

RURAL AND AGRICULTURAL TOURISM IN BULGARIA – OPPORTUNITIES FOR A BETTER LIFE

Ivan KILIMPEROV

Agricultural University - Plovdiv, 12 Mendeleev Blvd., 4000 Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Email:
i.kilimperov@gmail.com

Corresponding author: i.kilimperov@gmail.com

Abstract

Typical of the modern urbanized society is to have increased dynamics of life and the continued impact of various stress factors. Urban living conditions are constantly deteriorating – increased noise levels, air pollutants, lack of green areas, and so on. The quality of the food is also deteriorating. In this regard, the purpose of the study is to present the rural and agrarian tourism in Bulgaria as forms of tourism, meeting the modern needs of the urban type of person for a better life - clean environment, quality (and functional) food, happiness and human communication.

Key words: *tourism, rural tourism, happiness, functional foods, better life*

INTRODUCTION

The opportunities to explore the lifestyle of local people (their culture, traditions, holidays, etc.), the agriculture as a major economic activity in rural areas, the food and non food products traditional for the region, as well as the typical dishes, drinks and architecture lie at the heart of rural and agricultural tourism.

Both, humanity and human interaction, which embody the satisfaction of human social needs (third level in Abraham Maslow's Pyramid of needs), are deeply seated in the philosophy of rural tourism product. Rural and agricultural tourism offer a high level of diversity from everyday life, which, in itself, is a factor for overcoming the adverse effects of stress factors and forms of distress. All this - in combination with good food (of good taste, ecological and health characteristics) and pleasant atmosphere - leads to increased mood and self-esteem. Therefore, both rural tourism and agricultural tourism could also be perceived as factors of happiness and better life. However, to interpret them as factors of happiness and opportunity for a better life, we need to carry out a comparative analysis of the opportunities of rural tourism product to provide the key factors that have a positive effect on the mood of people.

Such opportunities are offered by the rural tourism accommodation, home-made food, food products produced in the country house or farm, production of functional food, organic farming and its products, communication in an informal environment with the hosts, family atmosphere in the tourist facilities, rural culture and holidays (as an element of the rural tourism product), as well as the active participation of the guests in all these processes.

A comprehensive vision for the development of the relevant rural tourism destination is also needed, including „...the preservation of the cultural heritage, promotion of tourist attractions, investments, diversification of activities, service and staff quality“ [5]. In any case, “... tourist services in the rural areas are able to support local population and communities in developing economic diversity” [6].

All this leads to the idea of achieving sustainable development, based “on the understanding of the need to extend the current level of knowledge by carrying out more faithful studies in” [3] rural areas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purpose of the study, the main factors influencing human happiness were derived. Also an attempt was made to present these

factors as part of the elements of the rural tourism product.

Based on the tourist zoning of Bulgaria and the analysis of the above-mentioned factors, the basic areas that have opportunities to include these factors of happiness in the product of rural and agricultural tourism were also derived (the Case study method).

In the marketing strategy for development and advertising of rural tourism product, it should be included and the concept for promotion of rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria as an opportunity for a better life. The basic idea includes the possibility of offering a combined tourist service, including elements of different types of specialized tourism such as Spa and Wellness tourism, rural tourism, agricultural tourism, ecotourism, cultural and other types of tourism [1].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Happiness can be defined as a particular state of mind and body. It depends on a number of factors – the mental and physical condition, the way of thinking, the people around us, the food we eat, the income, the time, etc. And although researchers at the University College of London recently discovered the formula of happiness, it cannot be triggered “on demand” or just “appear” taking into account the factors mentioned in the formula. Happiness is a strictly individual understanding and state of mind for each individual.

On the other hand, the main goal of the tourism industry is to satisfy certain needs and target interests of its users, so that they feel satisfied with the holiday. Therefore, similar to the concept of ‘Wellness’, happiness as an element of the tourism product should be present everywhere and each user should define it for themselves, according to their individual needs, life concepts, values, current state of mind and body.

However, if we consider happiness as a tourist concept, we should “subject” it to a tourist interpretation which aim is to form a core group of factors that push human mind towards more optimism, self-esteem, joy of life, self-confidence – i.e. factors that create

conditions to increase the happiness in tourists.

In this regard, we may decompose Abraham Maslow’s idea of human needs and bring out those which are more spiritual-philosophical and not so tangible: security, social belonging, friendship, self-realization.

In the end, on the basis of various studies, the following 8 factors influencing human happiness can be summarized [7]:

(i) Maintaining active social contacts.

A number of studies have indicated that people with active social contacts are more positively predisposed, healthier and happier. What is essential is not just maintaining social contacts, but surrounding oneself with people who can be relied on, i.e. a friendly circle (third level of Maslow's Pyramid).

(ii) Availability of more free time.

Although ‘free time’ is increasingly regarded as an abstract concept which is in direct dependence on income and working hours, in the end, each person can plan in their own time-budget enough free time. The ‘free time’ concept should also be clarified here. In general, this is the time that an individual should devote to themselves, to do the things they like and love; a time for spiritual growth. And although free time depends directly on working hours and income, ultimately, everyone should be their own master and freely dispose of their time, abilities and energy.

Therefore, each individual should feel free to schedule and allocate their own free-time fund according to their own individual needs. And, the more free time we have, the happier we should feel (based on the definitions of free time).

(iii) Enough financial resources.

Although money is not a measure of happiness, it is a necessary and important precondition if we want to devote ourselves to our loved ones and our hobbies. Happiness is also in direct contact with the satisfaction of the primary needs.

From the tourism point of view, the undertaking of the tourist trip is also linked to the availability of sufficient financial resources. Therefore, usually tourist trips are

undertaken by people with incomes at or above the national average.

(iv) Slowing down.

In modern times, we live our lives in an extremely dynamic and hectic environment. This, to a large extent, prevents us to 'see' and enjoy (or at least not enough) those moments that make us really happy – moments with our children while they grow up, the morning smile of the loved one, the quality food, etc.

(v) Good deeds.

Doing good is also contained in religions (incl. the religious-philosophical trends), we follow – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., it is indeed the righteous social behavior that makes us human, it makes us better and happier.

(vi) Physical activity.

It has been proven that physical activity is one of the ways to overcome the adverse effects of modern lifestyle and the impact of stressful factors in our everyday life. On the other hand – overcoming the accumulated neuro-psychological tension increases the positivity in us and makes us more relaxed and happy.

(vii) Amusement.

Amusement is a synonymous to happiness. People who have fun more often, feel happier. Probably, it is due to the fact that they relieve the pressure in this way, or because of the diversity, or the opportunities for social contacts, time with loved ones, etc.

(viii) More time with friends.

Friends are among the most valuable 'gifts' we can get. A time spent with friends is fun; it leads to a slowdown, relaxation from problems, and it is sometimes related to doing good deeds.

According to other sources [8], to be happy it is important to surround ourselves with happy people, to smile more, to improve some of our skills, etc.

It is intrinsic to our very biological essence to live amongst nature, to be surrounded by our natural habitat – the biosphere. Therefore, the immediate contact with nature can be determined as an **important factor of happiness**.

From the point of view of tourism there is another thing of significant social importance for the tourists' happiness - the **form** under which basic services are offered, i.e. services related to the

satisfaction of physiological needs - quality and ecological characteristics of food, specificity and specialization in offering the "accommodation" service.

All of the above factors of happiness can be considered as elements of the rural tourism product as well. **Social contacts and human interaction** is a sought-after service by rural tourists, especially by the narrowest form of rural tourism, where the opportunity to explore and experience the life of the local population lies in the core of tourism product.

On the other hand – human interaction, indeed, gives uniqueness to rural tourism product; it is an opportunity for the hosts to get to know their guests and to offer a high-quality tourist service.

Free time is associated with tourism in general. Free time is what lies at the heart of the development of the tourism business. Proper organization and management of rural guests' free time is the basis for increasing the satisfaction from the holiday as well as the positive thinking in tourists.

Offering more opportunities to explore rural culture and identity, transforming village festivals into tourist attractions with an opportunity for direct participation of tourists in them, will eventually lead to spiritual growth and increase of happiness.

Undoubtedly, the availability of sufficient **financial means** is one of the mandatory conditions to undertake tourism trips. Considering the conditions in Bulgaria, usually rural tourism is associated with lower prices of services offered in comparison to other forms of specialized tourism. In most of the cases the price-quality ratio is good and meets the consumers' expectations.

The **slow food** concept is in direct connection with the development of the catering service in rural and agricultural tourism. The main idea is to oppose to the globalization of bad eating habits, the great number of fast food establishments and the consumption of junk food.

There is one more thing laid down in the philosophy of rural tourism product - the opportunity to experience the simpler way of life, where **the pace is significantly lower**, where importance is given to little things that make us feel happy.

Often, rural tourism is considered together with ecotourism, as a sustainable form of tourism, aimed at preserving nature, traditions and customs, taking into account the needs of the local population. On the other hand – the life of local people is strongly linked to land and nature, and what is typical to rural environment is the high level of morality and humanism. This is a prerequisite for a high level of interaction and mutual assistance in the society, development of social and volunteering activities as part of the development of rural and agricultural tourism. In many cases, some of the elements of agricultural animation are even linked to the performance of good deeds by tourists – for example, planting a tree, afforestation of certain areas, initiatives to preserve nature and socio-cultural environment, etc.

The main element of the services in rural and agricultural tourism is the **physical activity** of tourists. It has been proven that farming is one of the most powerful anti-stress factors for a number of reasons: it is associated with consumption of a lot of physical power and energy, it offers a high level of diversity from everyday life; it provides immediate contact with nature.

Typical for the services of rural and agricultural tourism is that **animation** should “penetrate” everywhere – in the furnishing of the room, during meals, during diversification activities. A feature of rural tourism is the possibility for guests to take direct part in the “production” of the offered services. There is a ‘**fun**’ element in the preparation of traditional for the region dishes, in the supply of the necessary products (produced in the barnyard or other local producers), in the preparation of the local canned food, in the demonstration of different rites and rituals.

What lies at the heart of the rural tourism in Bulgaria is the **humanism** of Bulgarian village, expressed both by the hospitality of the hosts and the local population, and by the exterior and interior of the Bulgarian country house which has preserved its **friendly** message.

A typical and well-developed form of rural tourism in Bulgaria is the rental of villas and houses. Usually they are rented by companies and the goal is **fun and spending some quality time with friends**.

Usually, rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria are developed in the mountainous and hilly regions of the country. Besides their unique nature, many of these regions are known for their specific dishes and food products, which have excellent quality and ecological characteristics. Therefore, the abundance of the natural factor, the immediate contact with nature and the delicious and high-quality food are typical for the Bulgarian rural tourism product.

After all, tourist service should be aimed at providing happiness for tourists (the Wellness concept). This leads to the **conclusion** that Bulgarian rural tourism product covers the main factors related to the happiness of people. Therefore, rural and agrarian tourism in Bulgaria can be regarded as part of the “Global Factory for Happiness” and as opportunities for a better life.

With regard to the development of rural and agricultural tourism (as a form of the rural one) in terms of providing conditions for a better life, opportunities should be sought in tourist areas which offer the necessary natural and anthropogenic tourist resources.

Bulgaria is divided into 9 tourist regions and, depending on the natural and anthropogenic resources available, each of the regions has a certain specialization in the field of specialized types of tourism. The regions are as follows [4]: 1. Danube Region; 2. Stara Planina Region; 3. Sofia Region; 4. Thrace Region; 5. Rose valley Region; 6. Rila-Pirin Region; 7. Rhodopes Region; 8. North Black Sea Region; 9. South Black Sea Region (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Tourist regions in Bulgaria
Source: Conception for tourist zoning of Bulgaria, 2015.

From the above tourist regions, the major specialization of the Rhodopes region (7) is mountain and rural tourism, while in the Stara Planina region (2) rural tourism is included in the additional tourist specialization of the region. In fact these are the two regions in the country where the opportunities for the development of rural tourism are the best. Nevertheless, there are good opportunities in the Rila-Pirin region, the Rose valley region and the Danube region, as well.

Therefore, considering rural tourism - and in particular agricultural tourism since it is a form of rural tourism - as a factor of happiness and, accordingly, an opportunity to provide a better life, it can be argued that it can thrive and offer a quality and competitive product on the territory of the whole country. Of course, in terms of rural and agricultural tourism, priority should be given to the development and promotion of those areas where natural, anthropogenic and socio-economic conditions are the best. Basically, these are the tourist regions of Rhodopes and Stara Planina, and in part the tourist regions of Danube, Rila - Pirin and Rose Valley.

CONCLUSIONS

Happiness is a concept that is associated with certain emotions and sensations strictly individual for each person. Nevertheless, some basic parameters can be determined, which can be characterized as factors of happiness. If these factors are present, accordingly, the individual feels happier, which increases the quality of life.

On this basis, the factors of happiness can be seen as elements covered in the Bulgarian rural tourism product, which leads to the **conclusion that *rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria can be regarded as part of the main factors of human happiness and as an opportunity to provide conditions for a better life.***

In fact, these factors of happiness are also part of the priority elements of rural tourism product offered in Bulgaria:

- Social contacts and human interaction;
- Efficient use of free time;
- Physical activity as a form of combating stress factors;

- Comparatively cheaper rest, compared to other forms of specialized tourism;
- Food of excellent quality and environmental characteristics;
- Accommodation with friendly atmosphere;
- Opportunities to slow down and relax;
- Unique rural tourist animation;
- Carrying out voluntary activities;
- More reasons to smile and experience positive mood and thoughts;
- Application of folk medicine;
- Immediate contact with nature;
- High degree of diversity and (especially for the holidays of tourists from major cities and tourist resorts [2]) supply of quality food products, etc.

Rural and agricultural tourism in Bulgaria should be developed as a priority in the tourist regions of Rhodopes and Stara Planina. Good opportunities exist in other tourist regions of the country, such as Rila – Pirin, Danube and Rose Valley.

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