

RURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA - A MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The development of national tourist brand is one of the priorities of the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism. The project on branding Romania is EU-funded, within the Regional Operational Program (ROP) 2007-2013. Out of the different evaluation point of views - qualitative research in source markets and domestic market, project's team opinions, branding project research on the attractiveness / competitiveness, 6 tourism key product of Romanian tourism have been identified, one of them being Countryside & Rural Tourism. The paper aimed to present an analysis of the Countryside and rural tourism from a marketing perspective bearing in mind that, in order to reach the target set by the Romanian National Tourism Development Masterplan 2007-2026, of increasing the number of visitors at 9,7 milion in 2016, a marketing plan will be implemented. The average yearly growth of the arrivals number for the countryside and rural sector for 2011-2015 will be 25%.

Key words: competitiveness, countryside and rural, marketing, tourism product

INTRODUCTION

The first step of the tourism brand project was the Image and potential analysis. Two research methods were used by TNS. Qualitative research – in depth interviews, (91 were conducted) with an average length of 37 minutes and focus groups (2 were conducted with Romanian key players of the tourism industry) and stakeholders, tour operators, travel agents and opinion leaders (tourism and non tourism related) opinions were surveyed both in Romania and in the source markets, on eight source markets + Romania. The eight source markets are Austria, Germany, France, Italy, UK/ Ireland, Russia and USA
Quantitative research - a total of 10.881 computer assisted telephone interviews were held, that is, 1.200 per market. Travellers were surveyed in Romania, people who took a holiday trip in the last 3 years, in the source markets, people having travelled abroad for holidays in the last 3 years.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to set up this paper, first of all it was proceeded to the analysis of the actual situation of rural tourism regarding: product profile, external environment, competitive position. Then there were established the goals and the main development guidelines, marketing goals, targeted needs, segments and portofolio, main distribution strategy and positioning for distribution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Situation analysis

Product profile

Countryside and rural tourism takes place in rural areas or settlements, countries and places with natural attractions, hills, rainforest, small seaside villages, springs, rivers and lakes, etc. The basis of a countryside and rural vacation is an accommodation service complemented by additional services/facilities relying on the

local lifestyle, cultural and natural resources. For the purposes of this research, the Countryside and rural sector is vacation within rural areas. In this definition the following activities are not included: sport tourism, adventure tourism, religious tourism, golf or ski resorts tourism.

The Countryside and rural sector (around 18 million trips) can be structured into two main markets, defined in terms of ways of using its resources: Countryside lifestyle: The main motivation is to live intensely all aspects of the rural lifestyle and Active countryside holidays: Use of the rural space for the practice of activities which can be related to physical activity and/or edutainment.

The consumer

There is not a single profile for the Countryside and rural tourist, however, according to the MINTEL report about Rural tourism in Europe (2007), the most typical socio - demographic characteristics are: between 35 and 44 years old, with no gender difference, middle social class and with a medium/high or high income level. The most relevant features associated to the consumer profile by product market:

External environment

Market trends

Countryside and rural tourism will continue to grow but, as customers are more experienced and well travelled, they are demanding new and different ways of experiencing this kind of holidays.

Specific trends of the Countryside Sector

Rise of Internet as a source of information, creation of opinion and mean of booking, increase of self organization of trips by customers, tendency to late booking vacations, preference to split holidays during the year - instead of one holiday travellers choose several short breaks, consumers are demanding higher quality experiences, more demand for higher standards of quality in accommodation, dining, transport etc in rural areas, increasing interest for meeting local people and understanding traditions, increasing demand for authenticity and uniqueness

Competitive position

Key countryside and rural destinations

Countryside and rural tourism offers are present almost everywhere in Europe. There are several destinations offering this type of tourism, however most of them focus a great part of their marketing efforts in targeting the domestic market rather than the international ones. However, there are few destinations that have reached mature status in this sector, having structured an attractive and developed product to draw international markets.

Romanian Countryside and rural product snapshot

Although the rural tourism in Romania has registered some growth, it presents a significant potential which is not sufficiently exploited. According to the new law, the agro tourism pensions are structures with a capacity of up to 8 rooms functioning in the houses of the citizens or in independent buildings, which offer the tourists accommodation in special arranged places and facilities for preparing and serving the meal, and also the possibility to perform household or cottage activities. Moreover, the owner carries out at least one activity which is related to agriculture, animal care, cultivation of different types of plants, orchards or carries out a handicraft activity, in a workshop where one can make different hand-made objects. The rural and regional tourism from Romania will benefit in the period 2007-2013 from almost 500 million Euros, through the European Regional Development Fund. The following accommodation structures will be able to benefit from these structural funds:hotels, motels, tourism pensions, camping places, huts, and hotels for young people. The maximum period for implementing a project is 23 months. In the case of the accommodation structures the total cost of a project has to be between 200.000 Euros and five million Euros, and for tourism leisure structures the costs of the project have to be between 200.000 Euros and 20 million Euros.

Romania has a rich and mostly unspoiled natural landscape: natural and national parks, mountains, lakes, forests, fauna sanctuaries, etc.; providing a diverse sort of experiences

for travellers looking for enjoying a unique natural and rural environment. Landscape's beauty and uniqueness that gives Romania its competitive advantage, supported by active environment preservation to keep it. Tourist can experience different scenarios, climates, colours, gastronomies, etc excellently preserved through centuries. Local traditions and daily life in typical villages (village square, church, traditional houses, etc.). Traditional customs and the local open festivals take place across all Romanian regions throughout the year. The gastronomy of Romania offers a wide range of dishes and recipes that are not still recognized enough by international travellers. Romanian food and wine is currently the main complementary offer of the Countryside and rural tourism sector, contributing to enrich the overall experience. Countryside and rural tourists are increasingly looking for experiencing the destination and getting involved in the rural local life. In that sense, hospitality of Romanian people is an important factor.

The opportunities that destinations could exploit to successfully compete in the Countryside sector come from four possible sources:

Opportunities for Countryside and rural sector:

Unsatisfied needs:

-Internet is by far the most used source of information by Countryside and rural travellers. However there is a considerable lack of online information available regarding options of international Countryside holidays

-The opportunity consists in organizing and commercializing the countryside and rural tourism destination offer through oriented and specific travel portals

Emerging needs:

-There is a growing trend of travellers more and more interested in holidays that involve discovering, learning and participating in local traditions and lifestyle, rather than just lying on the beach or taking coach tour

- For this reason the opportunity consists in combining quality accommodation in a unique landscape with high value experiences based

on local traditions, culture and lifestyle that can satisfy visitors' needs

New segments:

-New segments of travellers with a motivation to travel to rural areas are emerging, such as single adults, divorced, aged couples and groups of friends with special interest among others

-The opportunity is to create products and experiences adapted to these new segments, to their needs and interests, such as soft tours for older couples, packages for singles, or custom made experiences for those groups with a special interest.

Competitor's mistakes:

-Many destinations rely on the basic attractiveness of natural resources not developing high value experiences for visitors

-For many travellers the simple observation of nature in a passive way is a satisfactory experience, but it does not provide long lasting memories in the visitors' minds

-In order to face this situation, the opportunity consists in taking advantage of the available resources to develop really fascinating experiences making the visitor an active protagonist and not just a spectator.

Threats for Countryside and rural sector

New competitors: there is a great probability that many countries of Central and Eastern Europe will develop Countryside and rural tourism offers, since they are new destinations offering still unexploited rural environment and competitive prices

Rivalry among competitors: the great number of competitors trying to attract international Countryside and rural tourists is a threat for those destinations that do not stay up to date on the changes of the demand, the new requirements of the customers or the development of new products; this can cause a loss of competitiveness, and in the long run, a loss of market share

Other threats that can affect the Countryside offer of a destination are: overexposing/crowding; overdeveloping; lack of environmental culture by the locals; lack of sustainable planning; loss of authenticity; excessive regulations and bureaucracy; pollution of natural settings

Strengths & weaknesses for Romania: analysis of the sector gaps.

Strengths of Romania: richness of rural landscape (mountains, rivers, forests, fauna, etc.); the countryside still preserves the traditional and authentic Romanian character (lifestyle, hospitality, customs, local events, etc.); typical rural lifestyle (picturesque villages, olive oil, wine routes, etc.); diverse cultural offer in rural areas (history, music, religion etc.); excellent local gastronomy; excellent attitude of local stakeholders towards tourism development

Weaknesses of Romania: Romania is not recognised as a Countryside and rural destination; lack of know how and training of tourism players in rural areas; lack of organization of the Countryside and rural offer; lack of partnership among small enterprises (network, co-marketing, etc.); quality of a great share of the accommodation, not complying with international standards; insufficient and inadequate accessibility and supporting infrastructure; not enough offer of activities involving traditions, culture and lifestyle in rural areas, lack of organized and clear information available online on Romanian countryside leisure options; lack of information in other languages rather than Romanian (maps, directions, etc.).

Development goals and Guidelines

Marketing goals

The European countryside sector is characterised by a great number of destinations with a consolidated position in the market and by many new destinations that are emerging with competitive offers.

Romania has the basic resources to have success in this sector. However, the Countryside and rural tourism industry still needs to consent and implement a marketing plan able to address the great issues that are affecting the sector, which are the following:

1. To organize and standardize the rural offer
2. To take advantage of its unique tourist attractions to enrich the Countryside and rural offer
3. To increase awareness of Romania as a Countryside and rural destination thus increase the market share of this product in

overall tourism of Romania from 1% to 2% in next five years Romania has the opportunity to create a powerful Countryside and rural offer based on a differentiated concept, related to the most notorious features / attributes of the Country: natural heritage, unspoilt landscape, character and traditions (lifestyle, hospitality, customs, etc.), picturesque villages and so on. The European countryside sector is characterised by a great number of destinations with a consolidated position in the market and by many new destinations that are emerging with competitive offers. Romania has the basic resources to have success in this sector. However, the Countryside and rural tourism industry still needs to consent and implement a marketing plan able to address the great issues that are affecting the sector, which are the following:

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For that reason, the market goal for the Countryside and rural tourism of Romania is to Establish Romania as a countryside and rural destination by:

- a) developing the product based on experiences and rural lifestyle
 - * Improve general Organisation
 - * Increase quality and specialization of tourist services
 - * Development of countryside and rural experiences
- b) increase the presence on internet and in intermediaries' portfolio
 - * Encourage on line direct booking
 - * Create a sales support system

* Develop a trade recommendation program
 c) transmit an image of destination for authentic rural experiences

- * Improve the awareness among targets
- * Enhance on line Information
- * Focus communication on specialized trade

Targeted needs, segments and portfolio

A key decision of the marketing plan is the identification of the targets: which segments of the demand should be attracted. The strategic targets for the Countryside and rural sector of Romania are defined considering the following aspects:

- Quantitative volume; Evolution; Average spending; Adequacy to the Romanian offer;

Table 1. The target groups for Countryside and rural tourism

What are they looking for?	*Escaping from city pressure and unwinding *Discovering and learning *Experience local culture, traditions and hospitality
When do they travel?	Mainly in Spring and Autumn
What do they want to visit?	Alternative and unexploited Countryside and rural Destinations
How do they book?	*Through Internet, directly to the rural accommodation networks *Mainly with less than one month in advance
What are their sources of information?	*Internet *Friends recommendation *Travel agency

Source: Authors, 2011

Main competitors' targets

In terms of socio demographic profile, the greatest segment of the sector is composed by people between 35 and 55 years old, travelling with their family, in couple or in a group of friends. When referring to couples and groups of friends, the most appropriate target groups for Romania are the "Double Income No Kids" and "Empty Nesters", increasingly looking for escaping the daily life to experience the remoteness of the countryside and to meet local people and traditions. Furthermore, their level of expenditure is higher than other segments. Additionally, and considering that a great segment of the sector is composed by

families, Romania should also attract them, who are looking for family friendly environments where to experience rural traditions and a healthy lifestyle. With a "creative" mindset, non-routine standard of living and forward-thinking attitudes: when travelling, they prefer to elude crowded destinations.

- Searching for authenticity, for intimacy, for nostalgia – a desire to "go home".

- Searching for human contact, for conviviality.

Business Portfolio of Romania's Countryside and rural sector The attractiveness/competitiveness methodology is a useful tool, in order to define the product market in which to focus the efforts of development; it considers:

- The attractiveness of the product markets, based on the volume of present demand, its prospected evolution and the profitability of the sector: average tourists' expenditure, extension of the tourism season, geographical concentration of markets, etc.

- Curious with rural lifestyles or reaffirming traditional values.

- Desiring to practice learning experiences (riding a horse, observing farm practices, visiting old villages, cooking etc.)

- Health conscious (a desire for home-grown food and healthy lifestyle).

- Desiring to discover unspoiled landscapes, nature and so on.

-The competitiveness, resulting by the 5 competitive forces (rivalry among destinations, threats of new entrants and substitute products, bargaining power of the demand and of the suppliers) and by the accomplishment of the sectors' key success factors by the Romanian supply. Product development strategies should be directed mainly to the enhancement of the competitiveness:

- Improve the general organisation - to help the "family run" establishments on aspects such as tourism know how, promotion, positioning or quality standardization. Clusters should be created to structure thematic areas based on unique concepts (heritage, nature, traditions, gastronomy, etc.).

- Increase quality and specialization of tourist services - increase and standardize the overall quality of the rural tourism offer. On one hand, the institution of special labels aims to improve the quality of accommodation, activities, restaurants and other related services. On the other hand, the creation of human resource programmes has the objective of enhancing the quality of services provided by the Countryside entrepreneurs and human resources in terms of skills, languages knowledge, quality and customer attention culture.

- Development of Countryside experiences - The creation of a set of Romanian Countryside and rural experiences is crucial to improve the product and the value offered to the customer: learn the daily work of a farmer, the elaboration process of honey, traditions.

Distribution strategy and positioning for distribution

As Internet and travel agencies are the main booking channels for Countryside and rural tourism, specific strategies have been identified to increase the presence on the web and in the portfolios of intermediaries.

1. Encourage on line direct booking - The Romanian rural sector should facilitate information and direct bookings through internet by the customers. Within this frame, a uniform system for allowing reservations and a system to organize the vacation (“do-it-yourself travel kit”) should be developed, incorporating the latest technological applications to facilitate the travel planning of the potential independent.

2. Create a sales support system - The rural sector of Romania needs to increase the sales by tourism intermediaries in source markets, therefore a series of actions should be designed utilising the potential of internet and other new types of technology systems to facilitate the commercialization by the trade.

3. Development of a trade recommendation programme - With the aim of making the intermediaries suggest Romanian countryside and rural offers to their customers more often and carefully, a recommendation programme should be developed, by organizing fam trips and by offering benefits and advantages to

encourage them to become specialists in selling the “Countryside Romania”.

Positioning of the product for market and distribution.

Out of the positive attributes that this product sector gives, it is important to uniquely position this product in customers / clients' minds as well as in the mind of business trade (intermediaries).

Table 2. Key differentiating factors for product

Intangible Attributes	*Authenticity of the place and people. *Mixing with locals *Learning /education experience *Holiness of some sites *Spirituality *100% religion *Mystery	Emotional benefits	Safety *Authentic *Back to the roots *Romantic *Different and innovative *Original
Tangible Attributes	*Heritage mostly in rural areas *Villages full of history, folklore and culture *Agriculture (2/3) country territory *Ancient traditions remain and can be experienced through music, festivals, food, people *Landscape and mountain scenery *Warmth and hospitality of people	Rational benefits	Escape & relax *Natural education and cultural edification *Reflexion * Belonging and socialisation * Satisfaction

Source: Authors, 2011

Positioning of countryside and rural product for the customers: relaxing and enjoying the slow pace of increasingly disappearing simple life with natural grown food, time for the family and more social contacts due to interesting excursions and activities.

Positioning of countryside and rural product for the intermediaries: Romanian product for countryside and rural product is for travellers that look to enjoy friendly and still authentic rural lifestyle in one of the most rural countries of Europe.

Sales objectives:

For the period 2011-2015, Romania plans to increase the number of arrivals with an average yearly growth of 25%, the number of overnights, by 20% yearly and as market share to achieve in 2015 2% of total Romanian tourism traffic.

CONCLUSIONS

In 10 years from now, Romania is aiming to become quality tourism destination being globally competitive in selected products/experiences. In achieving this, Romania is using Tourism as a steward and promoter of key natural and cultural values of Romania

Countryside and rural tourism is one of the 6 products selected within the tourism brand creation, providing good options for growth on the basis of the assessment of attractiveness and competitiveness of the Romanian tourism products.

When speaking about reaching the market requirements for this product, Romania scores well at richness of the rural landscape, gastronomy and rural lifestyle and not so well at infrastructure and communication.

The marketing goal for Romania for Countryside and rural tourism is to establish Romania as a destination for Countryside and rural tourism, increase awareness and its market share in the next 5 years from 1% to 2%.

In order to achieve this goal, a special operational marketing plan for this sector will be drawn and implemented by all the stakeholders in tourism.

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