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ORGANIZATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF SKOPJE'S TOURISM PRODUCT

CONFERENCE PAPER

Skopje is the capital city of the Republic of Macedonia and it is located on the crossroad between Northern and Southern Europe and Western and Eastern Europe and also the Asian countries. There are 750.000 inhabitants unofficially, but officially according to the census of 2002 there are 506.926 inhabitants. There are around 200.000 tourists per year in Skopje, but according to the national statistical office there are 119.634 tourist arrivals, not counting the visitors that are staying in private accommodation. Most of the arrivals are business motivated. Skopje is the most important business center in Macedonia and it is the main congress tourism center. 37% of the total hotel accommodation capacities in MKD are located in Skopje. 45% of the total travel agencies are located in Skopje.

Due to the fact that most of the income from the arrivals in Macedonia ends in Skopje, it is very important to develop a strategy in every domain of the tourism and hospitality. Therefore the emphasis will be on the following points: (a) elements for a strategy of the hotels; (b) elements for a strategy of Travel Agencies; (c) goal of the strategy; (d) achieving extra income of the present visitors; (e) increasing of the number of the tourists; (f) prolonging the stay of the tourists.

The purpose of this paper is to show how to divert the present visitors of Skopje into real tourism spenders.

Keywords: Incoming tourism, Sustainability of the tourist destination, tourist info

INTRODUCTION – THE TOURISM AS INVISIBLE EXPORT OF THE NATIONAL ECONOMY

Today the Tourism is a phenomenon which contributes to the national economies at a high level. The fresh supply of foreign currencies that enter within the borders of the country can not be compensated with no other ways of foreign trade, or export in abroad.

If we observe Tourism in World frames we can see that it participates with around 40% of the total World Exchange, with more than \$856 billion within the total World Expenditure.

Europe has the highest percentage of Tourism distribution with 54% of the total World Tourism Distribution, and if we speak about the expenditure, 51% of the total World Tourism Expenditure is done in Europe.

Where is Macedonia in these frames?

1. MACEDONIAN TOURISM, DISTRIBUTION AND EXPENDITURE

The Macedonian tourism with its distribution and expenditure compared with the other countries in Europe and the region is insignificant. The total number of tourists in the year 2007 was 536.212 and according to different comparisons that number hasn't changed, but it has gone downwards due to the World Economic Crisis. In the same year the number of the foreign visitors was 230.080 which were 43% of the total number of tourists, but we have to emphasize that these numbers are taken from the reports of the hotels and the other accommodation capacities that report the number of guests, but not the guests accommodated in the private apartments.

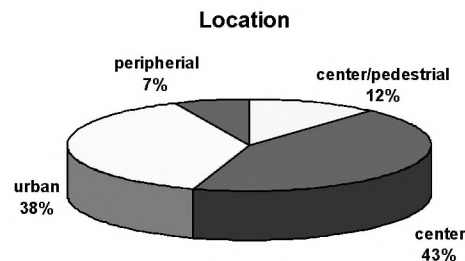
1.1. The distribution and organization of the Skopje's tourism product

We will speak more about this country's situation with the example of Skopje the Capital of The Republic of Macedonia which is the main business and strategic center, located on the crossroad between Northern and Southern Europe and Western and Eastern Europe and also the Asian countries. There are 750.000 inhabitants unofficially, but officially according to the census of 2002 there are 506.926 inhabitants. There are around 200.000 foreign tourists per year in Skopje, not counting the visitors that are staying in private accommodation. Skopje as the biggest city in The Republic of Macedonia is frequently visited by many people with different motivation of the visits. Skopje is the most important business center in Macedonia and it is the main congress tourism center. In Skopje are located most of the embassies of the countries which have diplomatic relations with The Republic of Macedonia. That pulls out that many foreign visitors come every year in Skopje.

1.2. Hotel capacities of Skopje

If we observe the distribution of the Hotel capacities in Macedonia (as the most representative and significant accommodation capacities) 37 % of the total number of hotels are located in Skopje, which is very good for the development of the tourism of this city. We also have to see what seems to be the situation in the sphere of the intermediation in tourism of this urban center. It was confirmed that there are 60 hotels in Skopje according to the students research that was provided in November 2008. The aim was to do the research upon all the 60 hotels but a significant group of them refused or were not able to answer our demand. That didn't influence the research and the output of the research drastically.

Figure 1. Location of the hotels in Skopje



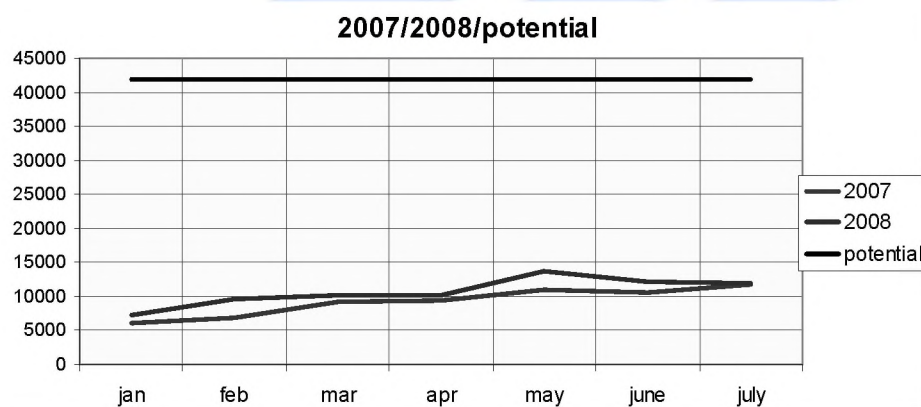
Source: Students research November 2008

About the general info as the location the status of the hotels is the following 55% of the hotels are located in the center of Skopje, 7% are in the periphery and 38% are in the urban area of Skopje.

The number of the guests in the hotels in Skopje is the highest during the autumn and it is the lowest during January and august, that is due to the fact that Skopje is interesting for congress tourism and this kind of tourist activity is done mostly during the autumn. If that is compared with the seasonality of the overnights it can be concluded that the lines match.

According to the research done by the group of Skopje there are around 1378 rooms located in 60 hotels and there are 2563 beds in the same objects. Some of the data was got from the web sites of the hotels because some of them refused to be interviewed.

Figure 2. Potential and actual capacity of the Hotels 2008



Source: The national statistical office of the Republic of Macedonia and questionnaires from the student's research November 2008

About the occupation of the accommodation capacities for the year 2007, the output was 53% but officially the occupation is 24% according to the national statistical office of the Republic of Macedonia and the tourism department by the Ministry of Economy. Great number of the hotels were not able to give an answer to this question because of the secrecy of this information and maybe because some of the hotels don't have any statistical system for guests.

According to the statistical office during the 2007 the occupation of the hotels was 24% and this figure is $\frac{1}{4}$ of the absolute potential of the hotel capacities in Skopje, which is considered to be very low. It was decided no to get so deep in these analysis because certain institutions have to be involved in analyzing the actual situation in the field of the accommodation capacities and solving the problems that come of that.

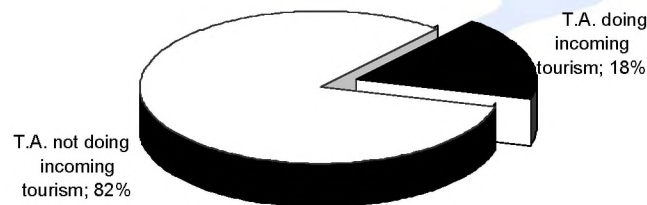
1.3. Travel agencies in Skopje

According to the Macedonian law of tourism and hospitality, the only legal forms of entities that are aloud to work in the field of intermediation in tourism are the travel agencies with the different types of licenses (A, B, C). Important information is that 45 % of the total number of agencies is located in Skopje.

During the research that was provided were targeted 37 travel agencies that were considered to deal with incoming tourism. Incoming tourism is considered to be the most important type of tourism due to the invisible export that is done in this field. The selection was done in a way of a tourist point of view. By checking the web sites of all the travel agencies from Skopje it was concluded that only 30 agencies in Skopje are dealing with incoming but later while the deeper analysis were done the conclusion was that only one agency works pure incoming tourism.

The questionnaire was created in such way that after getting and processing the data to get certain information about the actual situation in the field of the intermediates in the receptive travel and tourism industry in Skopje.

Figure 3. Structure of agencies that do incoming tourism



Source: Student's research and Golden Book November 2008

1.4. Tourist info services connected with Skopje

The tourism info services are very important for the distribution of the tourism product because today the biggest part of the people uses internet in order to find information about almost all the destinations in the World. We have to stress out that the Internet sites are of a significant value for the distribution of the Skopje's tourism product that is more heterogeneous but not very developed.

The information is an element of the communication. Communication is of a crucial importance in the field of the tourism. If one is not informed how is thy supposed to know about a destination, and not to speak about traveling to a certain place? The tourists always search for information about the destination, first in their domicile place of living, before going to the destination. When they are already in the place of interest they also search for information that is necessary for having a good stay and satisfying the needs. Skopje can not be seen as the main tourism place in Macedonia but according to the number of visits, overnights and spending in a tourist sense of the word it has the leading role in the country.

The potential visitors of a country or a place that they intent to visit, first of all do a research on internet in order to locate the place of interest, afterwards to learn more about it and the most important of all to find out how to reach that place. During the research that was provided in November 2009 on the internet by entering the phrase "Skopje tourist info" was come up to 7links:

- Exploring Macedonia
- Tourist guides association
- Tourist info center
- Tourist association of Skopje
- SKOPJEONLINE
- Travel2macedonia
- Go Macedonia

The most reliable sources of information but still partial are the official portal of The Republic of Macedonia, Exploring Macedonia and the private portal for tourism Travel2Macedonia, that intends to get the position of an official web portal of The Republic of Macedonia due to the high standards of quality that are provided by it.

In order to check the speed of answering the demands was done a simulation of correspondence of couple of foreign tourist that wanted to visit Skopje and some other parts of Macedonia and in a period of one hour to less than one day the demands were answered. In addition are submitted the demands and the answers connected with Exploring Macedonia and the travel agencies that cooperate with the portal.

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Michael and I come from Ireland. Recently I was checking the net for tourist information about Skopje and I discovered your site. I am in Skopje since the 15th of October and will be here until 15th of November.

Do you have any suggestions how I can spend my spare time during my stay in Skopje in order to see more of it.

Looking forward to hear from you.

Sincerely yours.

Michael ROBERTSON

Dear Mr. Robertson,

Thank you for your visit to the portal ExploringMacedonia.com as well as your request. We can organize for you guided personalized tours, boat tours on Lake Ohrid, wine tours (including unlimited wine and lunch/ dinner at a winery), recreational tours (biking, hiking, paragliding) and of course numerous visits to the most beautiful churches, mosques and monuments in Macedonia, from the Neolith, Roman, Byzantine and more recent history. Please do let us know about your preferences, so that we can offer tours/activities to suit your interest.

Thank you,

Nora Buklevska ExploringMacedonia.com

Dear Madam,

First of all thank you for answering my mail so fast, that is very professional from your side!

I am interested in some tours in Skopje and around Skopje and two days tours in some remote places in Macedonia such as Ohrid, Bitola and Strumica.

On the 3rd of November I would like to visit the most significant churches in Skopje and the Museum of Macedonia with a guide. I was wondering if I can be added to another group or the tour will be individual and what would be the price in the both cases.

On the 7th of November I would like to visit Ohrid and I would also like to make a round trip around the lake of Ohrid (Skopje-Ohrid-Pogradec-Ohrid-Skopje), is that possible?

On the 10th of November I would like to visit Stobi and Heraklea, is there any possibility lunch to be included in the tour.

On the 13th of November I would like to visit Strumica and the surroundings of Strumica, but also the most significant churches!

I would like to have the itinerary of my tours request if it is possible and the prices, or the total price of all the days.

Certainly you can give me some suggestions, but first of all I would like to have your tours programme with the prices if it is possible!

Best regards

Michael ROBERTSON

Dear Mr. Robertson,

Thank you for your e-mail and your kind words :) We will prepare the offer and send it within the next couple of days. If you have any questions in the meantime, do let us know.

Best regards,

Nora Buklevska, ExploringMacedonia.com

Dear Madam,

I am looking forward to get your programme, and I can hardly wait to visit all the places mentioned in my request.

Thank you very much

Dear Mr. Robertson,

Please find enclosed an offer from the travel agency Adventure Guide. I will send you other offer as they arrive. Please have in mind that we can also offer rent- a-car+guide+ lunch, if you would like to drive yourself.

Best,

Nora Buklevska, ExploringMacedonia.com

Halo Mr. Robertson,

My name is Tuparev Slavco and I am sales manager and also a guide in our alternative travel agency Adventure Guide Macedonia. I received your tour request from our national tourist portal Exploring Macedonia from Ms. Nora. In the attachment of this e-mail you will find 4 tour offers, as requested from you. We are specialized for work with FIT-s (free independent travelers) and our tours are highly personalized. Please look through the tour offers and tell me what you think about it. If you want we can adjust the tours to suite the best to your needs or you can also visit our web site www.AdventureGuideMacedonia.com and choose some other tours from the list or just get some other ideas for place visits. Please contact me at tuparev.slavco@AdventureGuideMacedonia.com . I will be happy to answer all your questions regarding traveling through Macedonia.

Best regards

Tuparev Slavco

Source: Personal correspondence with hidden identity with the executives from Exploring Macedonia for measuring the speed of answering questions and demands.

2. CONCLUSIONS

2.1. Info services, hotels and travel agencies

There is insufficient information from institutional level, which means that there is lack of information for tourists provided by the state. If we start from the facts that on the official internet portal can not be found enough info for accommodation and intermediation in tourism. There are only few hotels on the site, and only few travel agencies. The information is incomplete and can not satisfy the needs of the tourists.

The tourist information is very difficult to be approached, or sometimes almost unapproachable.

There is very often false info such as telephone numbers, e-mails and address that don't exist. During the research we witnessed a lot of examples of incorrect info on the web and the phone book.

There is lack of tourist info in the hotels and the travel agencies. We didn't see many tourist info boards in the hotels and the agencies. So the lack of this kind of elements makes the situation for the present tourists very difficult to get around.

The info system in the hotels is insufficient to answer the needs of the visitors and the guests.

There are almost no info boards on the most important strategic points (hotels, agencies, info points).

2. 2. The conclusions for the needs of the management

There is very low level of cooperation with public bodies and institutions. A lot of hotels and travel agencies don't cooperate with public bodies because they consider this kind of cooperation ineffective and inefficient. They don't trust the public bodies because they haven't had any use of previous cooperation

- there is low level participation in the institutional promotion on national and local level
- their activities are passive to the market and that can be concluded by the structure of the web site
- many hotels and agencies have very low level of quality of services

2.2.1. Elements for a strategy of the institutional info system

1. Improvement of the cooperation with the hotels and the travel agencies
2. Improvement of the mutual cooperation and confidence
3. Use of consultative services by engaging of an external consultative entity
4. Easier approach to information (for example that can be achieved by involving a telephone info line for tourists)
5. Effective and efficiently organized promotion (web sites, free promotional material and distribution to hotels, travel agencies, to strategic info points (internal and external))

2.2.2. Elements for a strategy of the hotels

1. Improvement of the general knowledge and managerial skills of the employees.
2. Engaging an external consultative subject with the aim to provide complete quality services, provide tourist information, to use hotel computer software, to establish feedback system and promotion.
3. Spending quality time and its improvement through internal factors and external factors.
4. Improvement of the transport conditions.

2.2.3. Elements for a strategy of Travel Agencies

1. Improvement of the cooperation with the public bodies and institutions
2. Stimulation for brought foreign tourists
3. Improvement of the general knowledge and managerial skills of the employees
4. Engaging an external consultative subject with the aim to provide complete quality services, improvement of the foreign languages spoken by the employees, provide tourist information, to establish feedback system and promotion
5. Involvement of the guides in planning of the packages

3. GOAL OF THE STRATEGY

There are current visitors of Skopje or tourists that are at the moment in the city. So this is a very important and useful start for some activities that can be done and would involve the present visitors of Skopje. The hotels and the travel agencies have many possibilities to work on satisfying the needs of the current visitors of Skopje. By inserting some extra offer in the hotels such as animation programs and other the hotel can achieve extra income. Very often happens the guest in the hotel who has come for business or some other purpose to spend the free time doing nothing. In the tourism industry there is one rule "The spending of the tourism product can not be postponed". Even though the potential of Skopje is great and it lays on an already developed fundamentals of the travel industry its use is very low. Instead of investing in to unstable promotion programs we should divert the activities into provision of information towards the current visitors of Skopje. They are already here and most of them stay at least 3 days. Their visit is mostly business motivated. But one needs not only work but also rest or free time to do some fun.

The lack of activities and entertainment in the hotels makes the whole situation to be not so bright when we speak about the complementary expenditure of the guests. Many guests claim that when they finish their working stay in Skopje they are wondering what else to do. There is almost nobody to explain them about the beauties or to offer them any kind of activity. Due to the lack of info boards in the accommodation capacities many people think that Skopje has no attractive places to be seen or visited. A contrary, Skopje and its surroundings have plenty of monuments of culture and other natural beauties.

The agencies can also add some other new programs that can be very interesting for the tourists. For example half day or full day tours for the business visitors of Skopje

3.1. Increasing of the number of the tourists

This is a long term objective because it is very difficult to attract foreign tourist. It is needed a lot of efforts and work to achieve this kind of goal. But step by step by efficient propaganda that doesn't have to be very expensive or it can be done by the Institutional bodies (by participating on fairs abroad).

3.2. Prolonging the days of stay of the current visitors in Skopje

This also very difficult to be achieved and it is sometimes not impossible due to the fact that on many occasions it is not possible for the visitor to stay more days than usual because of many reasons. When a person decides to come to a destination the time is already planned ahead and the stay is not possible to be continued after coming to the place of visit. But there are some tourists that have plenty of time and that can prolong their stay in a certain destination if they consider it as a good idea.

4. PROPOSAL

The need of a body that will be specialized for giving consultative services is created since long time ago. This body will help in richening of the existing tourist offer not only in Skopje but also in other places in Macedonia could be incorporated through different appropriate programmas for the needs of every entity involved in the field of the tourism.

The main goal is to achieve sustainable tourism development and that is possible only through incoming or receptive tourism. The invisible export as the tourism is defined sometimes is very precious for overcoming the economic deficits of the country. By incorporating the three key elements of the tourist industry, the travel agencies, the hotels and the tourist info service and involving the incubator in improvement of the whole situation, the level of the quality of the services would be increased and a quality tourist product that would be offered to the European and the World market would be achieved and created.

How to sustain and support the tourism in Skopje and in Macedonia? First by making an extra income of the already present tourists and travelers in the accommodation capacities in the country, because it cheaper and easier to achieve an extra tourist expenditure in the country by the present tourists, than by attracting tourists from abroad and making promotion and other expenses for that.

By anticipating the needs of the travelers and the tourists we can realize that the most important objectives are the time the money and the ability to be involved in travel.

Starting with the fact that the average stay of the tourists and the visitor of Skopje is 2 days the time is very important objective. No visitor wants to lose time in searching for offers what to do in Skopje. The incubator could help the entities that are involved in giving different services to improve their offer and to keep in mind the time in order not to be any loss of time.

This body will be in contact with entities of experts from abroad and can provide some training for the interested entities such as the hotels and the agencies. That can be economically approved with the fact that it is cheaper to make training for a group of entities than every entity to invite foreign experts to organize trainings for the employees. It is even cheaper than sending certain employees to seminars and workshops abroad.

At the end this body is needed for a better tourist product not only in Skopje but also on the whole territory of Macedonia.

The incoming tourism is a part of the tourism activities which are taken in the receptive zone. The incoming tourism is part of the invisible export of the economy. The sustainability is a philosophy of using the resources in such a way that they won't be spent in a longer period and will be available for the future generations. The tourist destination can be seen as a resource in a wider scale. The sustainability of the tourism destination is very important if we want to develop tourism in a longer period of time. The selective tourism is often compared to the sustainable tourism. The mass tourism relies to the bases of mass visits and the overcrowding of the destination in a short period of time whether it is seasonally seen or in a longer period of time. If the destination is overcrowded there is always the danger of devastation of the resources which are very difficult to be replaced or recovered.

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