alliances between the different companies responsible for providing appropriate services, because in the tourism industry, the traveller (consumer) buys a single product (meeting a need through a trip), with complementary alternative cultural and gastronomic activities, while this unique product is sold by several suppliers (the hotelier, restaurateur and winemaker). It is therefore essential to establish bases, sometimes even legal ones, in order to reach agreements or alliances among all the suppliers. Using this methodology, some conclusions are reached that could enhance and increase the potential of the 'tequila route' product.

The strengths observed are the following:

- Possession of a brand-name known worldwide, transmitting the image of Mexico to the world
- The existence of the Agave Landscape and its recognition as a World Heritage Site since 2006.
- The presence of centuries-old industries engaged in the production of Tequila.
- The declaration of the town of Tequila as “Magic Town” by the Ministry of Tourism.
- Being geographically embedded in the region of Jalisco, where most typical Mexican products can be found (Tequila, Mariachis and Charrería).
- Having already generated the Tequila Route leads to the creation of new products and a network of facilities that offer quality products and services both domestically and internationally.

On the other hand, the most evident weaknesses include:

- Airport facilities are still inadequate.
- Poor road infrastructure and lack of properly informative signposting.
- Underdeveloped hotel infrastructure.
- Insufficient cultural development and job training to attend to international tourism.
- Lack of coordination between different public and private stakeholders in the generation and development of initiatives.
- Minimum average tourist stay-overs (hiking tourism).
- Low influx of international tourism.
- Action taken over by the big tourist tequila companies that monopolize the activity (Cuervo and Herradura) who direct the ferrying of tourists from collection points (Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta) to their warehouses, hindering the development of activity for small businesses and other sectors that could benefit from tourism, because tourists do not venture out of the wine cellars to tour the towns.
- Poor environmental control and agave landscape conservation.

The opportunities are, however, important:

- Diversity of natural, cultural and historical resources in the area that can promote the creation of complementary tourism products (nature tourism, adventure, health, cultural, religious, business and conventions ...)
- Human resources: hospitality and the spirit of service.
- The declaration of tourism as a priority economic activity for the Government of Mexico and the State of Jalisco.
- The nearby availability of an additional sun and beach destination (Puerto Vallarta) or a main commercial hub (Guadalajara).
- The possibility of using communication technologies for direct access to new markets.

Some threats must be considered, as they can condition all further developments:

- The image of insecurity in Mexico perceived around the world.
- Lack of competitiveness and quality in tourism services.
- Global economic instability.
- The availability, in the area, of well-known competitive, national and international destinations.
- Insufficient appreciation of preserving the environment, culture and history.
- Loss of traditional values.

The Tequila route was established on April 27, 2006 by the Tequila Regulatory Council which was chosen to be the executing agency of a technical cooperation agreement with the non-refundable Development Bank. The project's objective was to increase the competitiveness of small and medium tourism enterprises and related sectors, developing a common vision, tourism products and services around tequila-related options and the agave landscape (Venegas, 2011, 164).

Once the tourist route has been created, the next step would be to promote the tourism product in order to reach its potential, creating synergy between public and private interests to pave the way for the future evolution of the tourism route.

The methodology for the implementation of this type of tourism product involves three distinct phases: launching, development and consolidation. The launching phase begins when the different public and private entities involved in the tourism product (accommodation establishments, public, warehouses, and so on) create an entity to manage the route and the facilities of the establishments that are part of that route.

The development phase begins once the official certification as 'Tequila Route' is approved. During this period, the management body launches detailed actions coordinated with the General Secretariat of Tourism. If the certification process results in a satisfactory evaluation, the destination will maintain its certification as the 'Tequila Route' and move on to the next phase. If the process is negatively assessed, it loses its certification.

The consolidation phase is a continuous process of checking that the route remains within the desired quality level, both in terms of the number of associated establishments and in the actions of the management body.

Currently Tequila routes are under development. The municipalities of Tequila, Amatitlán, Arenal, Magdalena, Ahualulco de Mercado, Etzatlán, San Juanito de Escobedo, Teuchitlán are involved, and have 152 tourist service companies (72 SMEs and 79 artisans) with the distinctive TT symbol (Tourist Tequila) of service quality.

Figure 2: Map of the Tequila Route



Source: Tourism Bureau of the State Government of Jalisco.

The tequila route has developed various activities aimed at promoting and developing participating inhabitants and municipalities, highlighting the different activities that can be performed in the region from the point of view of tourism, such as:

- The creation of Cultural Tourism commercial packages of products and services that try to show or explain the archaeological, historical, monumental, architectural and living cultural expressions of the municipalities of the Tequila Route.
- Farm products that are intended to demonstrate, explain and encourage interaction with field activities related to Agave.
- Adventure tourism: products and services with a low risk level and the interpretation of the natural resources on the Route.
- Tourism weddings with products that offer the visitor the infrastructure needed for organizing weddings and banquets, on the tequila industry premises.

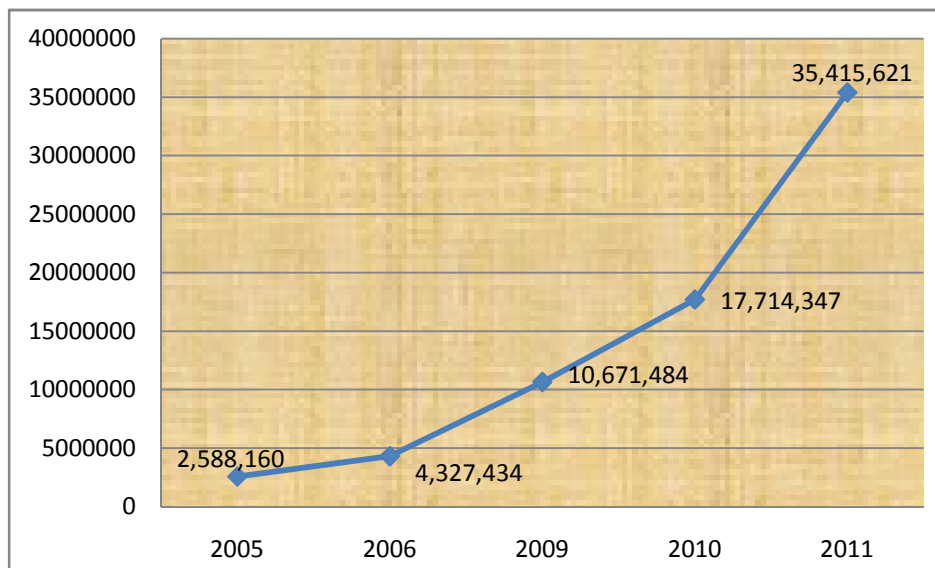
For the understanding and enjoyment of the cultural values of the tequila industry, the industry has created programs like 'Tequila Express' and the concept of 'Mundo Cuervo'. The town of Tequila is promoting tourism in the so called 'magical villages'.

Some activities include the recovery of old abandoned distilleries for cultural visits, catering, and old haciendas that had produced tequila, guided visits to industrial facilities, tours of the agave landscape, ecotourism activity in the volcano of Tequila, handicraft production linked to the area, traditional cuisine and festivals. These present



an untapped market niche for the strengthening of cultural tourism that the Secretary of Tourism of Jalisco is publicizing, while also promoting this region by presenting tequila in international tourism fairs. The objective is to increase the number of tourists on the Tequila Route (from six hundred thousand in 2011, to seven hundred thousand a year later), and to increase the income associated with a well-established Tequila Route; the income has increased more than tenfold in six years (from \$2.5 million in 2005 to \$35.4 million in 2011).

Graph 1: **Income related to Tequila tourism (\$)**



Source: Mexico Tourism Secretariat

### **PROPOSAL FOR STRATEGIC ACTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OF THE TEQUILA ROUTE**

Promotional actions for any tourism product undoubtedly require knowledge about the peculiarities, circumstances, preferences and necessities of the market, from both the point of view of offer as well as demand.

The zone should adapt itself through the diversification of tourism products, and make a specialized offer to adjust to the changes that take place in consumer habits to satisfy these needs, which is definitely what is most important for procuring the loyalty of new tourism consumers. As a result of the findings of the SWOT analysis, a series of strategic actions and measures are proposed to lead to the promotion of the zone, increase wealth and attract new investments.

**1. Strategy:** To encourage the coordination of public and private institutions in order to promote tourism in Tequila. The great diversity of those involved in tourism promotion, especially state, regional and local public organisms and the lack of coordination among them and with other stakeholders all becomes an obstacle that affects the promotion of tourism. For that reason, coordination should be fomented among the different factions cooperating in the combined fabrication of activities by the different institutions. By the same token, common ground should be found among the different public and private entities so they can take a common stand in the actions to be carried out to develop tourism in Tequila in the region of Jalisco.

**2. Strategy:** To encourage the development of tourism as an activity integrating different business activities in the municipal areas that make up the Route. Among the actions proposed are:

- a) Developing cooperation in tourism with other activities to design an integrated offer to reduce the seasonal effect of tourism demand.
- b) Developing combined efforts for tourism promotion with other companies involved in activities related to tourism.
- c) Promoting and supporting participation of fellow businessmen in certain events oriented towards free time activities.

**3. Strategy:** To promote the forging of collaboration and agreements among companies and educational institutions to obtain better coordination with professional-formation teaching that matches the needs of companies and institutions in the tourism zone.

**4. Strategy:** To promote a culture of cooperation among wine cellar producers and hotel activity so that small wineries and hotel establishments can form part of the tourism offer on the Tequila Route in the same conditions as the distilleries whose installations have monopolized the principal tourism offer of Tequila. If it is not possible to diversify the tourism offer, this will continue to be associated with single day visits and few over-night stays, which weakens hotel development in the area and thus decreases revenues.

**5. Strategy:** International Promotion of the Tequila Route. Although tequila is a product that is symbolic of this culture in the international market, actually the great majority of real visitors are domestic. Acting together with the state of Mexico in promoting the Tequila Route in big international tourism fairs and in conjunction with big tour operators, this is a fundamental step for the necessary elimination of the seasonality of demand in order to increase the revenues that tourism can generate in this area.

**6. Strategy:** Development of sustainable tourism and environmental protection of the zone. It cannot be forgotten that the agavero landscape has been declared Heritage of Humanity by the UNESCO. This fact is another attractive tourism factor, although at the same time it is an important responsibility with respect to its conservation on the part of the organisms involved. Maintaining this landscape in the same pristine condition for centuries is an obligation and commitment acquired in the declaration of Human Heritage, but it is also imperative if they want to maintain a competitive advantage with respect to other tourism destinations.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The need to raise sustainable patterns of tourism in areas traditionally engaged in other economic activities in order to avoid mistakes in the marketing of tourist areas leads to the need for determining exactly what and how tourists wish to consume in each specific destination. This study has undertaken an analysis of the situation of tequila tourism and proposed a methodology for conducting a tourism study in the Tequila region and on the tequila routes.

There is still no mass tourism because tourism promotion in the region of tequila agave production is very recent, and tourists only visit the place for a short period of time (usually less than a day). Most tourists come from Mexico itself and in the case of international tourism, from the U.S., the starting point being the coastal area of Puerto Vallarta. They do not cause any environmental impact that could affect the agave landscape. Others come from Guadalajara and use the Tequila Express as a tourist attraction.

To boost the number of overnight stays, it is necessary to rehabilitate the oldest tequila haciendas, the number of hotel rooms and to increase quality standards for international tourism.

The recognition by UNESCO of the agave region as a cultural landscape has been the point of departure for visitors interested in learning how tequila is produced. However, the basic initiatives to promote it are the "Tequila Express" and "Mundo Cuervo". These bear the major bulk of tourist flow, while "Tequila: Magic Town" and the "National Museum of Tequila" are virtually unnoticed by visitors. It is imperative to revitalize these two options in order to promote a wider range of cultural activities and to obtain a balanced approach to Tequila tourism that benefits the residents of the region. So far, the big winners are the tequila companies, as sales of their products in the distilleries have increased in recent years.

The growing demand for tequila tourism means that companies have a promising future, but to consolidate such destinations, promotion must be properly undertaken both on the part of the different branches of public administration as well as by private companies themselves.

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