

WEEK-END TOURISM IN RURAL ZONES – THE NEW TOURIST REALITY

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Abstract

In today's fast-paced and stressful lifestyle, short-term forms of tourism become increasingly preferred. Another factor that favors short-term trips (given the conditions in Bulgaria) are the financial constraints on households and the lack of enough free time. This is precisely the basis for the rapid development of weekend tourism in Bulgaria and its high level of participation. On the other hand, Bulgarian traditions and folklore, traditional cuisine, architectural features of certain regions, the nature, spontaneous contact with nature, high degree of diversity and other factors can be considered as unique tourist resources for the development of rural tourism in the country. What is more, these resources if used as an integral part of rural tourism product, can make it extremely attractive and sought-after by both Bulgarian and foreign tourists. Therefore, it can be argued that weekend tourism in rural areas is one (or should be one) of the new tourism realities of destination Bulgaria, which is also in the context of the main purpose of this research.

Key words: rural area, rural development, rural tourism, rural zone, tourist area, weekend tourism

INTRODUCTION

There are different definitions of rural tourism based on different criteria and approaches. There is no single, generally accepted, definition for it, but the existing ones can help us bring out some of its basic elements that characterize it: holiday in a rural area; traditions and folklore; traditional dishes; rural lifestyle; contact with nature and people; humanism; agriculture; divergence; "host-guest" connection, etc.

Therefore, tourism services in the rural areas are able to support local population and communities in developing economic diversity [10].

Hence, its main feature is that it takes place in the conditions of rural environment. Very often the interpretation of the terms "rural area" and "countryside" matches. The latter is initially associated mainly with the demographic characteristic of the area. "Rural environment" is defined as "a location with less than 2,000 inhabitants who live in houses not more than 200 meters apart from one another" [12].

Here the meaning is more thorough. Rural environment is the meaningful and spiritual

side of rural life, of rural population. It is part of the natural and anthropogenic resources associated with the development of rural tourism. It is the people and their skills, initiatives and opportunities that constitute the greatest asset in every rural area [8]. Therefore, if rural area includes the geographical, demographic and economic characteristics, livelihood of local population, infrastructure and social security of the village, etc., rural environment embodies everything else – the lifestyle, rural identities, rural culture, their living standards and customs, rural humanism, nature, the attitude towards people and environment.

According to Bulgarian legislation, however, rural areas are "municipalities on whose territory there is no city with a population of over 30,000 people and the population density is below 150 persons/km²" [11].

In some rural municipalities agricultural activities are poorly covered and the population has a typical urban lifestyle. Some typical rural areas does not "fit" in the definitions of rural area and some smaller cities may have the characteristics of villages in terms of their lifestyle. That is why, according to Atanasova-Chopeva, "rural area should be considered such

an area that comprises all villages within a municipality, i.e. the rural part of each municipality should be regarded as a separate distinct rural area" [2].

It is precisely this definition that is regarded as the essence of rural zone – a territory which has the typical characteristics of rural environment with regard to the way of living. An advantage for the development of tourism in such rural areas is the fact that they are near major cities and are already recognizable as tourist destinations.

On the other hand, weekend tourism can be regarded as a trip and/or stay in a selected tourist site (destination) during free weekends. According to prof. Muller, we can determine 10 tendencies that define tourism [5]. Among them the following ones directly affect weekend tourism in rural and suburban areas:

(i)tendency towards experiment, towards experience — people seek to experience something different, the so-called: "calculated risk" – in this case, the vacation in suburban, but primarily rural areas, is in itself an experience of something different;

(ii)tendency towards "convenient" environment – people prefer destinations that offer coziness and comfort of residence – the environment in rural zone offers more humanism while the innate qualities of the hosts as well as the presence of natural elements (this applies also to suburban areas), to a certain extent, provide the comfort of residence. As regards the comfort – it is one of the statutory conditions for the development of tourism at all;

(iii)tendency towards cheap trips - search for advantageous deals - in comparison to the offers of large and well-known hotel chains weekend tourism in suburban and rural areas offers prices that are substantially lower;

(iv)tendency towards more frequent and short-term trips.

Its combination with rural tourism, i.e. its positioning in rural areas, leads to the creation of unique rural tourism service that satisfies the new needs – divergence, adventure, nearness to town, nature, humanism, delicious dishes, relatively low cost. Another advantage is the close relation between weekend tourism in rural areas and the weekly leisure-time

fund.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

At the core of this research is the thesis that weekend tourism in rural areas is one of the new tourism realities of destination Bulgaria. For this purpose the methods of analysis and deduction are used as well as survey method, case study and others.

The aim is to bring out the importance of weekend trips as part of the tourist habits of population, as well as the degree of promotion of rural areas as tourist destinations.

It is clear that the popularization of contemporary tourism causes significant problems of economic, social, cultural and environmental nature [6]. Having in mind globalization and its effects on tourism, there is an urge for complete change in the product policy of tourism [4].

That is why one of the objectives of this research is for weekend tourism in rural areas to be perceived as an integral part of the model for achieving sustainable tourism in Bulgaria. The latter is not a type of tourism, but a form of tourism development [9]. Sustainable tourism aims not only at influencing tourists during their trip, but also at forming a culture of resource conservation in tourist centers [7]. That could be perceived as the added value of weekend tourism in rural areas [1]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The meaning of vacation is a phenomenon of medical and social competence. The role of economic science is to create the organizational, managerial and economic preconditions for their realization in life and daily life. Medically justified vacation has found its economic interpretation as part of the vacation, tourism and leisure in general.

Weekend tourism in rural areas refers to the weekly leisure-time fund; therefore, it is a form of utilization of weekly rest period. To emphasize its importance, it is necessary to examine the level of satisfaction of working people from their weekly rest period. Below there are shown the results of questionnaire

survey conducted by the author in the territory of the city of Plovdiv, comprising 425 respondents.

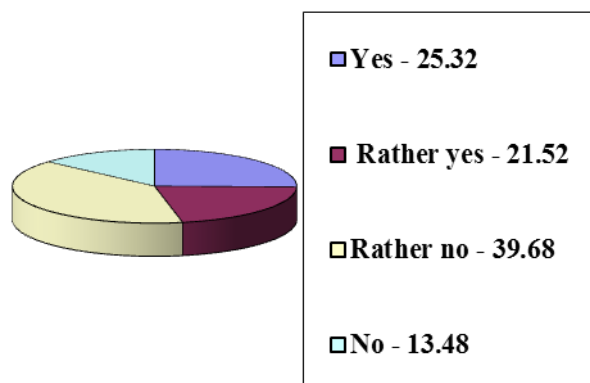


Fig. 1. Answer to the question: "Do you feel refreshed after your weekly rest period", in %
Source: Field survey, 2015

The Fig. 1 clearly shows that for the majority of the respondents (53.16%) weekly rest period is insufficient to compensate for the physical and mental fatigue accumulated during the working week.

The next question – "How do you spend your weekly rest period?" - is used for a more precise understanding of the meaning of weekend tourism as a factor in maintaining the natural balance "Activity – Relaxation". For greater clarity, the respondents were divided into two main groups – those who answered positively to the previous question and, respectively, those who gave a negative response. The results are presented in Fig.2.

The Fig.2 shows that the majority of respondents provide the necessary conditions for their physical and psychological recovery during the weekly rest period. Slightly more than 54% practice weekend tourism, while almost 75% of them are directed precisely to rural areas. By including those who spend their vacation in the countryside, it turns out that the majority of people who are happy with their weekly rest periods are associated with the village and rural way of life, respectively, with weekend tourism in rural areas.

In respect of specific activities and sought-after tourist services – a huge variety is provided. The concentration is around activities that offer a high degree of diversity from everyday life. These are the preferable

elements of weekend tourism in rural areas (Table 1).

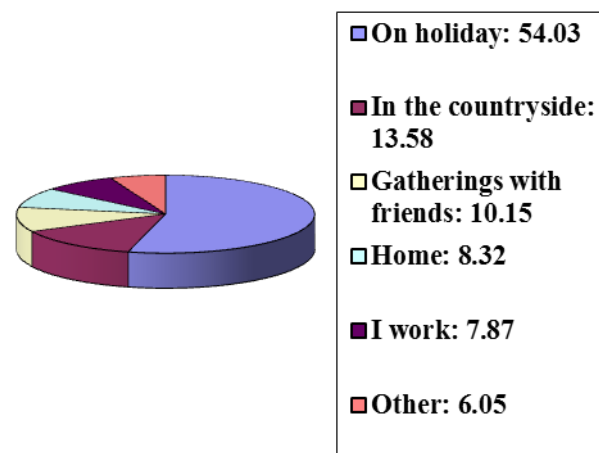


Fig. 2. Activities carried out during the weekly rest periods by the Group of people happy with their weekly rest periods, in%.
Source: Field survey, 2015

As it is apparent from Table 1, the preferences are towards mountainous areas and more seldom towards presence of water areas. It has its logical explanation – for the living conditions in Bulgaria beach resorts are distant from the capital and most of the major regional cities, which suggests seeking other forms of weekend holiday. On the other hand, the presence of lakes, reservoirs, rivers, etc. predisposes to fishing tourism although this service is still underdeveloped in our country. This fact makes the villages in mountainous and hilly areas in the country most preferable. Interesting results are obtained in terms of destinations as well.

As mentioned above, the majority of respondents preferred vacations in rural environment which could offer them contact with nature, divergence and humanism.

With respect to the distance from people's place of residence – the preferences were towards more nearby destinations: around 80% of the respondents would take a trip within a maximum of 2 hours and 30 minutes distance (or up to 200 km)¹.

¹Concentration of tourist facilities in certain areas is typical for the Bulgarian conditions (especially in mountainous areas), most of these facilities are within 2-hour trip by car from the major centers. This being the reason why these destinations at such distances are so preferred.

Table 1. Elements of weekend tourism product in rural areas and their importance for its users, in %

No.	Elements	Does not matter	Slightly important	Important	Very Important	Total
1.	Stay in the mountains	2.53	11.39	33.54	52.54	100.00
2.	Presence of water areas (river, lake, sea, etc.)	12.03	18.99	42.41	26.57	100.00
3.	Rural identity (lifestyle, culture, way of living)	10.99	18.91	37.97	32.13	100.00
4.	Relaxing environment, escape from everyday life	0.03	5.06	32.91	61.40	100.00
5.	Making new friends	12.66	30.38	39.24	17.72	100.00
6.	Tranquility and solitude	2.53	22.15	34.18	41.14	100.00
7.	Presence of places of amusement	24.68	32.91	27.85	14.56	100.00
8.	Nearness to town	18.10	17.09	37.15	27.66	100.00
9.	A break from physical exertion	12.66	20.25	32.91	34.18	100.00
10.	A break from neuropsychic exertion	2.53	7.59	20.05	69.83	100.00

Source: Field survey, 2015

As it is seen from table 1 - about 65% of the respondents in the survey - the nearness to town/city is of great significance.

As indicated in table 1, tourist destination should provide opportunities for exploring rural culture and lifestyle (an important element for 37.97% and very important element for 32.13%); divergence (important for 32.91% and very important for 61.40%); it should offer the necessary degree of tranquility (34.18% - important and 41.14% - very important). By providing these requirements, prerequisites are created for overcoming physical and mental fatigue – important respectively for 32.91 and 20.05%, very important for 34.18% and 69.83% of the respondents who are happy with their weekly rest period.

Particular areas of interest are the last two categories of people who are content with their weekly rest – who answered "I work" and "other" (Fig. 2), because they are almost 14% of this group of respondents. In terms of working people, only 8.06% are directly involved in agricultural activities, which is normal, given the level of agricultural tourism in Bulgaria which is yet weakly developed. As a main motive for such form of utilization of weekly rest period, almost 90% indicate the diversification of their usual work activities, since with most of them the workload during working hours is chiefly mental. Work

activities during vacation are geared primarily to satisfying certain hobby interests, such as pottery, woodcarving, hairdressing, cooking, etc.

What they have in common is that these activities can be offered as part of rural tourism product, respectively – as elements of weekend tourism product in rural areas.

This is not the case, however, with those who are not content with their weekly rest. A great number of them are forced to work a second job during the weekends, prompted by the shortage of funds, which corresponds with the lack of enough free time². For this reason some of them are forced to stay in their homes, or to travel to their home villages, in order to provide food products.

A small part of respondents spend their

²Often, in an informal conversation, respondents revealed that lack of enough free time was "the more serious" problem, but the lack of sufficient financial resources was the initial reason for the additional employment during weekends. More disturbing is the fact that even when they reach a certain standard of living, to a large extent people have become accustomed to this type of overloading and prefer spending their weekends in the way they have done so far. This is probably due to the long transition in Bulgaria which has largely disturbed the travel habits of the population. On the other hand, in terms of younger people, such habits are entirely missing or severely limited – within the framework of the annual holiday.

weekly rest traveling for relaxation, but often due to the limited family budget they are not able to provide the conditions necessary for that purpose. In general, the trips are to their private villas and the major part of the weekend time is occupied with work – repairs of buildings, preparing for the winter; work activities related to maintaining the improvised family farms and other alike that largely resemble the usual domestic pursuits. The only benefit is in changing the place, i.e. the situation of residence – from home (city) to the villa (the village).

The results are illustrated in Fig. 3.

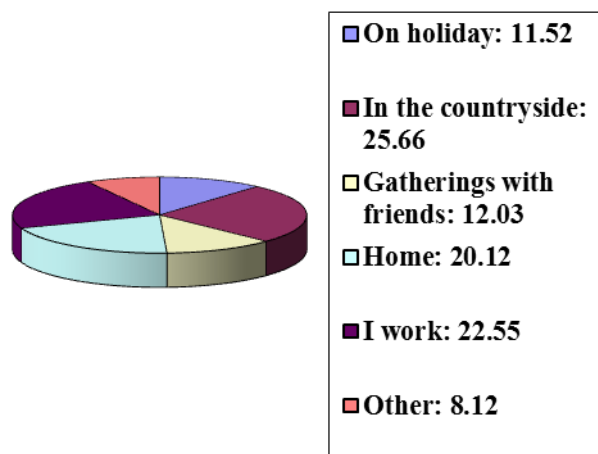


Fig. 3. Activities carried out during the weekly rest periods by the Group of people unhappy with their weekly rest periods, in%.

Source: Field survey, 2015

Nevertheless, about 30% of the respondents (unhappy with their weekly rest) would like to change the way they use it by practicing weekend tourism. The percentage is high enough to be of interest for further research, which is the motive for exploring their expectations towards the weekend tourism product and its spatial positioning. This is illustrated in Fig. 4 – preferences of those who are unhappy with their weekly rest in relation to the selected destination.

Here, again, it is apparent that the preferences are to closer destinations, and as more than one-third are directed, once again, to rural areas.

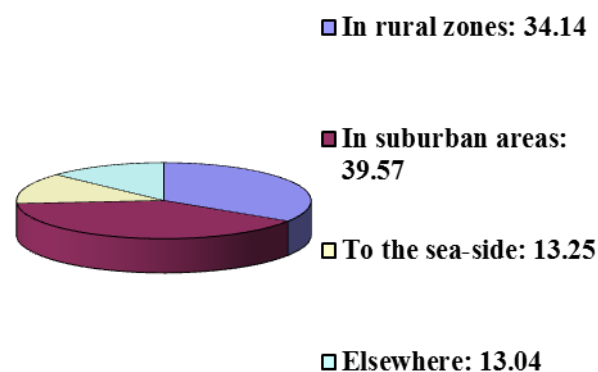


Fig. 4. Answer to the question "Where would you prefer to travel during your free weekends?", in %.

Source: Field survey, 2015

Again the most sought-after elements of weekend tourism in rural area, as it is illustrated in table 2, were connected to opportunities for exploring rural culture and lifestyle (72.33% of the respondents indicate it to be the main motive for future trips), contact with nature (85.01%), peace and quiet (73.14%), divergence and escape from everyday life (91.10%), conditions for physical and mental rest – respectively 68.62% and 73.28%.

The implication is that for both real users and potential users of weekend tourism product in rural areas certain elements of its product have the highest degree of significance for tourists and can be considered as **factors of satisfaction from the weekly rest**.

It is obvious that to a large extent the results repeat themselves, which proves the importance of weekend tourism as a form of utilizing the weekly rest period, in particular - weekend tourism in rural areas.

The importance of the latter will continue to grow due to the specifics of destination Bulgaria and the economic situation in the country on the one hand and, on the other hand, due to the approach adopted for the tourist zoning of Bulgaria.

It provides for the establishment of 9 tourist regions, each of them shall have two sub-regions with the relevant main and additional specialization in tourism [3].

Table 2. Elements of weekend tourism product in rural areas and their importance for its potential users, in %.

No.	Elements	Does not matter	Slightly important	Important	Very Important	Total
1.	Stay in the mountains	2.98	12.01	41.93	43.08	100.00
2.	Presence of water areas (river, lake, sea, etc.)	15.13	21.05	39.66	24.16	100.00
3.	Rural identity (lifestyle, culture, way of living)	20.26	7.41	29.77	42.56	100.00
4.	Relaxing environment, escape from everyday life	4.78	4.12	26.88	64.22	100.00
5.	Making new friends	27.56	31.09	25.16	16.19	100.00
6.	Tranquility and solitude	2.82	24.04	40.65	32.49	100.00
7.	Presence of places of amusement	29.15	17.56	32.51	20.78	100.00
8.	Nearness to town	19.66	21.13	39.66	19.55	100.00
9.	A break from physical exertion	9.07	22.31	33.15	35.47	100.00
10.	A break from neuropsychic exertion	1.23	25.49	22.53	50.75	100.00

In this situation forming rural areas for recreation and tourism will play an extremely important role for the development of rural areas in Bulgaria and in particular - for the development of tourism in them. The presumption is that a large part of the villages with opportunities for development of rural tourism (or with already developed one) fall in tourist regions, where rural tourism is not included even in the additional specialization of the region. Thus, prerequisites are created for non-use of the existing tourism potential or "destruction" of already established product.

The tendency towards increasing the number of holidays at the expense of their duration, including the development of weekend tourism which is characteristic for contemporary tourists, especially for rural tourism, turns the creation of rural areas into a key instrument for the development of sustainable forms of tourism in Bulgaria.

Therefore, it can be argued that the weekend tourism in rural areas can and should be one of the new realities of the Bulgarian tourist product, beyond, of course, well-developed sea, mountain (winter) and spa tourism in Bulgaria.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results presented in this research, the following basic conclusions may

be drawn which give some general directions to the research performed. The conclusions are not final, but they could be considered as a solid base for the future development of tourism in Bulgaria, especially of rural tourism, after the tourist zoning of the country.

Bulgaria is traditionally known as a destination for sea, balneological (SPA) and mountain tourism.

The country enjoys highly favourable climatic conditions, including natural and anthropogenic resources for development of rural and other specialized types of tourism.

Rural tourism is practiced increasingly in the form of weekend trips.

The accepted approach to tourist zoning of the country would give rise to a number of changes in the development of tourism in Bulgaria, especially for some of its specialized forms like rural tourism.

In response to the new conditions, a result of the tourist zoning, key changes should be made in the organization of rural tourism.

It is necessary to establish rural areas for recreation and tourism and they should have the status of micro-regions, so as to maximally utilize the available conditions for the development of rural tourism, or keeping the areas which have already developed such as:

(i) the solution offered (conclusion 4) follows its logic based on consumers' attitudes

regarding the consumption of rural tourism product – over 75% of those who travel during their weekly rest (resp. over 60% of those who wish to travel) are directed precisely to rural tourism;

(ii) given the formation of tourist regions in Bulgaria with their respective centers and the tendency towards practicing rural tourism during weekends, the establishment of rural areas would be economically justified as well;

(iii) to establish itself as a destination a rural area must meet consumers' expectations – it should offer opportunities for exploring rural culture and lifestyle; natural factors, quietness, tranquility and humanism must be abundant;

(iv) in view of the rich cultural heritage of Bulgaria, its ethnographic peculiarities, the peculiarities of its social assets and current trends in tourism, it can be argued that one of the new tourism realities of destination Bulgaria can, and should be, weekend tourism in rural areas.

It is exactly this type of tourism that can be seen as an instrument to partially overcome the demographic and financial-economic crisis in Bulgarian villages.

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