

RESEARCH ON THE SUPPLY AND CONSUMER DEMAND FOR RURAL TOURISM IN EASTERN RHODOPE

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Abstract

Rural tourism in Bulgaria is a relatively fast growing and newly-established alternative form of tourism. In recent years, there has been a positive tendency towards increase of the interest in practicing this type of tourism, increase of the number of tourists who have visited rural regions and have used its services, as well as towards diversifying the elements of the offered tourism product. A prerequisite for the sustainable development of rural tourism in Bulgaria and, in particular, in the research territory in the Eastern Rhodopes, is the abundant resource available to our country; already existing or newly established rural regions/villages which contain the main elements of rural tourism – natural and ecological conditions; specific culture, art, folklore; attractive traditions (customs, rituals); authentic cuisine; agricultural and other specific activities. Village holiday market is growing at precisely the time when the future of many rural areas is uncertain due to changes in agricultural policy or the increasing attractiveness of urban life. Rural tourism seems to be among the most suitable tools to revive the dying rural regions, such as the villages and municipalities in the Eastern Rhodopes, as well as to provide opportunities for economic and social development of the regions. The aim of this research is to analyze the tourist services offered as well as the consumer demand for rural tourism in the Eastern Rhodopes. The main methods used in the present study are the inquiry method, the method of analysis and synthesis. The survey was conducted during the period 30.10.2016 - 30.04.2017 and it included 16 questions. 190 questionnaires were correctly filled in and returned. Based on the results achieved in this research we have made some conclusions that may be of great use to the parties concerned, who live in the municipalities in the Eastern Rhodopes, to help them develop the territory as a destination for rural tourism, as well as to the owners and managers of rural tourism facilities to offer a more qualitative, comprehensive and competitive tourism product.

Key words: rural tourism, research, rural tourism supply and demand, Eastern Rhodopes

INTRODUCTION

Tours to villages and rural regions already occupy second place after the seaside holidays. This tendency also applies to Bulgaria. According to the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (BAAT), the interest in rural areas has intensified. The increase in demand for rural tourism products is about 6%. In Bulgaria the niche market of rural tourism is still not sufficiently busy, although there are significant prerequisites for its development. A part of the tourist facilities that offer rural tourism are a form of diversification of the agricultural production, which contributes to improving the welfare of the families and population in the municipality. Another part of the tourist facilities are specific, specialized, independent organizational forms (economic structures), performing targeted activities in

the field of tourism services. This part includes the following tourist facilities family hotels, guest-houses, boarding houses, etc., which are independent organizational and economic business structures, they have nothing to do with the agricultural farm.

In mountain and rural regions, there is an important production segment in which motivated and innovative entrepreneurs are involved, where tourism is linked to the quality of agriculture and is an economic lever for the growth of the region, as well as a form of protection of the territory that may be at risk. Therefore, tourism services in the rural areas are able to support local population and communities in developing economic diversity. [5]

In the specialized literature a number of authors interpret the essence of “rural tourism” concept and give their definitions.

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. [3]

It is exactly the main elements of rural tourism that are the subject of its supply and demand. The consumer interest in rural tourism is determined by several key factors that can be managed.

Rural tourism in the different European countries is organized by taking into account their national specificities: culture, traditions, geographic resources, etc. It is not only the countries, but the individual regions themselves that try to create their own, different model of organization of rural tourism [1].

The aim of this research was to analyze the tourist services offered as well as the consumer demand for rural tourism in Eastern Rhodopes, so we conducted a survey of the opinions and attitudes towards rural tourism in the region of Eastern Rhodopes among the residents of towns and villages in the Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Stara Zagora and Haskovo regions.

Based on the results achieved in this research we have made some conclusions that may be of great use to the parties concerned, who live in the municipalities in the Eastern Rhodopes, to help them develop the territory as a destination for rural tourism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In analyzing rural tourism supply and the consumer interest in rural tourism in the research municipalities in the Eastern Rhodopes, a two-step approach was applied: A pilot survey and an actual one were conducted. The aim of the pilot survey was to approbate the actual questionnaire and to enrich the overall analysis by introducing additional information as well as more fully to encompass the current state and problems of rural tourism in the research region.

For the successful implementation of the empirical survey on the supply and consumer interest in rural tourism in the research area, a plan was draw up for the organization of the survey and it comprised the following successive stages:

First stage: Sample formation. The population that took part in the survey consisted of individuals, real and potential users of rural tourism product in the research region, regardless of the time of consumption of the service. The survey was conducted with 190 (in planned 205) individuals.

Second stage: Elaboration of a timetable for the conduct of the survey in time. The survey was conducted during the period 30.10.2016 - 30.04.2017 and it included 16 questions. 190 questionnaires were correctly filled in and returned.

Third stage: Development of structured questionnaires.

When developing the actual questionnaire, the corrected and enriched questionnaire of the pilot survey was used as a basis to be applied in the actual survey, as the aim was to ensure purposefulness, completeness and comparability of the data.

The questions were grouped in the following subject blocks and they concerned:

- level of awareness about rural tourist facilities;
- the attracting factors as conditions and prerequisites for rural tourism;
- the factors (motivators) for rural tourism;
- level of satisfaction from the rural tourism.



Fig. 1. The territory of the Eastern Rhodopes
Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The tourism product offered in the research region includes accommodation (bed), meals, entertainment activities, etc.

The main means of accommodation is the rural house - 38.5% of the total number of rural tourist facilities, 20% of the tourist facilities are small family hotels, 18.7% - villas for rent, 17.8% - hotels and country houses. It is exactly the country house and traditional rural lifestyle and atmosphere that is the main focus and essence of the rural tourism concept. That is why the country house is the facility to provide this specialized type of tourism. The combination of a country house and a small hotel is also positive - 17.8%.

The majority of the rural tourist facilities – 42.7% of the total number - offer accommodation and meal – the two main elements of the tourism product, which means a more comprehensive tourism product and better service for tourists. The traditional local cuisine reflects the culture of the local population and is an element of the regional development as well as an important tourism resource.

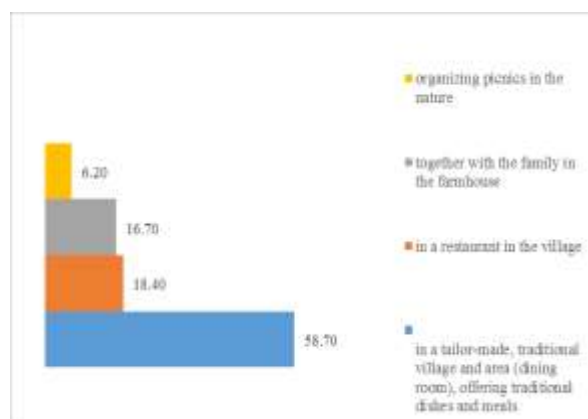


Fig. 2. Answer to the question: „How is eating organized?“, (%)

Source: Own research.

Particular attention must be paid to the possibilities for the production, certification and marketing of high-quality local food, and imposing a local trademark of traditional agricultural products of a given region (terroir) [4].

Nearly 20% of the tourist facilities use their own infrastructure for arranging

accommodation only. A more complete tourism product – accommodation and meal plus attractions and entertainment is offered only by 16.5% of the rural tourist facilities.

The meal, being a main element of the tourism product, in the majority of tourist facilities was organized according to the rural tourism concept - traditional regional food and dishes were served in a specially arranged, unique, traditional dining-room (58.7%). The other option of organizing the meal was also in line with the rural tourism concept - together with the family in the country house - 16.7%. Or, a total of 75.4% of the owners organized rural tourism radically different from the mass one, and it contained in itself the two main elements of the rural tourism product. Many traditional dishes and products are threatened by extinction due to the globalization and industrialization of agriculture. Rural tourism supports the “slow life” concept. Its general health effect on human body is invariably associated with the slow eating as counterpoint and antipode of the low-quality fast food which is of no particular nutritional value. [2]

The organization of the additional element to the tourism product - attractions and entertainment activities for tourists was also in line with the intrinsic characteristic of rural tourism. The location of tourist facilities makes it possible for the visitors to be close to nature. The unique natural landmarks, the rich historical heritage, architectural and cultural assets that date back from the prehistoric, antique, medieval and Bulgarian national revival periods in the research region are a priceless potential resource for rural tourism development. This is one of the main motivating factors for tourists to visit and choose these tourist facilities. 27.7% of the tourist facilities organized walks in the nature at the request of the tourists. Almost the same is the number of those interested in getting acquainted with the local historical and cultural landmarks. 12.4% of the tourists preferred these tourist facilities because of the possibility to carry out health-strengthening procedures – eco walks, playgrounds for sport, horse, donkey and mule trail riding in the mountain, cycling, etc. More than 75% of the consumers

looked for an additional service. That is why the organization of additional services such as: excursions in the nature, to historical and cultural landmarks, organization of sports events, ethnographic and cultural initiatives, etc. may result in increase of the interest in the respective tourist facility as well as in increase of the number of consumers of rural tourism product.

From the survey carried out, it can be summarized that the potential of the Rhodope villages and the surrounding countryside is not fully exploited. Only 16% of the owners perceived the additional activities as part of the comprehensive tourism product – main activity.

The research reveals the main motivating factors that govern the consumption of tourism product. Nearly half of the consumers of rural tourism (47.5%) visited tourist facilities in these municipalities because of the atmosphere and the service they were offered in these tourist facilities - traditional Rhodope atmosphere, 21.7% of them visited the region because of the untouched nature and clean air, about 10.9% of them came to explore the cultural and historical landmarks, 10% of them came because of the traditional Rhodope cuisine. 7.4% of consumers were attracted because of the low prices. Only 3.2% were willing to engage in agricultural activities. Most often willingness to participate in agricultural activities is expressed by people whose main profession and work is associated with high neuropsychic overload, static position of the body during daily work, all-day work with computer and work in enclosed spaces. This category of tourists seeks physical movement, relaxation by means of active agricultural work, in addition to the other elements of rural tourism product. The majority of rural tourism lovers do not show interest in participating in agricultural work. This fact is also indicative for the insufficient development of agricultural tourism.

It is notable that very often the reason for choosing a particular tourist facility is not a single factor but a number of them. In particular, for the research municipalities in the Eastern Rhodopes the main motivating factors

were the opportunity for the consumers to be in the countryside, in a different, authentic, traditional Rhodopes atmosphere. The combination of nature, history, culture, traditions multiplies these motivating factors. The complete correspondence between expectations and experience guarantees an expected effect for the tourists from their trip, visit and experience. This effect is even more important for the owner and manager of the tourist facility because it will lead to a repetition of the visit, to attraction of new customers, and will generate more incomes and profit.

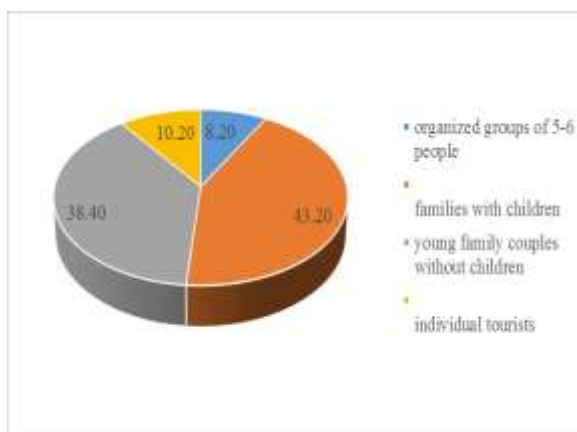


Fig. 3. Answer to the question: „Which types of tourists most often visit your sites?“(%)

Source: Own research.

Regarding the age structure of visitors, the research shows that young people, aged between 31 and 44, were prevalent. They were 36.5% of the total number of visitors. These were working people, who came mainly on weekends. The natural and anthropological landmarks in the region attracted a large number of older visitors – aged between 45 and 59. They were 27.7% of the total number of visitors. They were also in working age and chose for their weekly rest the atmosphere of the Rhodope village. Nearly 20% of the total number of visitors were young people – aged between 16 and 30 years, who diversified their holiday by staying at rural tourist facility in the Rhodope villages. The low proportion of people over 60 years can mostly be explained by a shortage of financial resources. 70% of the visitors have higher and secondary education.

The share of visitors who have primary education is high – 26% .

Regarding the organization of the visit, the research found out that nearly half of the visitors were married couples with children – 43.2%. The share of young married couples without children is also high – 38.4%. These data are indicative of the genuine desire in young people to get acquainted with and to explore the history, culture and traditions in the different ethnographic regions. Rural tourist facilities were less frequently visited by organized groups of 5-6 people. - only 8.2% of the total number of visitors. Almost the same is the number of the individual visitors. The prevalence of married couples who seek rural tourism product is a very positive phenomenon. It is a prerequisite for strengthening the family and at the same time it provides a healthy family atmosphere for children and instills in them love for the family traditions, patriarchal spirit and preservation of Bulgarian identity.

Since the majority of visitors were in working age, it is logical to have a high relative share of visits during the weekend – 47.3%. Non-working people visited the region mainly on weekdays. There is already a tradition in Bulgaria: to “escape” from home when there is a larger number of public holidays. On the positive side, a large number of Bulgarians prefer to stay in the country. 36.5% of the total number of visitors of the rural tourist facilities in the Eastern Rhodopes visited the region precisely at this time.



Fig. 4. Answer to the question: „What is the main reason your users choose your site?“, (%)

Source: Own research.

The tourists from the country prevail – 63.7%, from EU countries – 12.4%, from neighboring Greece, Macedonia and Romania – 14.2%. Summer is the most desired holiday season in the Rhodope villages – 43.2% of the total number of visitors. About 23% of the visitors came in spring and autumn. A rural tourist facility promotes itself mainly by producing advertising materials - brochures, catalogues and prospectuses – 42.6% of the facilities, 25% - through the Internet, 15% - through travel agencies.

From the literature review regarding the nature of rural tourism it becomes clear that the main elements of its content, which are the motives for its implementation, are: learning, recreational, social and economic motive, questions in that direction were included in the survey. According to the consumers in the survey, the first reason to make the holiday in the rural area attractive, was "the presence of a typical rural lifestyle and unique rural environment". In the contemporary modern, urbanized society the life of the individual can be described as dynamic, stressful and hectic. Hence the need emerges to escape from this dynamics and hectic environment and to head to another, totally different, simpler and more peaceful world. The authentic rural environment offers a different experience; it heightens the idyllic feeling that you are part of the surrounding untouched nature with all its colors, diverse flora, fauna, relief, etc. It is in this environment that the recreation process takes place - the recovery of our body and soul. The possibility of solitude amidst a clean and beautiful natural environment attracts a large number of tourists. Therefore, if promotional packages of the tourist facilities include additional services, such as mountain trekking, field walks, walks among vineyards and orchards, mountain meadows and pastures, it will attract a large number of visitors, especially young people. A great number of tourists, lovers of rural tourism, indicated the price of the tourist service as one of the factors to prefer rural tourism to the conventional, traditional one. According to the data, the accommodation in a rural setting is considerably cheaper for the tourists than a

holiday in a large, though not so luxury, hotel. The fact that the financial motive is one of the factors for the development of rural tourism is not undermined in the literature about rural tourism. The tourism market has a very large number of potential consumers who practice rural tourism because they cannot afford higher costs to organize their holiday.

From the answers to the questions in the questionnaire it has become clear that a great number of tourists looked forward to the additional activities to enrich their experience, their professional and hobby interests, to satisfy their curiosity. The more diversified the structure of the rural tourist product is, the more abundant the opportunities offered are, the greater is the consumer demand for the rural tourist product. This requires consolidation – formal and informal, of the owners’ efforts – hoteliers, restaurateurs,

managers, entrepreneurs in the field of entertainment and other cultural activities, local authorities, etc., in order to promote and present a quality and comprehensive tourism product. The Rural Development Program has introduced the “integrated rural tourism” concept, with a view to further expanding and enhancing the content of rural tourism and the rural tourist product. This broader range should include all types of tourism that can be carried out in a given rural region. In this way, according to the Rural Development Program, an opportunity will be created for tourism activities to be developed more comprehensively and coherently, also it will be possible to attract more investments, to support the private initiative, to more fully absorb project and program financial funding, thus the existing differences between the different regions will be gradually deleted.

Table 1. Ranking of tourists' preferences (rural tourism) in the Eastern Rhodopes

Rank	Young single people	Young married couples Age 30-40	Married couples Age 40-50	Elder people Age 50-65	Tourists above the age of 65
1	mountain trekking	passive recreation	nature walks	sightseeing tours	nature walks
2	dinner near the fireplace	local cuisine	getting acquainted with the farm	traditional meal	passive recreation
3	attending a restaurant	nature walks	local cuisine	passive recreation	getting acquainted with old crafts
4	sightseeing tours	mountain trekking	passive recreation	getting acquainted with the family and the farm	sunbathing
5	passive recreation	attending a restaurant	excursions	sunbathing	local cuisine

Source: Author's study in the Eastern Rhodopes

From the survey carried out it has become clear that almost all tourists who stayed at a house with a yard and farm, above all, looked for recreation and rest. Passive recreation and sunbathing were among the preferences of tourists, no matter where they have ranked them. Mountain trekking and mountain walks were a preference of tourists from all age groups. Since the guest-houses and family hotels in the research region do not offer any specific additional services, logically, they were visited by people who looked for a holiday in the beautiful mountain. There were relatively few tourists who had come to the

region to look for cultural and historical landmarks. The tourists from both elder groups showed interest in the farm and old crafts. The tourists of younger age sought the diners near the fireplace or a visit to a restaurant or other entertainment venue.

The villages in the research region are surrounded by unspoiled landscapes, there are a number of natural phenomena, eco walks, marked starting points for hiking and mountain trekking. In order to develop rural tourism and to attract tourists, the available tourism resources located on the territory of the Eastern Rhodopes must be brought to and maintained

in good condition. The next step is to turn these resources into tourist attractions. To prepare advertising prospectuses of these places, and to deliver these to travel agencies, tour operators, to be displayed somewhere prominently, in the foyer of the guest house or the family hotel, so that all visitors can see them, get acquainted with them and be intrigued to see these places, to get to know and learn more about them. The municipality should also utilize even the smallest resource in the region and turn it into a “pulling power” to attract tourists.

CONCLUSIONS

The main accommodation facility is the country house and the supply of traditional rural lifestyle and atmosphere is the main focus and essence of the rural tourism concept. A total of 75.4% of the owners organized rural tourism radically different from the mass one, and it contained in itself the two main elements of the rural tourism product - accommodation and meal.

From the survey carried out, it can be summarized that the potential of the Rhodope villages and the surrounding countryside is not fully exploited. Only 16% of the owners perceived the additional activities as part of the comprehensive tourism product – main activity.

The consumers, when choosing a tourist destination, are guided by reasons and needs which can be satisfied by the elements of the rural tourism product;

Now, based on this research, a profile of the average consumer of the rural tourism product can be drawn up: it is the average Bulgarian, educated, living in urban conditions, with medium to high incomes, their opinion has great importance and influences the organization of rural tourism. This profile gives reason to believe that in the future the demand for this type of tourism will grow.

The demand for an integrated tourism product combining in itself rural tourism and elements of balneotherapy, culturally-informative and recreational mountain tourism, is increasing. This requires consolidation – formal and informal, of the owners’ efforts – hoteliers,

restaurateurs, managers, entrepreneurs in the field of entertainment and other cultural activities, local authorities, etc., in order to promote and present a quality and comprehensive tourism product.

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