

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATION OF INTEGRATED TOURISM PRODUCT (FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF VELINGRAD)

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the new century there is a trend in Bulgaria towards increasing demand for specialized tourism services. Although our country has unique combinations of natural and anthropogenic resources, they get quickly exhausted as an attraction. This requires continuous updating of tourism product in order to adapt it to the ever changing needs of users. Good prerequisites for that are presented in creating an integrated tourism product based on the available resources for development of rural and spa tourism in the region of the municipality of Velingrad - which is the subject of this research. On the one hand, the area is well-established and rich in mineral waters; it has the relevant facilities for development of SPA services and, on the other hand, it has the necessary prerequisites for development of rural tourism. The author states that, given the upcoming tourism regionalisation of the country, the creation of an integrated tourism product is the basis for achieving high competitiveness of tourism at international level.

Key words: development of rural areas, integration, integrated tourism, rural and SPA tourism

INTRODUCTION

Velingrad is located 130 km from Sofia, and 80 km from Plovdiv in the western part of the Rhodope mountain. Beautiful nature and deposits of mineral waters make Velingrad one of the leading “balneological” resorts in the Balkans.



Photo 1. Velingrad Panorama

Velingrad was established in 1948 upon the merging of three settlements – Kamenitsa,

Ladzhene and Chepino.

The Chepino region became a part of the Bulgarian state as early as the First Bulgarian Empire.

The Tsepina Fortress, and also the entire region fell under the Ottoman power in 1371 – 1373.

The Tsepina Fortress is a monument of culture with national significance. It was built on a rocky hill with elevation of 1136 m, and during the Middle Ages the fortress was a political and administrative center. Recently the foundations of the fortress walls, the foundation of the church and four water reservoirs were renovated. There is an exposition of the finds, discovered upon its archaeological surveys in the foot of Tsepina. Workshops and enterprises for wood material processing were established in the region around Velingrad after the Liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878.

Velingrad is also famous for the largest karst spring in Bulgaria, called Kleptuza. Its output is from 600 to 1200 l/sec, and supplies two ponds with a separated resting area with water wheels on the side.

The average annual air temperature in the

resort is + 9.3°C with average January and July temperatures at + 1.8°C and + 18.7°C, respectively.

Velingrad is in the first place in Bulgaria in terms of abundance and diversity of its mineral waters, the temperature of which varies between 28°C and 91°C. The diversity of mineral waters has also led to diversity of options for use of the mineral water – for relaxation, rehabilitation and recovery. Mineral baths, swimming pools, beaches, balneological sanatoriums, and SPA hotels are available for tourists. The hottest water is in the section of Kamentsa – with temperature of up to 91 C.

The mineral water and the procedures which are offered in Velingrad have favorable influence upon the locomotory system, neurological disorders, hypertonia, gynecological problems, renal and urological, respiratory and stomach, and intestinal illnesses.

During the mass forceful conversion to Mohammedanism (Islam) of the Bulgarians in the region in the second half of the 17th century, many people had escaped and had hidden in the forests, in order to keep their Christian faith. After that most of them had settled in the residential section of Kamenitsa, where they had built the temple “St. Trinity”. Secretly a dug out was excavated, it was turned into a chapel and liturgies were performed there. In 1933, it began the painting of the temple, which continued for nine years. In 1965 the church was reconstructed. The church takes 211 square m. built up area; the building is massive, and the walls are constructed of stone with thickness of 0.80 m.

Another interesting place in Velingrad is the History Museum. In it one can see one of the richest expositions of painted Easter eggs in Bulgaria.

Many protected territories are located in the region of Velingrad – Valyavitsite, Rogachitsa, Chernovets (Arapchal).

The only deposit in Bulgaria of the plant *Spiraea salicifolia* L is situated in the region of Tazhnika near the river Dospat. In June-July the plant blooms with pink-red grape racemes; on the inside its branches are

hollow. It was used for the production of pipes. The plant is included in the Red Book of Bulgaria (a list of endangered, disappearing and extinct biological species found in the territory of Bulgaria).

There are many natural landmarks in Velingrad and around it. At a distance of 35 km from the town, near the village of Pobit Kamak is situated a rock formation with the same name. The form of the coarse-grain granite resembles the Russian dolls.

The Yundola resort is situated 16 km from Velingrad. It is an appropriate place for winter, as well as summer tourism. The Lepenitsa cave is also situated 13 km South-west of Velingrad. The cave is 1,525 long and it has two-storey galleries, underground river and lakes. For the visitors, it is interesting to see the variety of stalactites, stalagmites, columns, and stone curtains, which reflect in the crystal-clear water of the lake. One thing among the richness of the cave is the cave pearls, and the cave craters are a unique find in Bulgaria.

At the sanctuary at the mount of Ostrets (1,369 m above the sea level) are found multiple remains of the clay pots, dating back to the late iron age (6th – 1st century BC).

The narrow-gauge railway line Septemvri - Dobrinishte passes through Velingrad. Transportation of goods was also performed along it in the past, but nowadays it is only intended for transportation of passengers.

In Velingrad there are more than 40 hotels and holiday homes, 2 sanatoriums, 140 catering and entertainment establishments. The public mineral baths are modernized, and 22 open and covered mineral swimming pools are built.

The Sarnitsa dam is also located in the territory of the municipality of Velingrad, and there are also other dams nearby – Belmeken, Batak, Beglika which are a favorite destination not only to fishermen, but also to enthusiasts of mountain tourism. There are also other mountain resorts nearby – Tsigov Chark, Sports Complex Belmeken, etc.

You can receive more information about the town, its landmarks and accommodation places in the Information Centre for Small and Middle-Sized Business, which is situated on

Svoboda Square [8].

The combination of mild climate, solar radiation and mountain forests together with hot mineral springs, combined with the Bulgarian traditions makes the municipality very suitable for development of integrated tourism and organic agriculture [5]. Organic agriculture is practiced in 160 countries of which 45 are in Europe. The share of organic land of the world agricultural area is very small, accounting just for 0.9 % [7].

There are 32 hotels, 2 health recreation centers and 140 restaurants and leisure places only in the municipal centre – town of Velingrad as well as public mineral baths and 22 open-air and covered mineral pools. The geographic and climatic conditions favour eco-tourism, ski-tourism and hunting tourism. Another significant economic sector is wood logging and wood processing as well as some chemical industry and machine building. Wood processing accounts for 35 % of the total GDP of the municipality, 21 % are formed by agriculture, 19 % by trades and 6 % are formed by hotels and recreation facilities. The major part of the firms (75 %) functions in the service and tourism sector. Agriculture is mainly represented by animal breeding – sheep and cow breeding, poultry. Also there is high available potential for RES utilization in Velingrad Municipality in solar thermal and PV, waste wood biomass, geothermal power, small hydro power. There is untapped potential of Small HPPs as well as of space heating and DHW preparation using geothermal power from the hot mineral springs.

Within Green Twinning activities Velingrad Municipality is developing knowledge on sustainable energy planning and project identification and implementation [5].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to bring out the possibilities of creating an integrated tourist product in Bulgaria. The subject of this study is the municipality of Velingrad because of the availability of the necessary resources for development of different types of specialized tourism – balneological and SPA tourism,

rural and ecological tourism, adventure tourism, and others.

On the other hand, creating prerequisites for development of an integrated tourism and integrated tourist product is also favourable for the sustainable development – "a trend that, on a global scale, gains more and more popularity and more and more supporters ". The main advantage in this direction is that the town of Velingrad is already a recognizable spa destination and its services are typically sought by solvent, well educated tourists who are interested in new, unconventional experience. This, in turn, leads to increase of the opportunities for attracting incoming tourist flows and presence of potential customers for the new and different tourist services that are offered.

For the purpose of this study and gathering the necessary information different techniques are used such as analysis, deduction, observation, informal interviews.

On the basis of the Case study method, the conclusions made from the study can be validated for the country as well, and the integrated tourist product of the municipality of Velingrad can be adapted as a model for achieving sustainable tourism, which aims to influence tourists not only during their journey [6], but to turn into a behavioral model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The success of tourism activity is largely associated with the condition of the environment where it is organized. This connection between tourism and natural environment is bilateral. Over the past 20 years European tourism has been characterized by a high rate of development, which has resulted in pressing the main tourist resorts and the areas unused so far, mostly the sea coasts. This has led to management problems in terms of the conditions, amenities and visitors. The awareness of environmental problems caused by tourists has led to actions in the public as well as the private sector, and their aim is to tackle with the problems encountered as a result of tourism activities.

In this sense, the appearance of rural tourism

as an alternative type of tourism is quite natural. It opposes to the mass (industrial) tourism which facilities and tourism product are characterized by a standardization that has already become rather depressing. The term "rural tourism" is interpreted differently in different countries and covers a range of diverse economic and narrowly specialized tourism activities carried out only in rural areas or, generally, in areas outside the urban agglomerations. As time goes by, multiple concepts arise in tourism practice that define tourism in rural areas – agricultural tourism, farm tourism, rural tourism, alternative tourism, ecotourism and others, that have different meanings in different countries.

In order its essence to be clearly and universally defined, the European Union has adopted the term "rural tourism" as one that sums up all the tourism activities in rural areas. At present, rural tourism is seen as a set of activities developed in the countryside that offer an alternative to the dynamic and intense rhythm of life in the cities. It covers travel to rural areas, stay in a country house, as well as conduct of specific scientific research in conjunction with a hobby or profession. The definition covers the whole agricultural surroundings, traditions, customs, holidays, visits to agricultural museums, monitoring and participation in traditional agricultural activities and craft industries, as well as the forms of tourism that are directly related to the farm in case of an extended stay or single visit. The development of rural tourism is inevitably accompanied by parallel development of other forms of tourism concerning the specific additional attractions of the region.

Rural tourism as a holiday in the countryside is not just fashion but a necessity, given the pollution of the natural environment, the dynamic and intense rhythm of life in the cities, which naturally urges people to search for tranquility and relaxation amidst clean natural environment and more secluded places. In a number of developed Western European countries such as France, England, the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Spain and others, rural tourism is stimulated at national level. Tours to villages and rural areas already

occupy second place after the seaside holidays.

This specific type of tourism is provoked primarily by the saturation of tourism supply with standardized, traditional and monotonous offers that do not bring any diversity in tourist vacation (sea, mountain, routes related mainly to cities). On the other hand, the excessive ecological, physical and moral demolition of tourist areas increases. Thirdly: the excessive dynamics and automation of urban conditions that characterize the contemporary lifestyle. This type of tourism is characteristic of highly urbanized countries and it develops because of the desire for a return to nature since it enables many people to experience nature in its primary form or in rural environment to discover unknown crafts, interesting attractions, gastronomy, new forms of culture, and all this without spending so much money. Rural tourism is an original way to seek an exit from the ever-perilous practice of mass tourism which is entirely economically oriented and largely ignoring the environmental, social and moral values.

Rural tourism can be connected and combined with the services of a number of other specialized forms of tourism – cultural, wine, ethnographic, culinary, environmental, hunting and more. In this way a network of regional business structures offering a specific regional product including a whole complex of services and products can be created [1]. Moreover – in recent years two regions with a large concentration of small and medium-sized tourist enterprises for rural and other types of tourism have been established where a significant investment of capital is made regarding the social and economic situation of the region [4].

Economic and social benefits

Rural tourism is considered to be an adequate tool for regional development, contributing to:

- Increase of the land price
- A better basis for the facilities of the local population
- Improvement of the regional infrastructure
- Diversity in the labor workforce
- Additional income for the local population
- Improvement of agricultural environment and rise of the socio-economic status of these

regions

- Promotion of cultural diversity, preservation of national heritage, appreciation of the lifestyle and traditions of local people and respect for their privacy and dignity.
- Increase of awareness of the "feeling" of nature. Rural tourism should stimulate in tourists appreciation and understanding of the ecosystem and need for its conservation.
- Minimization of the negative effects on natural and social environment caused by traveling of tourists.
- Rural tourism is deemed to have a significant advantage because it does not harm the environment and, at the same time, contributes to the regional development. It allows for the use of an already existing accommodation, thus reducing the investment costs and preventing the seizure of forest and pasture areas. Spending the holidays in such regions with low density of tourist flow allows tourist facilities to be distributed more evenly in the territory. This is useful not only for the environment, but it also brings additional income to the local population.

In addition, rural tourism creates opportunities to meet the tourist needs of disabled people and it also contributes to their quicker socialization. The recreation of family atmosphere and friendly attitude are at the root of it [2].

Infrastructure

Each single element - subsystem has its own number of peculiarities. Green natural environment ensures sustainability to the system. It is the spatial "framework" of rural tourism. It includes not only its inherent geographical elements, but also a number of anthropogenic resources, mainly in the fields of cultural values (lifestyle, mentality, folk music). In other words, the host environment has not only a physical, but social dimension as well, which emphasizes the distinctive character of the product.

Tourism infrastructure should be considered in several directions:

1. A means of shelter to tourists, which in most cases is also the home of the villagers. Also, we have to add the farmyard or the farm which are of great interest to tourists and especially children (care for animals and

birds, growing vegetables and fruit). Here the focus is on preserving an authentic lifestyle and architecture.

2. Engineering infrastructure related to lighting, heating, telephone lines, road network, water supply, etc. Without them the normal consumption of the specific product of rural tourism is impossible.

3. Production infrastructure that is focused on practicing crafts and production of typical rural souvenirs (authenticity); preparation of local specialties including with the participation of the tourists themselves: regional cuisine, pickled vegetables, sausages, jams, dried fruit, etc.

4. Social infrastructure that serves to activate the contacts between villagers and tourists: cultural house, cinema, local festivities (fairs), carnivals, competitions, games, etc.

Tourism infrastructure should meet two basic requirements:

- To create normal conditions for the tourists' stay
- The disturbance of green natural environment to be reduced to the minimal degree possible.

The tourist is the subject of rural tourism, the important element of its market, especially with their motives, expectations, internal attitude. The host is regarded as a general concept that refers to the local population. It is the host who carries out the majority of services, homemade cooking, preparation of special homemade dishes, caring for the farm animals and/or the garden. And once again, it is the host who introduce tourists to folk crafts, folklore, customs and lifestyle. The host is a leading figure in this type of tourism. The level of tourists' satisfaction from a countryside vacation depends to a great extent on the host's skills, natural culture and spirit.

Integration

From functional point of view rural tourism is closely linked to other types of tourism. Above all, it is linked to recreational (sea and mountain) tourism, cultural tourism, as well as certain types of specialized tourism (hunting and cult tourism). With these types of tourism it shares a common integrated green natural environment. In organizational aspect, family tourism business appears to be the unifying basis.

All this allows rural tourism to be included in combined tours and thus to exert multiplying impact on the traditional tourist routes. For example, coastal and maritime recreational tourism can be combined with a vacation in the countryside. This is especially useful for large seaside tourist resorts that can diversify their product with visits to villages or other forms of route-cognitive tourism. It is possible to form specialized tours that include different objects of rural tourism: visit of a group of monasteries, natural phenomena, boat trips combined with accommodation in tents, etc. Rural tourism can also satisfy specific hobby interests with scientific goals: photo love, collecting herbs and minerals; collection activity in the sphere of folklore, linguistic studies, etc.

In view of the growing interest to weekend holidays and extended weekend holidays it is possible weekend tourism to be introduced in rural areas as a way to diversify tourists' leisure time [3].

Each country or region places its own imprint on the development of rural tourism, and new forms and perspectives are sought. Local communities, legislative authorities, representatives of various sectors of the economy are involved in their realization. Rural tourism appears to be one of the important moments in the development policy of rural areas. Programs for support and investment in this sphere are being implemented, exchange of experience and information is organized.

The role and significance of Rural Tourism as a factor for sustainable development of rural areas

In the last 20 years tourism in rural areas has grown as a business activity which is due not only to the users' interest in a different kind of holiday, but also to various government initiatives and policies in this direction. This activity has been growing particularly intense in developed countries where targeted efforts are made to promote rural tourism. The reasons for this targeted policy are rooted in the concept of tourism as a means for economic recovery of rural areas and a way to maintain and protect the environment.

The main positives for the regional

development, which rural tourism determines, can be summarized to: maintaining a higher level of land price; improvement of regional infrastructure; diversification of opportunities for employment; generation of additional income for the local population and increase of the socio-economic status of the regions; improvement of the quality of environment; promotion of cultural diversity, preservation of national heritage, lifestyle and traditions and many others.

One of the significant advantages of rural tourism regarding protection of the environment and promotion of regional development is the limitation of investment costs and prevention of transformation of forest and pasture areas into urbanized areas since the existing accommodation in rural areas is used, also tourist facilities as well as the tourist flows are more evenly distributed on the territory of the country.

The development of tourism activities in rural areas is a subject of great interest at both individual entrepreneurial as well as regional and national level. An evidence for this is the overlapping of tourism in all plans for regional development, as well as the increased interest of entrepreneurs to programs that provide funding for activities in this direction. As some reports of State Fund Agriculture and State Agency for Tourism show, State measures 311 "Diversification into non-agricultural activities" and 312 "Aid for the creation and development of micro-enterprises", of the Rural Development Program 2007-2013, are among the most attractive ones - they attract the most interest, including the new project submission which started on 14 June 2010.

On the demand side there is also a growing interest in this type of tourism. As shown by some nationwide surveys of tourist flows in Bulgaria, 15.6% of Bulgarians and 6.4% of foreigners, who rested in Bulgaria in the summer of 2009, chose rural tourism as a type of tourism.

Ever since 2006, the Strategy for the development of sustainable tourism has been implemented in the municipality of Velingrad; its main objective is to preserve the identity and to develop the potential of destinations

"Velingrad" and „Velingrad Region":

The region does not have, nor is it allowed to promote, highly developed unsustainable forms of tourism connected with change of natural landscape, large-scale developments, or damage to nature by building facilities or otherwise.

CONCLUSIONS

The forms of tourism that cause damage to the social environment or the elements of cultural or natural heritage are not developed nor promoted in this region.

The local entrepreneurs develop or aim to develop sustainable tourism in this town and the neighboring villages.

The socio-cultural boundaries of the region are separate and distinct.

The tourism products and services offered in the region are associated with unique features and identity of the region.

Traditional customs, cuisine, handicrafts, folklore are cherished and preserved; they are not only practiced but also offered as attractions by the local entrepreneurs.

Presence of transport-communication links on the territory and resort-tourist resources.

The local community has an attitude to support and realize the need to protect the natural and cultural heritage and the development of sustainable tourism.

The construction of new buildings in the region complies with the traditional architecture of the region regarding the appearance and size of the buildings.

This strategy has been sculpturing the tourism sector in Velingrad for seven successive years in order to implement the common vision:

"Tourism in Velingrad, the municipality and the adjoining tourist region is developing on the basis of preservation of natural and anthropogenic resources and natural landscape. Velingrad preserves the brand of a leading thermal center and the distinction "Spa capital of Bulgaria", and it develops quickly as a balneological and spa resort".

A key strategic objective in the development of sustainable tourism in the municipality of Velingrad and its tourist region is the "Transformation of Velingrad tourist region

into a leading tourist destination in the sphere of balneotherapy and spa tourism in Europe for the period 2007-2013, with a permanent supply of year-round tourism product."

After seven years of implementation of the above strategy many visible changes in the desired directions can be named, but still there are some unresolved problems in the field of infrastructure, marketing, supply of a variety of complex/varied tourism products.

Thus, deficits are not in the accommodation base but in tourism products and their marketing. The summary diagnosis of the tourism sector in the municipality is: "tourism resources that are not fully tapped, comparatively cheap tourism" .

Conveying the previous assessment and planned actions from the municipal plan, one of the strategic directions for the development of the municipality can be reaffirmed in the new planning period as well – "development of sustainable tourism". Municipality of Velingrad is "gifted" with rich resources and capabilities for a wide range of tourist products:

Alternative tourism: It is considered that the municipality of Velingrad has the potential for development of ecological and rural tourism . The utilization of financial resources of the Rural Development Program should lead to the formation of finished, marketable products, enhancing the attractiveness of the region and diversifying the main supply in balneology.

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