

THE REVIVAL OF TOURISM IN MEHEDIŢI COUNTY – CASE STUDY: THE DANUBE BEND TOURIST DESTINATION

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Abstract

The sustainable management of the destinations is essential for the development of tourism, especially through the planning of the efficient usage of the space and of the land, as well as through the control of the development and through the decisions to invest in infrastructure and services. Granting the fact that the new development of tourism is, as a scale and a type, adequate for the needs of the local community and for the natural environment, the sustainable development can consolidate the economic performances and the competitive position of a destination on a long term. This needs a support frame that implicates all the interested parties at regional and local levels, as well as an efficient structure that facilitates the efficient partnership and management. A basic request for the quality existence and perennality of the tourist destinations from Romania is to remain competitive. The actions undertaken for this purpose should be considered as a part of the process of creation of a sustainable character, which represents one of the most important advantages in the competition. Thus, in order to ensure competitiveness, viability and prosperity on a long term, the tourist destinations should emphasize the full integration of the preoccupations regarding the sustainability within the decisional process and within their management practices and instruments.

Key words: *sustainable, tourism, destination, competitiveness, revival.*

Jel classification: *L83, Q00, Q01*

1. INTRODUCTION

The study proposes the consolidation of a “gained good”, the title of DESTINATION OF EXCELLENCE, obtained following the Pilot Project of the European Commission, in collaboration with the Government of Romania through the Ministry for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, Commerce, Tourism and Liberal Professions – the General Department for Development and International Relations (December 2007 – June 2008), obtaining the Diploma of Excellence as a consequence of the selection within the Project “European destinations of Excellence” with the subject “Tourism and the untouchable local legacy”. Thus, in order to ensure the competitiveness, viability and prosperity on a long term, the European tourist destinations of excellence should emphasize the full integrity of the preoccupations regarding their sustainability within the decisional frame and within the management practices and instruments.

The task of the experts in tourism regarding the revival of the tourism in Mehedinţi County and its promotion in the “mirror” in the neighbouring cross-border space, but also at national and international levels, must be based on a marketing plan specific for the revival of the tourist activities practiced at the tourist destination the Danube Bend and its promotion in the cross-border area, watching the pragmatic accomplishment of the following elements: the satisfaction of the tourists on holiday or on transition

through Drobeta Turnu Severin by improving the general conditions of the tourist offer, including by the development and the diversification of the infrastructure, by ensuring a certain economic growth. This means: specific activities of establishing the marketing objective in the promotion of the tourist product the Danube Bend (seminars, themed workshops etc.).

The marketing strategies will focus on: the establishment of marketing objective for the promotion of the tourist product the Danube Bend, seminars, brainstorming² at the level of the experts in tourism, relocating strategies for the tourist product, development strategies for cooperation with the neighbouring tourist destinations for the creation of a global tourist product – cross-borders; intensification strategies for the promotion activities of the new tourist product the Danube Bend.

Among our recommendations, we enumerate the following: the elaboration of a calendar of events which are specific for the tourist destination in order to develop the cross-border tourism; the founding of a cross-border centre for public relations; the elaboration of a building plan – founding some infrastructural elements, which can improve – change the visual perception of the destination.

² *Brainstorming* – technique for the stimulation of creativity within a group of specialists in a field of activity (tourism), and at the end of the brainstorming meeting, the organizer of the group selects the most valuable ideas proposed as a solution for the respective problem.

The mission of the marketing plan which aims at its promotion in the “mirror” within the neighbouring cross-border space, but also at national and international levels, will have to be reflected in the slogan *“Pages of history, culture and tourism within an unique area: the danube bend”*. This thing will help the building of the identity of tourism from the Danube Bend and can point the position on the market of the tourist product. This action will be enrolled together with the partners from Serbia.

We think as imperative the enrolling of some specific activities of attraction audit – starting from the forms of tourism which can be practiced and from the market niches where the resources should be focused.

In general, for the evaluation of the attraction of a destination, its tourist potential is taken into consideration. The Mehedinți County benefits from a special natural as well as anthrop tourist potential. The natural potential is represented by the following elements: the cast landscape (the southern area of Banat Mountains, Mehedinți Mountains and Plateau); the hydro-graphics (dominated by the flow of the Danube, but also of rivers like Topolnița, Coșuștea etc.); the flora and the fauna have a more reduced potential, but a series of endemism from the flora within the natural park of Iron Gates must be emphasized (among the 1668 of vegetal taxons existent in the Iron Gates Natural Park, 28 are endemic, 33 in the opinion of other authors), as well as the rich fauna rarely met on the territory of our country (the land tortoise or birds – the egret, lesser kestrel, black stork etc.); the Iron Gates Natural Park (the second in size from Romania) and, at the same time, it is considered the protected area with the greatest ethnic diversity from Romania. Along with this park, there is the national park of Domogled – Cernei Valley, and over 30 complex, botanical, pale ontological, speological, forestry protected areas.

The anthrop potential is represented by all the four categories included by specialists: the historic cultural attractions which include the historic monuments and the art monuments, respectively, ethnography and folklore. The most representative examples are: the epipaleolithic settlement from Schela Cladovei (considered the oldest permanent settlement in Europe, where there has been discovered an 8000 years old Homo Sapiens); the ruins of Traian’s bridge (considered the longest in antiquity – over 1000m long); the ruins of the Roman camp; the ruins of the Roman baths; the fortifications of the 1st – 5th centuries; the tower of Justinian; the ruins of the medieval fortress; the Grecescu church (known for the paintings of Gheorghe Tătărascu); the castle of water built in 1914; the ruins of the fortress of Ada Kaleh; the ruins of the fortress of Tricule; the monasteries of Strehaia and Gura Motrului; the Topolnița church; the wooden churches from different localities (Baia de Aramă, Broșteni, Cazănești, Balta, etc.); the specific towers of Oltenia (Cutui in Broșteni, Tudor

Vladimirescu in Simian locality etc.). We can include in the ethnography and folklore category the following: the village museums (Darvari) or ethnographic centres (Devesel, Balta, Ilovat, and Oprișor, etc.), folk music (Isverna), the folk clothing, as well as the wood craft (Obârșia Cloșani).

- institutions and artistic cultural events (the Iron Gates Region Museum, the Iron Gates Technical Museum, the Art Museum, the Ethnographic and Archaeological Museum of Gornea), the ethnographic collection and the icons and church books collection from Eșelnița; the Memorial House Gheorghe Rădulescu Motru; the Celebration of the Lime Tree; the Celebration of the Bat; the church celebration of Oprisor village; the celebrations of some monasteries, etc.

- the technical and economic potential (the Iron Gates I and II lakes and the dams with the power plants which determined the formation of two lakes and which include the biggest hydro-energetic department from Romania)

- The social and demographic potential (the villages and the cities from Mehedinți County, situated along the Danube River especially, but also in the northern part of the county).

For each tourist market, whether traditional or new, the marketer must make an inventory of the main forms of tourism which are practiced and can be practiced. (For instance, based on the studies regarding the tourist fluxes towards Romania, researchers have noticed that the German and Italian tourists are interested by the relaxing tourism and the treatment tourism, the seaside tourism, cruises and the hunting tourism).

2. THE INTEGRATION OF THE TOURIST POINTS ANALYSED WITHIN THE EUROPEAN TOURIST CIRCUIT

The integration of the tourist points analyzed within the European tourist circuit can be realized through: the relaunching of a tourist product specific for the Danube Bend and of some cross-border strategies of tourist planning;

The specific activities of documentation and position of the tourist product the Danube Bend (based on the SWOT analysis), start from the emphasis, the hierarchy and the monitoring of those specific and authentic elements (natural and/or anthrop) that can confer uniqueness and identity within the product strategy through which to obtain and permanently ensure the competitive advantage along with other areas and strategies specific for the marketing mix (price, distribution, promotion, personnel, scheduling and partnership).

Within the marketing strategy of the destination and, the more so as the destination is not the only tourist product and represents a complex of tourist products, the central role is filled by location.

Within the regional tourist marketing, location, as element of the competitive strategy, implies the elements of identity of a product (along with the other variables of the marketing mix). In this context, the audit of the identity constitutes the first step in the elaboration of an efficient marketing strategy.

The marketing identity at the level of a destination – Mehedinți County, the Danube Bend – with a special tourist potential, contains more stages: the establishment of the own marketing objective; an attraction audit; starting from the tourism forms which can be practiced and from the market niches which the resources must be focused on; a SWOT analysis, according to which the product can be placed, starting from the emphasis of those specific and authentic elements (natural and/or anthrop) which can confer uniqueness and, implicitly, identity within the product strategy, through which it can obtain and permanently ensure the competitive advantage in comparison with other areas, along with the other strategies correspondent to the variables of the mix marketing (price, distribution, promotion, personnel, packaging, scheduling and partnership).

According to the value and the concentration of the tourist objectives, according to their accessibility and infrastructure, we can delimit 8 tourist regions in Romania: North-East, South-East, South-Muntenia, South-West Oltenia, West, North-West, centre and Bucharest-Ilfov.

As a marketing resource, the regional identity must be analyzed and evaluated from the products and/or the offered tourist services points of view. Their evaluation must take into account the attraction elements which constitute main motivations for the tourists. The attraction elements are: the natural beauty of the landscape (mountains, lakes, forests etc.), history and famous people, commercial areas, cultural attractions, relaxation and entertainment, sports arenas, events and opportunities, buildings, monuments and sculptural assemblies, people and other attractions. In fact, this analysis (which is called the attraction audit in the literature) is the base of the definition of the regional marketing objective and of the action program within the marketing program for the respective region.

Based on the attraction audit completion, the next stage is the SWOT analysis for the Mehedinți tourism, an analysis already presented above.

The competitors of Mehedinți County can group at the level of region, of the neighbouring counties and at the level of international destinations.

At the region level (the Direction for Regional Development); the most important competitor is Vâlcea County, taking into account the indicators “number of tourists” and “net usage of the accommodation structure”.

Thus, in the year 2007, the total number of tourists accommodated in Mehedinți County was 45596. Among these, 36947 were from our country, and 8649 were foreigners. In a top of the South-West

Oltenia region, at the total tourist arrivals, the Mehedinți County fills the second place after Vâlcea, but at a very large distance (189844 in Vâlcea in comparison with 45596 in Mehedinți). From the point of view of the number of foreign tourists, Mehedinți County fills the first place, at the level of the same region, with 8649 in comparison with 8400 in Dolj County. The indicators of net usage of the accommodation units are for Mehedinți County of 28.5% which means that the county fills the third place at the level of the development region after Vâlcea and Olt.

In the relation with the counties Vâlcea and Gorj, the difference can be shown by the sport tourism practiced on the Danube or by the tourist cruises on the Danube (if there is a better reevaluation of its tourist potential).

At the levels of the neighbouring counties, the most important competitor can be Caras-Severin County, which has many common elements from the point of view of the natural and anthrop tourist potential. The difference between the two entities, in favour of Mehedinți county, can be shown by the cultural tourist potential, (for example the architectural monuments at Strehăia, Gura Motrului or Topolnița as well as the archaeological monuments, etc.).

At the national level, Mehedinți County fills the 31st place for the total number of tourists, outrunning only the counties without mountainous landscape. At the same time, it fills the 32nd place after counties like Bacău, Brăila, Giurgiu (which have more reduced tourist potential), but before other counties like (Neamț, Suceava, Tulcea, etc.) considered favourite tourist destinations.

At the level of international destinations, the main competitors are Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro, which, after all the promotion efforts, can attract tourists with the cruise ships. In fact, the number of tourists on the cruise ships which stop at Drobeta Turnu Severin port and visit the tourist attraction from Mehedinți is very small.

Regarding the tourism forms which Mehedinți County offers, we can talk about a competitive advantage in the relation with other counties like Olt and Dolj, almost regardless of the form of tourism practiced.

A competitive advantage of Mehedinți County, that can be much supported, is the involvement of the county in an international partnership with Bulgaria and the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro. The same strategy can be applied for Gorj County which has an attractive anthrop tourist potential.

Based on the SWOT analysis and after a careful segmentation of the market (based on the social and demographical and psycho-graphical criteria), we can determine the tourism forms correspondent to each segment, and then we can shape the product, trying to locate it. In tourism, due to the diversity and complexity of needs and of the consumer's wishes that must be satisfied, it is difficult

to choose from the location criteria, the most efficient being considered the ones which refer to the specific features of the product: that have as base the identity elements (ethnic, geographic, cultural etc.). In general, while for the traditional markets a new location strategy is necessary (by offering more better reasons for the tourist to return to the destination, the marketer has to know the whole range of loisir activities practiced and which have constituted attractions); "shaping" a new destination for new markets needs the definition of those attributes that can lead to the maximum degree of attraction and that can support the saying: "*More to see, more to do!*" – doubled by an original brand for the target public.

The following stage is the elaboration of the marketing strategy. Based on the location of the tourist product according to the identity elements, the regional tourist marketing strategy includes all the variables of the marketing mix (price, distribution, promotion, personnel, partnerships, packaging and programming). Thus, while through the price, the distribution and even the packaging and partnerships strategies, a clearly different tourist product can be produced, through the presence of the emotional factors which help the elaboration of the strategies of product, promotion, personnel and programming, the unity of the tourist product and the identity of the region can be achieved. Within the regional entity, identity can be seen as an instrument of concretization of a complex marketing process of planning, as a part of the strategic marketing process. As a marketing program, it contains the situation analysis (based on the main specific indicators of the tourist activity); deciding the objectives; the development of the strategy; the action program (communication, intern marketing etc.); the implementation, the evaluation and the control.

As objectives of this marketing plan there are: the maximization of the revaluation of the tourist resources from the destination; the improvement of the environment, physically and sensorial; the increase of the holiday duration through the increase of destination attraction; the intensification of the communication with the local community as well as with the potential service consumers related to the tourist offer:

The action plan for the tourism development in the region the Danube Bend for the period 2008 - 2009

SWOT ANALYSIS

Strong Points:

- the advantageous position of the region, in comparison with the European projects which aim at the transport infrastructure;
- the beauty of the landscape – mainly mountainous and danubian;

- many protected areas – national parks; natural parks; nature monuments and reservations;
- the existence of the unused at full capacity accommodation units;
- the existence of a good tourist infrastructure in the great mountain resorts and in the treatment resorts of national interest in the neighbourhood (Baile Herculane)
- rich cynegetic and fish fauna and a great botanical variety;
- historic monuments and medieval architectural ones with a great value (fortified medieval fortresses, churches, towers with entering gates or fortress walls);
- traditions and folklore customs, folk clothing, traditional architecture, very well preserved;
- the ethnic diversity, the cultural diversity;
- the varied cuisine (Romanian, Serbian etc.);
- the great surface covered with forests, having recreational and curing qualities.

Weak points:

- the lack of a regional tourism concept which cannot make possible the promotion of a unitary product in the country and outside the country;
- the reduced quality of the services and of the tourist information related to the promotion of the Danube Bend;
- the transportation infrastructure, the improper telecommunications and the technical endowment;
- the lack of an organized system which could make possible the access to the protected areas, natural parks or reservations through recreational or educational trips;
- the improper protection of the tourists offered by the competent departments like the Rescue department, which hike the mountainous paths at high altitude or during winter;
- reduced interest and business spirit of the rural population towards the tourism activities;
- the underestimation of tourism as a potential for business and for creating new work places;
- the lack of adequate tourist infrastructure (network of information centres, marketing centres and consultancy centres in tourism, materials for tourist promotion, guide services, facilitation structure for visiting the area);
- the low professional standard of the tourism personnel, of the travel agencies and of the personnel which offers services, there are linguistic barriers;
- the lack of activities organisation for the tourists' free time;
- the lack of themed tourist itineraries that reevaluate the natural / anthrop potential;
- the unattractive conditions of credits for the tourism projects;
- the weak tourist infrastructure in some areas of the Danube Bend region.

Opportunities:

- the interest of the public administration in the tourism development;
- the development of the projects for professional training;
- the restoration and the revaluation of the historic sites and of the monuments that have national heritage value;
- the existence of close relations between the population of the region and emigrants in the countries of the European Union or in the associated countries;
- the possibility of exploiting the mountainous areas all the year round for hiking, cycling and skiing;
- the increased interest for tourism at an international level;
- the development of some complex tourist products;
- the existence in the region of some powerful NGOs which know the valuable areas and are dedicated to their protection;
- the available work force which can be drawn to the system of tourist services.

Risks:

- the promotion of a legislation which does not encourage the investments in tourism;
- the underestimation of the specialized training in the field;
- the low implication and understanding of the proper exploitation of the environment and of the territory by the public authorities, for the benefit of tourism;
- the investment capital insufficiency in order to maintain and increase the number of business activities in tourism;
- the increased pressure of tourists (the anthrop factor) on the valuable tourist objectives which can lead to their destruction.

Through its strategic position, Mehedinți County, well shaped part of the national territory, situated at the meeting of the Carpathians with the Balkans, and with a direct access to the main European roads, railways and navigational routes, with a geographical landscape to be envied, crossed by the Danube on its way on the Romanian territory, with a length of 220 km, this county offers a special potential for the development of tourism.

Considered lately among the priority domains of the national economy, tourism, including the Mehedinți County tourism, will have to become the main economic branch. The special value of the tourist potential of Mehedinți County and the current status of revaluation, insufficiently exploited, allows the shaping of future development directions:

1. The increased tourist attraction and implicitly the development of the tourist services in Mehedinți County.

The impulse on the tourist activity will be seen as a source of income, through the revaluation, the emphasizing of the existent potential and through its

revaluation by improving the necessary infrastructure and by taking the necessary measures for a better organization of the tourist activities from an administrative point of view.

By a radical modernization of the infrastructure in general, and especially of the roads, of the electrical, water and soars networks, the new tourist forms and activities will be better advertised: weekend tourism, the church tourism, the mountain tourism, the scientific tourism in collaboration with the danubian universities, the treatment tourism, the ethnic and folkloric tourism, the sport tourism (nautical, speological and mountainous etc.).

2. The widening of the material base, of tourism activities and services in the rural area so that each folklore settlement becomes an attractive tourist centre.

The main directions of the program for the promotion of tourism aim at:

- the transformation of the tourism in Mehedinți County into an economic viable, competitive sector and a generator of work places and profit;
- the development and the modernization of the tourist structures;
- the revaluation of the attractive tourist areas from the county, but also the revaluation of some tourist objectives less known or difficult to visit (Topolnița and Coșuștea Valleys, the caves from the Danube Bend, as well as the cave from the Mehedinți Carst);
- launching and exploiting for the benefit of the rural areas of the permanent tourist programs of the county's and country's travel agencies;
- The inclusion of the Mehedinți tourist areas in the international circuit of the Danube as well as in the international circuit of tourist objectives from the Balkan Peninsula and Greece.

Moreover, in order to develop the tourist services from the Mehedinți County, during 2007-2013, the County Council of Mehedinți has to support the development of the relaxation areas (Bala, Balta, Obârșia Cloșani, Ponoarele, Isverna, Eșelnița, Dubova, Svinița, Simian Island, Ostrovul Golu and other isles along the Danube River).

The activities for the support and the promotion of tourism undertaken by the County Council of Mehedinți will be performed in collaboration with the similar institutions from Caras-Severin and Gorj counties, so that the development strategy for tourism in Mehedinți County be connected to the tourism in Northern Oltenia, be created as a regional strategy which could profit from the structural funds for the regions in development. The studies and the projects that will aim at the development of the tourist infrastructure will be aligned with the projects, studies and accomplishments from the South of the Danube, from the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro.

The present case study represents an application with an innovating feature, considered as

the beginning of a more complex application, the research being continued on other analysis coordinates of the tourist phenomenon, insisting on the revival of the tourism in Mehedinți County, the necessity for maximum use of the tourist potential – the one in the target area being a unique one and with a real cultural vocation. We would like its relaunching in the cross-border partner area (the districts of Borski and Branicevski), together with all the harmony these relations and identified problems engage in several stages, globally and integrated at all levels: the economic one in which a balance and a revival of the tourist fluxes towards Drobeta will be tried, the administrative one in which we identified common cross-border administrative “bridges”, the cultural one in which together with the cultural identities the collective representations of cross-border type will be multiplied: festivals, congresses, tourism fairs, events etc.

At the city’s level, such a centre is not very well endowed with the qualified personnel who could serve tourists at any moment, either with information connected to the objectives, the beauties, the potential of the county, or with details related to the itineraries and even with offers of tourist guide services.

Reports of monitoring the seminars and different actions enrolled in the tourism field will be elaborated. Lists will be made up in which the number of participants to such events should be specified.

The number of visitors at the Information Centre Danube Bend site will be monitored through registrations; this can be evaluated at an internal level as well as at an external one.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The case study can offer the tourists and the specialists in tourism a complex vision and an action strategy in the field of tourism which insists on the viable ways of revival and relaunching of the tourist destination Danube Bend.

By introducing the need for specialization of the actors involved in tourism (NGOs, local and county’s authorities, tour operators, travel agencies, local guides, tourism managers, owners of accommodation units) on certain directions of activity, the continuation of the destination promotion will improve the definition of responsibilities and of each

area according to the special training, insisting, where it is necessary, on the improvement of the specialization (through trainings, work-shops, seminars, simulations, exploration actions of the tourist potential). When launching new products and new tourist events on the tourist market from Mehedinți County (festivals, tourism fairs, summer schools etc.) it is imperative to continue the concept and the offered action, to know the environment in which the action takes place, to perceive the real opportunities and the real cross-border threats in the tourism field. The International Conference, second edition, dedicated to the sustainable development of tourism in the Carpathian Mountains, supports the promotion of this destination too: The sustainable mountainous tourism – regional response to global challenges, Drobeta Turnu Severin, Eșelnița, Romania, 26th-27th September 2009, in collaboration with the Geography Society from Romania and the Research Centre, Tourist Studies and Prognosis from the University of Bucharest, where there have been invited tourism experts from representative units of the Tourist University Education, the Research and Development Institute for Tourism, the Geography Institute under the coordination of the Romanian Academy, but also representatives of the MRI (Mountain Research Initiative).

The main multiplying and quick stake of the cooperation effects and of the economic development of the cross-border areas is the rebalance and the harmony, based on mutual respect. This means that the cross-border life is supported by a dense and close network of relations between all the factors of cross-border cooperation, and this network should be continuously revived – and the sustainable cross-border tourism will manage not only to revive but also to relaunch new tourist products which could win advantageous positions on the national and international tourist market.

Everyone who wants to start future programs in the tourism field can benefit from the results of this enthusiast and imperative action (tour operators, travel agencies, local tourist guides, tourism managers, owners of the accommodation units etc.). The concrete and multiplying effects will be seen in the programs for tourist design of the Danube bank, the impact of such a program being beneficial in the tourism field with a quality extension on the whole economic development of the cross-border area.

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