

CURRENT STATE, DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND PROMOTION OF RURAL AND AGRICULTURAL TOURISM IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The niche market of rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria is underdeveloped, although our country has excellent natural and anthropogenic resources for their development. The rich cultural and historical heritage, the well-preserved nature, the centuries-old traditions and culinary development create prerequisites for a unique rural tourism product. There are also opportunities to create an integrated tourist service based on rural tourism to contribute to some competitive advantages of destination Bulgaria. A key problem in this direction is the low level of popularity of rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria. This is complemented by the relatively low level of professional (theoretical) qualification of those who offer rural tourist services. Reserves to overcome this problem can be found in the creation of training demonstration centers. The goal of the paper is to determine the status and opportunities for development and promotion of rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria. For the purpose of screening have been used methods such as analysis, synthesis, monitoring and some statistical methods. To sum up, the following conclusions can be made: 1) Bulgaria has the necessary resources and opportunities for development of rural and agricultural tourism; 2) The development of rural tourism in Bulgaria is at a relatively good level; 3) There is a diversity with regard to the accommodation facilities, but this diversity is missing in terms of the services offered; 4) reserves can be sought in improving the quality of the services offered as well as of the accommodation facilities typical for rural tourism] 5) The promotion of the rural tourism product in the country can be achieved by means of developing demonstration centers.

Key words: rural and agricultural tourism, opportunities, integrated tourism, demonstration centers

INTRODUCTION

Rural and agricultural tourism are relatively poorly developed niche markets in Bulgaria, despite the available resources and opportunities for their development. A national strategy has also been developed that includes adequate measures for developing sustainable forms of tourism [10]. One of the opportunities to achieve sustainable development of the regions is the development of rural tourism [6]. Rural tourist services have been developed to a certain level though, but in fact agricultural tourism in Bulgaria is not available. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Bulgaria has the necessary resources for the development of agricultural tourism. Agricultural tourism is placed on an intermediate level between the health of the individual and the influencing factors. This level allows to work both ways, awarding it an important role in the structure of

the quality of life and hence of economic growth [3].

The development of specialized forms of tourism will significantly strengthen the position of the country in the international tourism market. For this purpose an analysis of the current state of rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria is needed as well as a necessity to outline the key opportunities for their development and promotion.

It is clear that the so called “massification” of contemporary tourism causes significant problems of economic, social, cultural and environmental character [8].

Having in mind globalization and its effects on tourism, there is an urge for complete change in the tourism product policy [7].

A possible solution is the development of rural tourism in its various forms, the development of an integrated tourist service based on the combination of various forms of specialized

tourism, as well as the development of the “slow tourism” concept [4].

Another means for the development of rural and agricultural tourism, including training of employees in this field, is the development of demonstration centers for rural and agricultural tourism.

It is also possible to bind rural tourist services to the services and animation of the visitors of the city of Plovdiv [2], which has been chosen as Cultural Capital of Europe for 2019.

Therefore, tourist services in the rural areas are able to support local population and communities in developing economic diversity [9].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purpose of this study a thorough analysis of the registered tourist facilities in the country was conducted. The aim was to bring the current state of the rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria.

Since no national statistics are maintained on rural tourist facilities at national level, for the purposes of this study all the registered 3-star facilities operating in rural areas in the country were regarded as rural and agricultural tourist facilities.

For the purpose of screening have been used methods such as analysis, synthesis, monitoring, case study and some statistical methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Often rural and agricultural tourism are perceived as synonyms. Despite the close relationship between them – there are certain key specificities that form the specific characteristics of rural tourism, on one hand and agricultural tourism as its variety, on the other hand.

Table 1 shows a summarized information about distribution of registered accommodation facilities in the country as a whole and in villages – by number and relative share, based on the information provided by the Ministry of Tourism.

Table 1. Distribution of accommodation facilities

Type	Distribution		
	Total number	In villages	
		In number	In percentage
Bungalow	281	68	24.20
Country house	101	40	39.60
Holiday Village	7	2	28.57
Motel	25	5	20.00
Camping	18	7	38.89
Boarding-house	20	7	35.00
Holiday House	140	29	20.71
Guest-house	1,205	421	34.94
Family hotel	739	166	22.46
Guest room	2,933	557	18.99
Hotel	1697	268	15.79
Hostel	17	1	5.88
Total	12,494¹	1,571	12.57

¹Total number of the registered accommodation facilities in the country.

Source: Ministry of tourism (electronic registers)

The share of accommodation facilities in villages, in percentage, is presented in Fig.1.

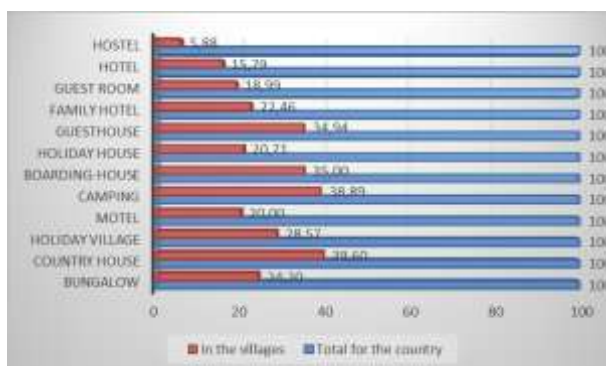


Fig. 1. Relative share of accommodation facilities in villages (by type of accommodation)

No small part of the facilities serve the tourists on the Black Sea coast. The conclusion is that the niche market of rural tourism in our country is undeveloped. It is also worrying that the existing rural tourist facilities are mainly focused on hotel services, i.e. accommodation, without the specific rural animation, which has its own explanation.

Another rather negative observation is that the share of rural guest-houses is only 34.94%, including those on the Black Sea coast. Similar, even worse is the situation in family

hotels. Their relative share in villages is 22.46%.

These results are graded as rather negative due to the fact that guest-houses and family hotels constitute the main accommodation option of rural tourism as well as for the agricultural tourism.

The share of the different types of accommodation in rural tourism is varied and relatively balanced, at least in terms of the main types. It is understandable – the largest is the share of guest rooms (35.46%), followed by guest-houses with a relative share of 26.80%, hotels and family hotels, respectively with shares of 17.06% and 10.57%.

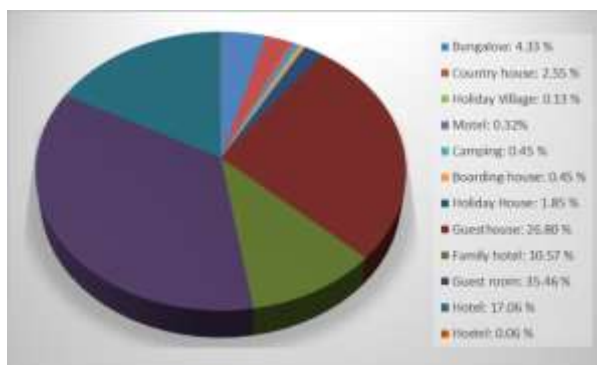


Fig. 2. Relative share of accommodation facilities in villages (by type)

According to the data from the Ministry of tourism, the significantly larger share belongs to the family hotels, because some of the accommodation facilities, registered as “hotels”, are in fact family hotels and are included in the Hotel Register.

The high relative share of the guest rooms, to a larger extent, describes the key features of the rural tourism product offered in Bulgaria, namely – the main service, “accommodation”, with minimal commitment on behalf of the tourist facilities’ owners to their guests and the time spent in the relevant town or village.

To a large extent these results are due to the fact that nearly 38% of registered accommodation facilities in the Bulgarian villages are located in the Black Sea region, which also determines the characteristics of the offered service. The main service is “the accommodation”, while some hotels offer meal options to their guests.

The situation with respect of the classification of accommodation facilities is also unfavorable. Although, in general terms, the hygienic and domestic conditions of rural tourism in Bulgaria are at a relatively high level, as it is obvious from the figures below – lower star-rated facilities are predominant.

According to the Bulgarian legislation, the main accommodation facility in rural tourism – family houses, family hotels, guest rooms - is rated up to three stars. However, the highest category (three stars) is the least represented one. This is obvious from the analysis carried out of the main accommodation facilities in villages – guest-houses, family hotels, hotels and guest rooms.

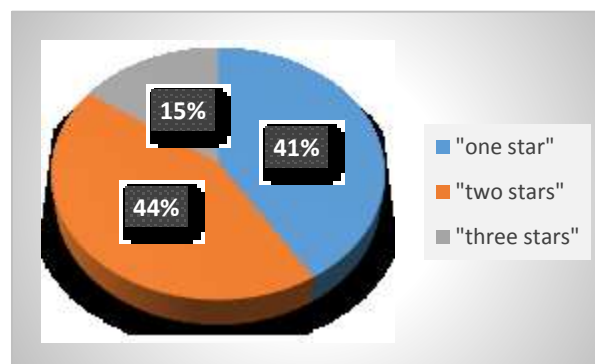


Fig. 3. Distribution of guest-houses by star rating, in percentages

As shown in Figure 3, the guest-houses are dominated by the share of two-star houses: 44%. One-star rated facilities constitute 41% of the guest-houses registered in villages. The share of the highest-rated accommodation facilities of this type – three stars, is only 15%. The situation of the family hotels in relation to the highest rated category is similar (Figure 4). Here, the domination of the three-star family hotels is even more pronounced with a relative share of 52%, followed by the two-star family hotels with a share of 35%. The accommodation facilities of this type, rated as three-star facilities - the highest for this type - is only 13%.

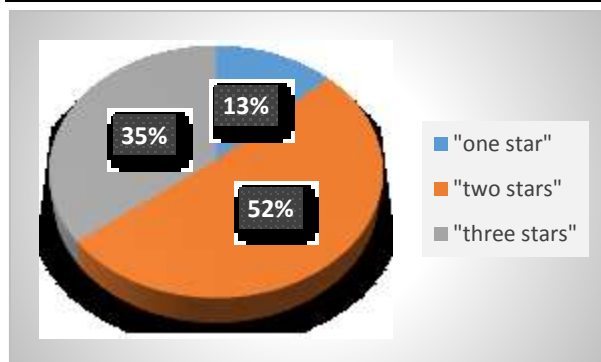


Fig. 4. Distribution of family hotels by star rating, in percentages.

The analysis continues with the distribution of the hotels, which is relatively more balanced; this is most likely due to the fact that a large part of them are close to established tourist destinations, which requires a higher rating. The distribution by star-rating is shown in Figure 5.

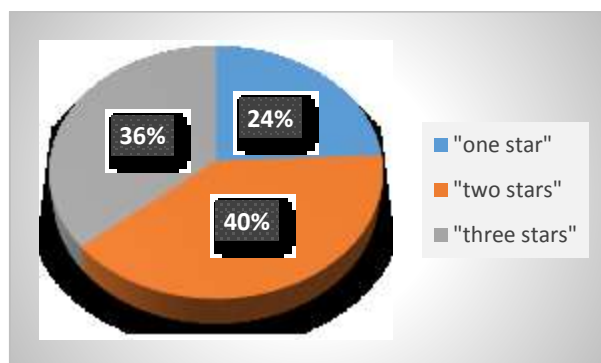


Fig. 5. Distribution of hotels by star rating, in percentages

Again, the two-star hotels are leading, with a relative share of 40%. In this category of accommodation the second position is for two-star hotels and last are one-star hotels. The relative shares are 36% and 24%, respectively. The distribution of guest rooms is shown in Figure 6. According to the Bulgarian legislation the highest rating for them is also three stars, which is least covered among the guest rooms registered in villages, with a relative share of only 8%. Another fact is that about 70% of them serve tourists on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast.

The two-star rooms have the predominant share of this type of accommodation, with a relative share of 51%. Two-star hotels are with a relative share of 41%.

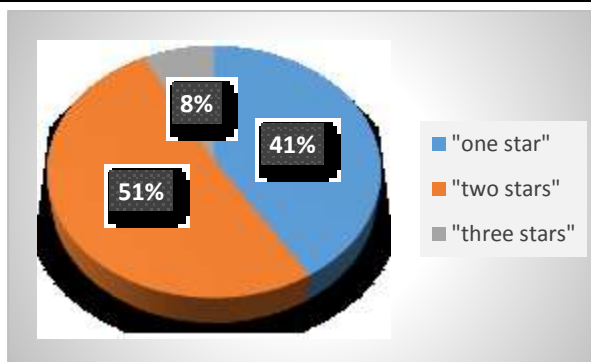


Fig. 6. Distribution of guest rooms by star rating, in percentages

Based on the current available information the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the state of the rural (and agricultural) tourism in Bulgaria with regard mostly to the accommodation facilities and their functional organization, which is positively correlated to them, as well as to the rural tourist services offered in them:

- Of all the registered accommodation facilities in the country, the share of those in villages is only 12.57%, which gives reason to argue that the niche market of rural (and agricultural) tourism in Bulgaria is poorly developed;

- With regard to the main types of accommodation, typical for rural and agricultural tourism, i.e. guest-houses, family hotels, hotels (rated up to three stars) and guest rooms, there is also a comparatively low relative share compared to the total accommodation facilities registered in the country, which is aggravated by the fact that a large part of these facilities are registered in the Black Sea villages;

- In the distribution by type of accommodation facilities in villages, unsurprisingly (in view of the territorial distribution - the villages of the Black Sea are predominant) the guest rooms are predominant, followed by the guest-houses, hotels and family hotels;

- Based on the predominant forms of management of rural tourist facilities, as well as on their territorial distribution in villages, the conclusion is that with respect to the services offered by them the focus is on the main tourist services – accommodation and meal, given that a large number of facilities do not even offer meal;

-The commitment of the tourist facilities' owners to their guests is low;

-Specific rural animation – activities related to the village daily life – agriculture, holidays, folklore, specific cuisine, etc. are not available, or are available to a very low extent;

-Low-rated main types of accommodation facilities are predominant – guest-houses, family hotels, guest rooms and hotels, as the most strongly represented in all groups are the two-star facilities;

-The availability of a lower-rated accommodation facility and weak owners' commitment to their guests is an attestation as to lower the service prices;

-An image is created of cheap rural tourism destinations and low quality services;

In addition to the above-mentioned conclusions, a number of other ones can be drawn up in relation to the current state of the rural tourism in Bulgaria.

Many problems related to the development of rural and agricultural tourism can be derived, but there are those whose solution should be of the highest priority. As a whole, agricultural tourism is not developed in Bulgaria, therefore it is largely meaningless to bring forth problems related to its development and, respectively, the search for opportunities to solve them.

It is absolutely not the case when it comes to rural tourism. Despite the limited supply of rural tourist services, as well as the prevailing lower-rated facilities, there is still some development of rural tourism. The problems mentioned below (without pretending to be fully comprehensive) can be classified as priority ones to be solved out, which is the basis for developing and offering a high-quality and competitive rural tourism product. The following main problems can be determined:

-Lower-rated accommodation facilities are prevalent – requirements to the projects under Measure 6.4;

-lack of informal institutions;

-poor infrastructure and tourism superstructure;

-sometimes there is lack of adequate state policy - allocation of funds; decentralization of

structures in the regions; strategy for development of rural regions, rural and agricultural tourism;

-unification by star-rating system;

-the rural tourism is not sufficiently reflected in the National Strategy for sustainable development of rural tourism;

-insufficient and at times inadequate action by the non-governmental organizations;

-funding;

-Social tourists

-lack of knowledge of the philosophy of rural tourism and its product on behalf of those who offer rural tourist services as well as on behalf of the employees in state institutions and some of the lecturers in the universities;

-misunderstanding of the nature of rural tourism by consumers themselves;

-Lack of qualified personnel – commitment to vocational training and university education;

-Lack of an adequate system for evaluating the opportunities for development of rural and agricultural tourism in order to determine regions that have priority to receive subsidies, etc.

Reserves to solve some of these problems can be sought in the increase of the quality of the offered services, specialization of the service, by building on traditions, customs, culture, culinary and agricultural development. For this purpose it is necessary the owners and service personnel engaged in rural and agricultural tourism to have a high level of qualification. It is also necessary the consumers themselves to have a high level of knowledge of the product and its advantages.

Demonstration centers provide good opportunities in this respect. In Bulgaria, however, there are no such centers, hence the idea can be perceived as an innovative for the country. The idea is to establish integrated demonstration centers for rural tourism and organic farming [5], where to demonstrate the traditions in the field of agriculture, responding at the same time to the modern requirements of consumers regarding the high-quality and ecological characteristics of the food offered. There are also opportunities for demonstrations in the field of rural tourism by means of re-creating rural houses typical for the respective

regions, observing the architectural and construction traditions. Emphasis is placed on the demonstration of dishes (with products produced in the farm), holidays, customs, rituals and rites typical for the respective region. The ultimate goal is to demonstrate full tourist service based on the philosophy of rural tourism.

Another opportunity to promote the services of rural and agricultural tourism is to combine them with services from other forms of specialized tourism. The idea includes the establishment of an integrated tourist service based on the expansion of popular tourist services such as Spa, Wellness, etc., with services typical for the rural, agricultural, ecological, cultural, etc. types of tourism [1].

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Bulgaria has the necessary resources and opportunities for development of rural and agricultural tourism;
- The development of rural tourism in Bulgaria is at a relatively good level;
- There is a diversity with regard to the accommodation facilities, but this diversity is missing in terms of the services offered;
- Reserves can be sought in improving the quality of the services offered as well as of the accommodation facilities typical for rural tourism;
- Agricultural tourism in Bulgaria is not developed, despite the available conditions;
- The niche market of rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria is poorly developed;
- If integrated demonstration centers are constructed, there will be reserves for improvement of the quality of services offered as well as for preparing highly qualified personnel to work in rural and agricultural tourism;
- The promotion of the rural tourism product in the country can be achieved by means of developing demonstration centers;
- Opportunities for development and promotion of Bulgarian rural tourism product may also be sought in offering an integrated tourist service.

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