

TOURISM: INNOVATION AND COMPETITIVITY. THE CASE OF EGYPT

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Abstract

Tourism is a major factor that can determine an intensive competitiveness between countries. Each state should promote its values, culture, history, taking into consideration the one important factor able to distinguish a country from another one: innovation. The aim of this research is to emphasize the issues related to competitiveness and innovation in Egyptian tourism. Documentary study was the research method used for the achievement of this article. This article can be a landmark for tourism companies which shall pay attention to innovation as a competitiveness factor. The success of a tourist destination is determined by the way that manages to simultaneously ensure and provide to the visitors, throughout its entire offer, an experience that equalizes or exceeds any other experience from many other alternative destinations. Nowadays, all the tourism companies should think about innovation as a promoting method to gain the competitive advantage.

Key words: *Egyptian tourism, flexible tourism services, innovation in tourism, tourism competitiveness.*

JEL Classification: *L83; M16; M37; O18; O31; Q56; Z12.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the economy sectors that has long-term development prospects. This can be a way of protecting, but also of "promoting the potential of a country (cultural, historical, folkloric, architectural etc.)" (Șușu, Bârsan, 2009, p. 74).

Egypt is probably the oldest tourist destination in the world. Holder of an incomparable treasure, made up of monuments and ancient sites of a modern living culture and of a natural environment of great beauty, Egypt is not just about more tourist destinations into one, but can be a place where you get in contact with the past history of pharaohs, "it also can be a thrilling view of the desert and coral reefs, a lively initiation into the Arab world or a combination of any of these possibilities" (Humphreys, 2010, p. 8).

In one of his first travel writings, the Greek geographer Herodotus wrote: "There is no country that possesses so many wonders, nor any that has such a number of works which defy description." This statement is true nowadays, too. The Egyptian symbols, shapes and mysteries were spread like a virus transmitted through sketches, journals and artifacts that first venture some travelers took home with them.

During the last decades, the Egyptian tourism industry has suffered a dramatic change. If once the main attractions were the ancient history and monuments of Age of the Pharaohs, now more and more tourists are no longer interested in the Pyramids of Giza and the temples of Luxor. They come here for the sun, white sands and turquoise waters, that banks of the Red Sea and Sinai Peninsula offer in abundance. For this reason, to attract tourists, there were major investments in innovation in the Egyptian tourism, to

ensure those conditions that make the tourist feel perfectly during his stay, but without forgetting in which country he is (cultural identity is thus preserved by combining modern elements with traditional ones).

II. INNOVATION IN TOURISM

The term innovation was introduced in economic literature by Joseph Alois Schumpeter, being defined as „the assembling of a new production function, since it covers the case of a new product, a new organization or opening new markets” (Nagy, 2010, p. 16). If in the process of manufacturing of a product we are dealing with a material good which is tangible and can be stored, after the production process of a service the things are different because the service is immaterial, intangible and can not be stored. In addition to these aspects that distinguish products from services, there is a particular feature of service which is the inseparability or the simultaneity of production and consumption. This feature makes that in the process of services’ innovation the customer also may be involved, leading to the quick and more accurate fulfillment of his desires and it improves products or services offered by the provider unit, too.

Innovation does not always have an impact on achieving the objectives of a tourism firm. Innovation is manifesting "through changes in tourism product, organizational structure, managerial and marketing practices" (Orengo Serra & Picón Garcia, 2013, p. 2). Over the time, there were outlined several criteria by which innovation could be classified. The most often used criterion is the subject of innovation. From this point of view, we are dealing with *product innovation and process innovation*.

Product innovation consists in designing and launching on the market of a new improved product or service to attract consumer attention and whose novelty is evident both for the manufacturer or the supplier, as well as for the consumers. In tourism, product innovation can be reflected by the appearance of organized trips, and of new services appeared with the development of technology, the development of loyalty programs for consumer or the implementation of new different ideas.

Process innovation consists in producing specific changes targeting the organization's internal aspects which contribute to increasing the performance of existing operations, issues that relate to the use of new or improved technologies or to replace an old production lines with a new one. Process innovation in tourism is more frequent and began to appear with the development of software used in the field. Among the examples of process innovation in tourism are included: the vast majority of hotels that are using the software for business reception, online reservation systems used by hotels, air and road transport companies.

Hjalager identifies three new categories of innovation, alongside with those described above: “innovation in management, logistics innovation and institutional innovation” (Hjalager, 2002, p. 465).

Innovation in management is any kind of practice able to substantially change the way in which the activity in management takes place or able to change in a significant degree the company's standard practices, so that these changes lead to the achievement of its objectives. Also, management innovation consists in the development of new job profiles, establishing new hierarchical systems, which often support new products and services. This type of innovation can occur through *empowerment*, namely by involving employees in decision making, consulting them.

Logistics innovation in tourism concerns the occurrence of changes in the supply chain, in the distribution channels or the development of marketing through the Internet.

Institutional innovation is not related to the tourism company itself, but to a new organizational structure and a new legislative framework which reorients and effectively improves the business. Tourists' preferences should be taken into account in the innovation process since they play an important role into the transfer of “information/knowledge toward the tourism companies” (Eggink, 2013, p. 5). The information provided by the tourists can generate new ideas, new solutions for the development of touristic services/products.

III. COMPETITIVENESS IN TOURISM

Competitiveness reflects safety, efficiency, quality, high productivity, adaptability, modern management, superior products, low costs. Competitive force of a company lies in competitive advantages and distinctive skills which “it possesses in relation to other competitors” (Danciu, 2004, p. 30). Defined as “the degree to which a nation, in free and fair market conditions, can produce goods and services that pass the test of international markets, while managing to maintain and increase the real income of its citizens”, competitiveness is a “challenge applied to all regions and cities/resorts in the world” (Kotler, 2001, p. 232). A firm is competitive in a specific market when it manages to achieve certain economic indicators (turnover, profit, market share) comparable or superior to those of other competitors that operate in the same market.

Competitiveness in tourism is defined as “the ability to deal with competition in an effective and profitable way on the tourism market”. The specific content of tourism requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach of this concept. This approach is necessary taking into consideration some particular aspects of the tourism product.

First of all, it should be pointed out that the multiplicity of the components involved in the designing and selling of a tourism product caused that the realization of its competitiveness to be a complex process at which contributes both competitiveness destination/tourist resort as well as that achieved in each type of tourism company: direct provider of travel services (transport, accommodation, food, recreation, treatment) or intermediate (travel agency).

On these reminded above it is necessary to be added that from the tourist's point of view, the product covers his entire experience starting from his departure until his returning home, “being enough that only one of the components of the product to have deficiencies and the global level of competitiveness is compromised” (Stăncioiu, 2003, p.104). Currently, the world tourism, is characterized by very strong competition between destinations. Thus, there is a need for a new model of tourism policy which can affect the competitive position of some countries in the present conditions of competition. The starting point in establishing the strategy for improving the competitive position is represented by decisive elements of competitiveness that are given mainly by:

- **factorial conditions:** natural and cultural resources, capital resources and infrastructure, human resources (combining these three groups of factors form the basis of the competitive position of a destination).
- **quality and structure of tenderers** comprising destination and experiences connected with this. The competitive position of a destination is determined to a large extent by its diversity, its degree of specialization and not least by the quality of bidders. An important competitive factor is the quality of tourism products.

This quality can be classified: natural (environment), material (base hotel, public food, transportation, sports, etc.), immaterial (administration, information, organization, etc.).

▪ **market structure and organizational structure:** distribution channels are strongly influenced by firm size. In a global competition, many small and medium companies have difficulties in establishing an unique destination, in distributing their products worldwide. These enterprises have medium costs for production and they generally have difficulties to achieve internal savings needed for development. Given these difficulties, in the context of world-class companies competition, market penetration and the resistance of SMEs (small and medium enterprises) on a competitive market will become increasingly dependent on the degree to which they will be open to cooperation and will be able to give up some of their entrepreneurial autonomy in order to ensure their economic survival in tourism sector.

▪ **conditions for expression of demand and supply adjustment:** basic elements of competitiveness, due to the size and structure of the market (market share of specific tourism, income levels and social level, degree of saturation, etc.), due to tourists opinion about the new products. Tourists who give priority to quality, contribute to a continuous quality control and to the rising of the competitive advantage. For adjusting the supply to consumer needs, there must be discovered new trends and new possibilities of making the tourism product.

The extent to which these determinants may contribute to the competitive position depends on the type of destination, the level of socio-economic development, landscape features, climate, culture, political factors etc. The success of a tourist destination is determined by how it manages to guarantee and at the same time to ensure visitors, throughout its entire offer, an experience that equals or exceeds many other alternative destinations. Ensuring the competitiveness of tourism products is the key in achieving competitiveness in tourism. This is the result of competitive providers, directly involved in the production of tourist services included in the package, "as well as other determinants that influence the competitiveness of the tourist destination" (Olteanu, 2000, p. 172).

As a result, the design of tourism product is not just about combining the multiple variants of the two types of elements: resources and tourist services, but requires a certain concept about product. The starting point in defining the concept about the product must be a very good knowledge of target customer segments in terms of: motivations, expectations, needs to be fulfilled, preferences, material possibilities. At the same time, it is necessary the selection and inclusion in the product of those items that best suit to the client's need, ensure the unity and homogeneity of the product and manage to differentiate it in relation to the competition.

The success factors in a business are: action orientation, simple structures, partnership with customers, increase productivity, market share, product quality and innovation (Grideanu, 2009, p. 136). "The factors influencing competitiveness in tourism are" (Dragomir, 2007, p.134):

▪ **national economic power:** the prosperity of a country is reflected in past economic performances and it has an impact on investments allocated to tourism development in that country;

▪ **globalization:** the countries involved in international flow of trade and investment;

▪ **governance:** government policies are determining competitiveness; state intervention in commercial activities should be minimized and oriented toward creating competitive conditions for tourism companies;

▪ **finance:** financial services quality, performance of capital markets;

▪ **infrastructure:** systems and appropriate resources for basic needs of the business; without proper infrastructure, tourism act can not take place. Also, lack of infrastructure may result in failure to reach new tourist destinations, unique, traditional, untouched by modernity;

▪ **management:** companies with an innovative, profitable and responsible way of management are frequented by tourists all year round, in every season;

▪ **science and technology:** scientific and technological capacity, the success of fundamental researches contributes to the implementation of the latest methods in the tourism field;

▪ **people:** market availability and qualification of human resources is crucial in the tourism industry. Without qualified human resources, actively involved in the company's well-being, we can not talk about a real success of the tourism company, because of the direct link between the tourist and staff.

IV. EGYPTIAN TOURISM: PAST AND PRESENT

In 1951, the number of tourists visiting Egypt was up to 0.1 million. Tourism, as an important sector of the economy, has risen significantly since 1975 when Egypt facilitated visa procedure for most European countries and North America and "established embassies in new countries such as Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland" (Ragab, 2014).

In 1976, tourism has been included into the government plans and thus 12% of the state budget was directed to renovate state owned hotels; also, the state had allocated funds also to private hotels and, perhaps most important aspect is represented by the investment made in the infrastructure (roads, highways and airports) for most of the tourist centers.

In 1979 were brought to Egypt experts and specialists in the field of tourism (especially from Turkey) and there were established new colleges focused on hospitality industry and tourism management. Thus, the number of tourists grew from 1.8 million (in 1981) to 5.5 million (in 2000).The

maximum number of tourists was recorded in 2014 when 14.7 million people visited Egypt. Maximum income was achieved in 2010 and it was \$ 12.5 billion dollars.

Since 2010, tourism has been severely affected in this country because of the political instability, terrorist attacks, tense situation between the Muslim and Christian population, attacks against tourist areas (Revolution of 2011 led tourists to avoid this country, particularly because of the fact that thousands of people were killed in conflicts in the street that summer). These aspects have created certain reluctance, in terms of choosing Egypt as a tourist destination, although most tourist resorts were not close to conflict zones, but they could always become a target for the attacks. For this reason, the number of tourists decreased significantly (reaching \$ 9.5 million in 2013), which, of course, affected the revenues from tourism industry (\$ 5.9 billion). In the first half of 2014 the number of tourists “decreased by 25% over the same period of 2013” (Smith, 2014).

In 2013, Egypt was ranked as the 85th, among the best countries in terms of tourism and travel, while in 2011 it was ranked as the 75th (Switzerland is ranked the first both in 2011 and 2013, followed by countries such as Germany, Austria, Spain, United Kingdom, United States of America; “Romania was ranked as the 68th in 2013 and the 63th in 2011”) (World Economic Forum, 2013).

V. TYPES OF TOURISTS FOR VISITING EGYPT

If we are taking into consideration only the nationality, most of the tourists who visit Egypt come from Russia, Germany, England, Italy, France, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, Poland, United States etc. The Egyptians are visiting their country, too, and lately, the resorts for foreign tourists are increasingly chosen by them maybe because of their desire to interact with tourists from other cultures.

After the form of tourism, the tourists who choose Egypt as a holiday destination focus on leisure tourism (by spending their staying at the Red Sea), cultural tourism (by visiting the landmarks most known worldwide) and business tourism.

After traveling habits the following classification can be made:

- individual tourists or tourist groups: for example, Russian tourists – rather said women tourists from Russia prefer to come to Egypt alone, unaccompanied, or with their female friends, aiming mainly entertainment, clubs, parties with alcoholic beverages.
- another category of tourists are the couples, both young and old who choose this tourist destination to relax but also to enrich their knowledge about Egyptian culture.

After means of transport used by tourists some aspects are to be mentioned:

- the plane: this means is chosen by the foreign tourists but also by the Egyptians, too, to avoid crowds or to cover great distances in a short time
- coach: a means of transport chosen by both foreign tourists and the national ones, due to the high degree of comfort at a very affordable price (lately several companies have appeared and they are carrying tourists both foreign and national ones to the main cities/touristic destinations: El Gouna, Sharm el Sheikh, Hurghada, Marsa Alam, Ras Gharib, Alexandria, Cairo, Aswan, Luxor etc.). These new means, just for tourism, have air conditioned and provide meals and drinks included in the price, hot drinks like tea, coffee, also.

As for the cities preferred by the foreign tourists, on the first place is Cairo, due to the fact that most of the known worldwide landmarks are here such as: Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx, Egyptian Museum, Aida Opera (at Cairo Opera House), Cairo Tower, Wax Museum, St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, Nile cruises etc. Other cities visited by many foreign tourists are: Alexandria - the pearl of the Mediterranean Sea, Luxor, Aswan.

Of the resorts on the Red Sea, the most important and the worldwide known are: Sharm el Sheikh, Hurghada, Marsa Alam - these are visited also by the foreign tourists and by the Egyptians, somewhat equal in number, due to their affordable prices.

More particularly, elegant and discreet resort of El Gouna is located about 25 km from Hurghada. This resort is frequented 95% by the foreign tourists (half of them are couples with children), the Egyptians rarely being able to afford a stay at this destination.

VI. INNOVATION IN EGYPT

Innovation in Egypt consists in:

- changes of the tourist products: adding new diverse recreational elements asked more and more by the tourists (safari, skate park, skateboard on the sand, known diving in the Red Sea among coral reefs etc.).
- training of hotels and restaurants staff: it aims to facilitate the communication between staff and foreign tourists, particularly because of the problems that sometimes arise because of cultural differences. There are fewer cases in which staff of hotels or restaurants or tourist attractions cannot speak at least one foreign language.
- intensive promotional campaigns in all markets, both to attract local population and foreign tourists in tourist areas (for the latter category, travel agencies from different countries place contracts with various tourism services in Egypt to create distinct offers customized for each category of consumers).
- infrastructure: it has the role to facilitate or not the access towards certain destinations or tourist attractions; in Egypt infrastructure is highly important, the roads/ highways that connect tourist destinations being of very good quality.

▪ material basis: the hotels and the restaurants from Egypt's tourist destinations are conceived so as to satisfy any tourist category, with a focus on the quality of products/ drinks provided, but also on the quality of the accommodation, staff training and its interest showed to tourist. A weakness in the material basis of accommodation is the fact that some hotels in the capital Cairo aren't upgraded - being public institutions, the investments allocated are not enough, many of them have the same furniture as they had 20 years ago; the rooms are not renovated in any way, however, tariffs are similar to a hotel that offers quality services, respect the customer and gives respectable conditions for a certain status. Another problem linked with this aspect is the practice of tariffs differentiated by tourists: for locals - Egyptians - a lower price, negotiable, whereas for foreign tourists - higher tariffs.

There are certain customs that tourists have to respect in the public places, too: tourist destinations such as El Gouna, Sharm el Sheikh, Hurghada, are designed especially for foreign tourists, the national ones have to adapt to those habits. Some of the foreign habits could be taboo for the Egyptians because of their Islamic religion (for example, in this religion women should cover their head and should wear clothes that cover their entire body, in order not to attract attention of the opposite sex persons; in the same time "delicate" gestures like kissing or hugging opposite sex persons in the public places are not allowed- actually are allowed but they could end up with few days in prison).

VII. COMPETITIVENESS IN EGYPT

In Egypt, competitiveness can be analyzed from two perspectives:

- competitiveness of the destination / tourist resort;
- competitiveness of each type of tourist company:
 - *direct provider* of tourism services: reception structures that have tourist accommodation, catering, leisure, treatment, transportation;
 - *intermediary*: tourism agencies.

In terms of competitiveness of destination/ tourist resort, there are many attractive cities for tourists in Egypt, because of the multitude of sights that attract tourists in a particular area. Currently, the tourists are not only focusing to visit the Pyramids, for example, but they prefer more to come into contact with the local population and to better know the Egyptian culture through the habits of common people. Therefore, we can say that there is competition between all major cities in Egypt (those especially developed to receive tourists: Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan). Although, at first glance, Cairo has a very large number of visitors, the others cities are gaining ground due to the cultural differences between Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt (in the south, people have other habits - although they are mainly by Islamic religion, the living and the port are different from those of the population in the north of the country).

Also the tourism resorts are in competition with each other, each one having its own intensive promotional campaigns. Some of them are very well known in the world (such as Sharm el Sheikh), and do not need promotion, unless new hotels or a new leisure facilities are appearing. These are usually areas that no longer need promotion. Tourist resorts, such as El Gouna, are promoted to a certain category of tourists, especially those with a particular financial situation enabling them to stay in this place.

Tourist destinations from Egypt are in competition with those of other countries that offer the same tourism services, but are different in terms of tariffs charged. For example, there are well-known and in trend, the tourist resorts from Bulgaria - Golden Sands; here, tourists can enjoy quality services at very competitive rates. Such is the case of tourist resorts from Turkey - Antalya, Belek, Kusadasi etc., where the number of tourists is somewhat constant.

It is worth mentioning that in all these cases, tourists are somewhat isolated from local population (as in the case of tourist resorts from the Red Sea - Egypt or those from Mediterranean Sea - Turkey) in order not to receive a culture shock - differences in living standards between the locals and tourists, the different conditions that those benefit.

Not the same thing would have notified if we talk about other tourism resorts in Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain, where there are provided identical conditions for both local population and foreign tourists.

In terms of competitiveness within each type of tourism enterprise, in Egypt there are different accommodation units with different classifications, from luxury hotels to modest tourist guesthouses, with price levels for each category of tourist.

We can say that Turkey is the main competitor of Egypt, from tourist point of view, if we take into consideration the rates charged. Usually, there are preferred those accommodation units that also provide customers various food and entertainment options.

Dubai is another tourist destination with which Egypt is in competition. Dubai – a quite eccentric tourist destination - frequently offers charter flights, but in this regard the prices can be quite misleading: it is usually practice attractive rates for the client, but only in the period where he would hardly resist the climatic conditions of the area, the number of accommodated tourists being low. Thus, through special charter flights and special package, it is intended to attract tourists during off season (implicitly, by performing discounted rates which aim reducing seasonality).

VIII. CONCLUSION

The competitiveness of a firm lies in its ability to increase revenues due to the increase of sales and / or profit margins, in markets where it competes, in order to gain the best possible position on the markets or to defend positions held. The competitiveness of a

tourism firm in the market economy mostly request a market research, a research of competitive environment and competitors. Success in business hugely depends on competitive advantage in relation to other producers of tourism services.

Competitive nations, with leadership vocation, do not borrow success models, but they invent their models or adapt them to local conditions, taking into account their traditional values. Basically, there must be competitive, diversified, flexible travel offers, to attract and make loyal more tourists categories and cover all types of tourism which a country can implement. We may say that Egypt is one of those competitive nation, thanks to its efforts for maintaining among the main countries that are attractive for tourists.

Expanding the range of tourism products determines achieving some goals not only useful, but also necessary for a travel agency, such as: multiple choices for consumers, competition restriction by occupying a market share (this sometimes intimidates competition and redirects it to another market), renewal of the tourism product as new needs arise.

Innovation is a process through which entrepreneurs transform opportunities into the marketing ideas which become essential for the change. Benefits of tourism innovation are represented by the image improvement, by making customer loyal and by the ability to attract new customers. Innovation implies change. Change or the need for change are those that lead to the occurrence of innovation and to the market launch of new products or services.

Another factor that contributes to the occurrence of innovations in tourism is represented by the

customers' needs. Having the competitive advantage helps to increase company profits and hence its development. In some cases, innovative practices used by travel agencies contribute to increasing their competitiveness, not just to their development. In some cases, innovative practices used by tourism companies contribute to increasing their competitiveness, not just to their development.

In recent years, Egypt has become a tourist destination increasingly chosen by foreign tourists due to its history and different culture which is the main attraction point.

The investments performed in infrastructure and in tourism material basis, made this country to consistently attract tourists, even if sometimes it faced with terrorist attacks or various incidents that seriously affected tourism in certain periods of time.

In the words of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria (Coptic Orthodox Church Patriarch of Egypt), "Egypt is not a country where we live, but a country that lives through us".

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