The Role of Cultural Tourism in the North-Hungarian Region

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Thematic tours based on cultural values and heritage offer brilliant possibilities for sustainable cooperation based on culture-tourism relationship. This branch of tourism requires relatively low investment and offers excellent possibilities for the diversification of tourist demand and offer both in time and space. The North-Eastern Region of Hungary possesses famous religious and secular vestiges and so thematic tours can also concentrate on the presentation of monuments representing both secular and religious spirituality. It is also important to note that tourist activity in its turn can contribute to the better conservation of the above values in the region. Thematic tours have a considerable impact on the sustainability of tourism and forster joint developments in the region. It is also important to mention that the tourist activity of the region can be integrated into the larger context of European tourist activity through thematic tours (e.g. Paloc Tour, Maria Tour, Wining Tour). In my paper I intend to examine some rele vant aspects of the demand for cultural thematic offer and some elements of the competitiveness of the above alternative tourist activity with special emphasis on the fact that 2009 is the year of cultural tourism.

Keywords: culture, tourism, thematic tours, regionalism, sustainability

1. Introduction

The many variants of tourism can be rendered into different groups: organised, family, active, passive, eco, rural, sports and cultural tourism. There is plenty of literature discussing the above plurality. Since this has been a recent tendency it makes possible the examination of new terminology as well: to day we can speak about catastrophe, drugs, or sex tourism as well. (2004 tsunami, Amsterdam, Thailand)

Yet, the term cultural tourism seems to be difficult to grasp, probably because of the too many attempts to define it. We can state from the very beginning that culture and tourism are interrelated categories and there is no tourism without culture. I think we should assess cultural tourism from the host’s side, and we should take into account the natural values, the architecture and the cultural events when analysing the situation.

I my paper I intend to offer a brief account of contemporary theoretical approaches to cultural tourism as 2009 is considered to be the year of cultural tourism. I hope to offer a comprehensive survey of the structure of the
attractions of the North Hungarian Region and the place it occupies among the other attractions.

Nowadays cultural tourism plays a very important role in the decision making of both native and foreign tourists. Cultural tourism is a branch of tourism in which the cultural motivation of the client is decisive. Cultural tourism is important as it prolongs the tourism season and thus contributes to the reduction of geographical concentration. It reveals local cultural values, preserves and sustains traditions and makes possible a better understanding of world/global and local culture. As the services offered by tourism need constant refreshing it contributes to the diversification of cultural products, and fosters the creation of new values with the possible result that it creates an exclusive alternative to common tourist activity.

The last decades of the 20th century witnessed the multiplication of research projects dedicated to the study and development of tourism. National and international projects alike develop new approaches to major issues. Researchers consider the evaluation of social, economic, and cultural aspects effects to be of major importance. Actually tourism became part of everyday life; it reshapes the rhythm of weekdays as weekends, holydays, make possible shorter or longer journeys more and more often.

From an anthropological point of view it is essential to examine the personality of the tourist, who leaves his/her permanent location and visits national or international urban or rural scapes driven by individual urge. Research has been pursued with regards to the interrelationship, patterns of communication, and durable contacts between tourists and local inhabitants. Anthropology refers to tourism as a kind of modern rite. (Graburn, [1983]) The tourist travels, flees from the monotonous world of everyday work into the world of leisure and pleasure. This process can be divided into three parts on the basis of its structure. The prospective client makes the necessary arrangements, travels to the target destination, and in the second phase he or she gathers first-hand experience, be they positive or negative, he or she makes friends with locals, returns to his or her place of origin, to his or her work and everyday routine.

We can participate in a number of ‘rites’ due to the possibilities offered by modern tourism. Traditional holydays like Christmas or Easter invite to recreation while other journeys are motivated by random or individual elements connected to a variety of occasions related to the client’s life like, reaching maturity, wedding, divorce or mourning.

Tourism is a rite that frees us from the monotony of the daily routine partly through the process of the journey itself. The rite of tourism involves categories like health, holiday, nature, or self-realisation.

In its 1980 Manila Declaration the World Tourism Organisation worked out the new, desirable trends of world tourism and stated the relevant influence of tourism on various aspects of progress with respect to political, social,
economic, cultural and environmental sectors. Tourism plays a relevant role in developing the cultural awareness of contemporary societies and creates ever new possibilities. Journeys can help us understand the culture of other nations and can contribute to the emergence of due respect for intellectual heritage in general. The Manila Declaration was accepted by the World Tourism Conference organised by the WTO on the Philippines in 1980. The Declaration states that tourism should be handled as an essential cultural and economic activity of all nations. It emphasizes the rich texture of tourism, and stresses the important role of internal national tourism. The Declaration surveys the economic relevance of internal tourism and reaches relevant statements with regards to its effects onto cultural, political, social, and environmental issues. The Manila Declaration served as a relevant incentive for the research organised and closely monitored by the WTO in the 1980s.

From among the most influential organisations aiming at research concerning tourism we should mention the AIEST (International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism), the IAST (International Academy for the Study of Tourism) and the TTRA (Travel and Tourism Research Association). They are organised on membership basis, and differences regarding the orientation and direction of research are relevant. While the AIEST and the IAST gathers experts interested in academic research, the TTRA is rather marketing-oriented, and its members pay greater emphasis to themes directly applicable in tourism.

The research team functioning within IGU (International Geographical Union) also should be remembered due to its theoretical and practical results. The group starts from the platform of geography and its aim is to investigate the questions regarding the development and sustainability of tourism on this basis. The IIPT-t (International Institute for Peace through Tourism), starts from the premises that tourism is a potential source of global peace, and starts from this optimistic vision when it sets to investigate the capacity of tourism to help cope with conflicts, and contribute to the reduction of social differences that might lead to conflicts.

Research of travelling, accommodation and accompanying phenomena is still victim of prejudices and doubts. Many specialists consider tourism to be a frivol area which is not worth investigating for serious scientists, due to its direct links with mass-culture an leisure time activities (Dann - Nash - Pearce [1988]).

Fortunately the tenet that tourism is simply a leisure time activity pursued by people equipped with rucksacks and tents is slowly transforming and a number of experts are trying to elucidate the dilemmas and worth of tourism as a complex and rather complicated activity. In spite of the fact that more and m Institutions of Higher Education are doing their best to address the question with training programmes and expertise, international academic research and science is not equivocal in its assessment of tourism as an independent discipline. As there is plenty of uncertainty regarding the role and place of tourism among
other sciences even those who are in charge of organising tourist activities are confused and certainly cannot document the relevance of the profession.

One of the leading trends of contemporary tourism is meeting the increased demand for high quality cultural values and related events, studying, acquiring first hand experience, entertainment, or rather a complex ‘tourist product’ involving the above. National heritage illustrates the soul, the intellectual, emotional values and adequate value-systems related to different historical, cultural and intellectual periods. Popular art is part and parcel of the cultural heritage of a nation or ethnic group all over the world. Tourists have shown increasing interest for these vestiges of cultural heritage and their contemporary patterns or exhibits. As cultural tourism is primarily interested in the reinterpretation, the contemporary re-interpretation of values of past periods relies heavily on the aesthetic, moral, ethical and artistic power of cultural heritage.

By the end of the 20th century people are determined to find new ways to communicate with their past and tourism manages to establish a weird relationship in this sense and enables tourists to acquire, and experience past, its traditional value systems, styles and tastes. This is a phenomenon which highlights the relevance of contemporary man’s search for originality and identity. Globalisation makes it possible for us to travel and communicate with groups of people who are visibly different from us. A reverse tradition is established and sophisticated intercourse among different cultures is made possible by this increased trend of mobility in time and space. (Kalocsai [1998] p. 197)

European Integration is a process which imposes the responsibility of local communities to preserve their centuries old individual cultural identity and heritage. The above responsibility also imposes an inventory of the values involved and requires that the worth of these traditions be interpreted with respect to the local and global factors involved. This tenet also demonstrates the fact that local cultures are relevant for both the global and local definitions of identity.

We can evaluate the vitality of cultural tourism on the basis of the pragmatic and theoretical analyses of demand and offer. The above methodological dichotomy is essential as statistics fail to distinguish between those who visit a target destination for cultural purposes from other groups. Theoretical assessments concentrate on the cultural aspects involved and usually ignore the results of statistics. Their greatest merit seems to be their accurate attempt to define their respective cultural sources when describing individual approaches. This also results in a plurality of valuable conclusions.

Natural and architectural environment, works of art, archaeological findings, various vestiges of intellectual heritage construct, what we define as local culture. Some of these might be of international relevance, others are relevant on
a national or local, communal scale. Cultural tourism concentrates on those aspects of cultural history which contribute to a better understanding of our identity in positive terms. This also means that cultural tourism is supposed to the preservation of local identity and traditions. (Puczkó-Rátz [1999])

It also should be note that preservation of cultural values old and new requires sacrifices on behalf of all the members of the respective community and imposes the responsible support of state, regional institutions, families, and individuals alike. This sacrifice should be, and is more and more often handled as a long term investment leading to harmony between human and natural factors.

2. Brief survey of the cultural reserves of the Northern Hungarian Region

The offers of the region are varied and numerous but the limits of the present paper do not allow a detailed interpretation of this aspect. Natural values, architectural beauties (castles, places, museums), and various events, and festivals organised in the three counties of the region constitute quite a valuable scale of offers for the tourist industry. The Zemplen Cultural Days, Hegyalja Festival, the Miskolc International Opera Festival, the Agria Summer Festival, the Salgotarjan International Dixieland Festival offer excellent opportunities for those interested in cultural events of local and international relevance.

The North Hungarian Region is one of the most varied and colourful regions of the country due to its natural characteristics. The region disposes of a remarkable ecological potential and its natural resources are further increased in value by the thermal, spa, and mineral water springs. 13% of its territory is protected local and national area and it amounts to 22% of the national protected area. The region has geographical, historical and cultural ties with Slovakia. The economic structure of the region has been shaped by it natural resources with its heavy industry and mining. The restructuring of national economy has greatly affected the region as these branches of industry are in decline.


The fact that these centres gained the status of World Patrimony led to a considerable increase of tourist visits to the area. This increased demand imposed the elaboration and implementation of complex development plans.

The centres of World Patrimony impose impeccable basics conditions like accessibility, quality services, and all year long rich and high quality programmes on the offer.

The thematic tours organised in the region are a good example of how cultural tourism and other braches of alternative tourism complement one
another. Heritage tourism gains a larger significance than visiting specific monuments as it also involves the emphatic presence of geo-cultural assets. Tours offered as targeting cultural heritage quite often include adjacent themes like tournaments in local castles, feasts, or thematic routes devised by local wine tourism centres.

It is in the interest of the North Hungarian Region to attract the attention of prospective visitors and investors to its cultural diversity. From among the thematic routes concentrating on cultural themes it is worth to mention the Iron-Culture Tour and the Baroque Route, which concentrate on the history of mining and iron and steel production and art history respectively.

In Nógrád County there are tours which present the local traditions, folklore, folk music, national costumes, gastronomy, and architecture of the area. One of the most relevant examples of the interrelationship between traditional and contemporary thematic branches of tourism in the North Hungarian Region is the Paloc tour thematic tour. The tour concentrates on the idea of the preservation of the values of folk-art through the presentation of rural lifestyle characteristic for the region.

The cooperation between Heves and Nógrád Counties greatly contributed to the success of the Paloc Route. The story reaches back to the nineties. The basic concepts of the Heves County board (1997) formulated the principles which later contributed to economic growth. One of the most important principles was that the seasonal character of tourist activity should be diversified so as to allow a four-seasons activity instead. As smaller settlements also joined the programme it became possible to diminish the concentration in time and space of the tourist activity in the region and the increase of tourist arrivals and nights. (Kiss J. Paloc Road, [2005])

The INTERREG programme supported crossing political borders, at the expense of cultural boundaries and the joint activity with Slovakia resulted in the expansion of the Paloc Road. (Fulek, Losonc, Kalonda)

The natural resources of the Zemplén to Cserhat, from Hollóháza to Hollókő, from Telkibánya to Ípolytailomóc offer us a varied view of the region. Telkibánya became famous for its gold mine in the Middle Ages. Ípolytailomóc became famous for its 23-17 million years old caves and minerals. The volcanic catastrophe destroyed it, but the ashes preserved the ancient findings in good condition.

The Mátra offers varied scenery and unique atmosphere to its visitors. Sacral places and shrines abound in this region. Not only church buildings, chapels, crosses, sculptures of saints and other traditional sacral places enter this category as the locals conferred this status to natural phenomena which have challenged the imagination of their ancestors and became sacral in folk tales, legends or myths. The list includes mountains, rocks, springs, rivulets, and targets visited by thousands of pilgrims. One of the best known sacral place of this kind is
Szentkút (Saint’s well) situated in Matravebely. According to popular belief water sprang from under the rock following St. Laszlo’s visit. Anybody who drinks from the water of the spring might be cured by its magic power.

Shrines attract visitors from other parts of the country as well. One of the most relevant motifs of the Palóc faith is the cult of Mary: these people consider Jesus to be of an identical quality which means that the elevate Mary to a divine status. The relevant emergence of the cult of Mary as a Jesus figure is undoubtedly a Paloc characteristic. (Lengyel–Limbacher [1997])

I intend to explain and illustrate through the example of Kozard what can be done in a really small village to preserve and revitalize cultural heritage. In my attempt to prepare the present case study I obtained relevant help from Dr. Hajas Pal Professor Emeritus and his wife Dr. Mrs Hajas, Marta Banos, the Mayor of the village.

Following the 1989 changes Kozard was also threatened by the ageing of its population, many of its inhabitants moved to other places, job opportunities were decreasing with the result that the youth were searching for job opportunities elsewhere. The turning point was marked by the creation in 1996 of small family enterprises for cultivation of orchards, managing the centre for storing fruits and vegetables, a mangalica farm to replace the local cooperative in Kozárd, and initiating programs to start rural tourism and finally the creation of the local rural development office. It was followed by the election of the new mayor and his administration in 2002 who decided to rescue the settlement which seemed to have been doomed to die out.

Kozard witnessed dynamic development in 2004 when the SAPARD and AVOP applications helped the village build its own sewage system, renovate the local chapel and build a new house of the village.

This marked the start of planned development of rural tourism in the village. There are six guest-houses in the village with capacity to accommodate 50 tourists. From among them two (Napfeny, and Csipke Guesthouses) offer tourists farming, hunting and rural holiday programmes as well.

Kozard joined the South Cserhat LEADER + Action Team in 2005 as a founding member and handed it numerous successful applications to the LEADER+ centre e.g., to develop the sty system for the indigenous domestic animals, playing field, open air stage, designing and creating the Chapel Anna and geological training paths systems. A Vadvirag Restaurant and Guest House was opened in 2005. The constant development of rural tourism contributed to the creation of new jobs and unemployment ceased to threaten the population of Kozard, young people started moving to Kozard and the prices of real estate tripled. In the period between 2002–2006 thirty new jobs were created and this small village offers jobs to people living in the neighbouring villages like Paszto, Salgotarjan, Ecseg, Csecse, Holloko, Matraszolos, Alsotold and Bujak. There is
a general hope that further developments might create job opportunities for 10 to 15 families in Kozarid in the near future. They planted apple, pear, cherry, and peach trees in a new 120 hectare orchard. They are also planning the construction of a factory that would produce bio apple juice as they meet difficulties in selling the apples they produce.

They started the mangalica breeding farm in 2000 with 20 bitches and they have been expanding production ever since. Mangalica became the best advertisement for both the local rural tourism and gastronomy. The excellent fruits harvested in the Kozáríd orchards are used to produce pálinka of superior quality. The jams produced at the Kozarid Jam Manufacturing Company are well known under the “Paloc Izek” “Paloc Gastronomy” name. As part of the Slow Food movement there is a joint venture called Paloc Gastronomy in Kozard and its neighbouring villages. This is a member of the world food-processing small entrepreneurial movement. The products made from mangalica pigs like ham, smoked bacon, sausages, salami, crispy fat are more and more popular. They are trying to find investors for the mangalica salami and sausages making factory and for the game products factory they are planning to start in the near future. They are also planning to build a palinka processing factory as part of the Hungaricum movement.

They also organize festivals and special programmes for the visitors to Kozard. Every last April Saturday or first Saturday on May they organize an Apple-blooming festival with music, dance local specialities. Local farmers, craftsmen, artists, cook meet visitors to Kozard in Apple Valley. Early July marks the concert called „Muzsikál az Erdő” (The forest is singing), and mid-September marks the beginning of the festival called “Hungarian flavours-Hungarian Colours” where gastronomy and fruits play a central role. Visitors can buy from the delicious local cherry, plum, apple, jams and honey, genuine mangalica sausages, salami, and bacon bokri curd cheese, Kozard hunter’ wines, home made pálinka and other local products.

The successful development of this little village Kozard sets an excellent example for other villages which face similar problems. In 2005 it was granted the OMEK Prize, in 2007 it was elected by Radio Kossuth the most frequented rural tourism unit of the year. In 2006 Cozad, and its farmers were invited to Rome to participate at the exhibition entitled the Tastes of Europe, in Kozáríd had the opportunity to present its progress in Sicily in 2007 as a participant in the Euro citizen programme. In 2008 Kozard was a guest settlement in Vara, Swedish at the Conference dedicated to the renewal of the rural area, and in the same year it was given the prize entitled “Flowery Village”.

The Kozard-Bokor-Holloko joint tourism programme was listed second in the competition for the tile of the best protector of traditions by EDEN in 2008. (European Destinations of Excellence) (http://eden.itthon.hu) One of the
restaurants of the village Vadvirág Restaurant won the exquisite quality award in the same year.

Kozard joined the Paloc Route, as member of the programme for the development of the rural area. The village was registered as one of the stations of the pilgrims pursuing the Maria pilgrimage in 2009. In August the Statue of Mary was blessed and thus it came to be registered as a statue which is situated on the pilgrimage route between Mariazell and Csiksomlyó. The Statue of Mary is the work of István Demeter (Székelyudvarhely) and László Koltay (Püspökhatvan).

The excellent results of the village were rewarded by the Ministry of Local Authorities, as it was offered the possibility to participate in the programme Best Examples of European Practices, which means that mayors from other Hungarian settlements come to study the activity of Kozárd’s mayor and its population. The village is visited by ministerial delegations, European experts who would like to find out more about their activity.

The Euragro Office of Rural Development and the Debrecen Agrarian centre are present in Brussels where together with some international partners they monitor the activity of the European Rural Networks the specialists of Euragro take part in other EU joint ventures and also delegate specialists to organize aids programmes outside Europe as well. (Agricultural News, October[2009])

Besides the delegates of Debrecen Agrarian Centre, the students of Szent István University of Gödöllő, Károly Robert College of Gyöngyös and Eszterházy Károly College, the students of Pannon University in Keszthely also pursue their practice as regional development experts in Kozárd.

Kozard was the host of the European LEADER Meeting in autumn of 2009, but it also welcomed the conference of European national parks, the meeting of Carpathian Basin Euro region, a delegation interested in the village reconstruction program from Japan, and they are expecting a delegation from Turkmenistan soon.

3. Conclusion

The North Hungarian Region is rich in themes which can support thematic tours like heritage tours or cultural tours which in their turn can be integrated into already functioning European tours. If we join already established tours with ones that present less known ones we can reduce the time and space concentration of tourist activity. Suitable marketing activity can provide suitably structured information for prospective native and foreign tourists and may result in longer time spent at desired tourist destinations.

In the North Hungarian Region rural tourism, wine tours, or fortress, or palace tours offer excellent prospects and should be developed. These forms of tourist activity have a number of advantages. First visitors do not arrive in
masses. Second the client’s motivation is cantered upon the respect and longing for natural resources, cultural values, respect for traditions, admiration for folk architecture, good wine, good food, peace and quiet, fresh air characteristic of the target destination. This also means that quantity is replaced by quality which in turns increases the value of the offers of the host region. (Buzafalvi [2009])

Artificial, primarily outdoor activity centered tourism activities are gaining greater importance nowadays.

In this region the number of cultural thematic tours, and of the projects aiming development of such tours, have increased considerably in accordance with the international trends. Planning and running programmes under the heading “cultural heritage” requires high professional accuracy. This is a responsible task which involves the inventory, analysis, and evaluation of the treasures of local culture.

The economic strategy of our country imposes amore emphatic role attributed to tourism as a possible means of supporting redevelopment of the handicapped regions. The EU considers regional and rural development, strengthening of social cohesion, improving the standard of people living in the country, creating the alternative income scheme of small entrepreneurs an unquestionable priority. The above priorities are relevant, for the whole country, but they are acutely important for underdeveloped regions where eco, agro or rural tourism might create job opportunities and thus could ease the existential pains caused by unemployment.

According to the National Board of Statistics in the January-August period 4.9 million guests spent 13.3 million nights at the registered commercial accommodations the average amounted to 2.7 nights and there is an estimated drop of 8.4% in the number of tourists and of 8.7% in the number of tourist nights as compared to the same period of 2008.

The number of tourist nights decreased in all the regions of the country. In the North Hungarian Region the decline was of 7.8%. In the Western part of the Transdanubian Region there was a small increase in tourist nights spent there by foreigners (0.6%), while in the central part of the Transdanubian domestic tourist nights increased by 3.3%. The results of the central part of the Transdanubian Region were relatively good. The number of foreign visitors increased by 2.1%, the number of Hungarian visitors increased by 3.1%, which means that we can speak of an average increase of 2.7%. Similarly there was some increase in the number of visitors to Lake Tisza; the number of foreign tourists improved by 1.9%, that of Hungarians by +1.2% compared to the same period of the previous year. (Hungarian Tourism Ltd. [2009])

The North Hungarian Region was hit by deep crisis in the last decades. The only way out from this situation could be provided by the transformation of the economic structure.
The chambers of trade and industry evaluate the state of economy on a regular basis and formulate suggestions for sustainable development.

Economic crises influence all the sectors of Hungarian economy, tourism industry is no exception either. On the basis of the data provided by Tourinform the number of clients decreased in the region, but in Salgótarján and Gyöngyös in June, in Eger in July there was a slight increase in the number of visitors.

To support sustainability further development of infrastructure is planned in the region. The counties and settlements of the region have to appear on the market with joint projects. ([GtM][2009])

The UNESCO and the European Commission stresses the importance of local, regional, minority cultures and their preservation in an attempt to preserve the multicultural character of the world. They stress the importance of traditional cultural values and declare that all human communities have the right to preserve their own culture. ([European Folklore Institute][2005])

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