EXPLORING NICHE TOURISM FORMS IN BULGARIA - RAISING AWARENESS OF NATIONAL TOURISM IDENTITY THROUGH PROJECT WORK

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Abstract: The purpose of the present study is to bring into focus the uniqueness of the Bulgarian tourism brand as projected by its core attributes: the authentic Bulgarian folklore; the spirit of the nation (preserved in its churches and monasteries and cultural heritage sites), the heart of Bulgarian people (hospitality, integrity, friendliness, tolerance, respect for the past and love for their land), the history of the land (myths, oral history and stories) and the beautiful nature. In addition, the study also aims to highlight those aspects of niche tourism that are most exploited by students as opportunities for tourism development. Another objective is to showcase the potential of NT for tourism development in Bulgaria. The overall aim of the paper is to demonstrate students understanding of the niche tourism product and benefits (social, economic and environmental) this type of tourism can bring to local people and host communities, in other words, how niche tourism can help build tourism identity and promote a distinctive image of the destination. Exploring further the theme of ‘Tourism and Identity’, students address one of the more resonant themes in recent tourism development in Bulgaria, namely ‘cultural tourism’ with a special emphasis on Bulgarian folklore and traditions revived through annual festivals and carnivals.

Key words: niche tourism, building tourism identity, special-interest tourism (SIT), cultural and heritage tourism, dark and esoteric tourism, high-end tourists, affinity groups

The present study emphasizes the potential of niche tourism and niche tourism forms that can be exploited and adapted to the Bulgarian tourism market. It has brought into focus a collection of student project works and class presentations which reveal tourism practices and visitor experience in Bulgaria. Said collection strikes with a variety of tourism forms which get people away from mainstream package products and traditional beach holidays having dominated the region for the past five decades, based on relatively static modes of consumption – namely stay-put vacations in resort complexes along the Black Sea coast which regretfully have been associated with another two vacation types i.e. sex and alcohol tourism, alas tarnishing the image of the destination.

Exploring Bulgarian tourism identity through the prism of niche tourism and particularly the use of Bulgarian folklore as a mainstream cultural attribute of the Bulgarian identity, it becomes clear that niche tourism forms can be a great pull for tourists, especially forms with an authentic ring for visitors. Moreover, the authentic feel and experience provided by culinary and wine-tasting tours, cultural heritage tours or events and festivals, based on the wide regional variety of
food and drinks and rich cultural heritage can be seen as an opportunity to build a distinct tourism identity and reposition the image of the country from a cheap, low-cost package holiday destination for sex and alcohol tourism into a cultural tourism destination involving more up-market and innovative tourism strategies. Indeed, tourism in Bulgaria should take its lead from the more caring attitudes to the environment and local landscapes and communities rather than the developmental models created in the last 15 years of transition. Indicative is students’ collective effort to bring more value to the Bulgarian tourism brand and emphasize the uniqueness of Bulgarian natural and cultural resources.

Niche tourism is increasingly regarded as a way for identity creation via social encounters in authentic rather than staged settings (Kaufmann et al., 2010: 222). Choosing a holiday type and destination reflects identity or identity search. This serves to show that niche tourism appeals to the needs and aspirations of a special breed of tourists characterized by enthusiasm and sensitivity. Furthermore, niche tourism often addresses a previously neglected or overlooked need on the part of the tourist which can translate into a desire to do something different, or learn something new. In this sense, niche tourism is a means to search for meaning, social bonds, social differentiation, distinction and status (Novelli, 2005; Siano et al., 2009). Indeed, niche tourism appeals to the more discerning, better educated and higher spending tourists who are out there to explore the world or satisfy a deep, spiritual or social need.

The tables below illustrate the concept of niche tourism characterized by distinctive niche markets (i.e. cultural tourism, environmental, urban, rural, etc.) each of them embracing smaller, more specialized micro niches (i.e., wine, culinary tourism, photography and screen tourism, etc.). Arguably, these highly specialized segments help a destination differentiate itself and be able to compete more successfully as a tourist destination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CULTURAL</th>
<th>ENVIRONMENTAL</th>
<th>URBAN</th>
<th>RURAL</th>
<th>OTHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heritage</td>
<td>Nature and wildlife</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Farm/barns</td>
<td>Photography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal</td>
<td>Adventure</td>
<td>Conference</td>
<td>Camping</td>
<td>Volunteer Small Cruise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td>Exibito</td>
<td>Wine/Culinary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>cotoum</td>
<td>Art</td>
<td>Festivals &amp; events</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genealogy</td>
<td>Geotourism</td>
<td>Gallery</td>
<td>Arts and crafts</td>
<td>Youth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Marina Novelli’s Classification of Niche Tourism
Each of the above micro niches could be further broken down into sub-sets of niche tourism forms. A good example is ‘Health & Wellness’ tourism which can be broken down into at least six sub-sets of niche forms (See table 2, below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEALTH &amp; WELLNESS</th>
<th>TYPICAL ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>TYPICAL VISITORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spa tourism</td>
<td>Healing with medical or mineral water</td>
<td>Elderly visitors with health problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic tourism</td>
<td>Body, mind &amp; spirit experience in a retreat</td>
<td>Middle age professionals or executives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual tourism</td>
<td>Pilgrimages, ashrams, meditation or spiritual retreats</td>
<td>Mainly over 30’s, some backpackers or independent travellers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical tourism</td>
<td>Operations, plastic or dental surgery</td>
<td>Westerners, over 40, more like women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga tourism</td>
<td>Asanas and meditation in retreats</td>
<td>Mainly professional women over 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty tourism</td>
<td>Massage, facials, treatments in a spa or hotel</td>
<td>Women over 25, professionals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The purpose of the present study is to bring into focus the uniqueness of the Bulgarian tourism brand as projected by its core attributes: Bulgarian folklore, the spirit of the nation (preserved in its churches and monasteries and cultural heritage sites), the heart of Bulgarian people (hospitality, integrity, friendliness, respect for the past and love for their land) and history of the land (i.e. Thracian past). The study also aims to highlight those aspects of niche tourism that are most exploited by students as opportunities for tourism development. A further objective is to showcase the potential of NT for tourism development in the future.

The overall aim of the paper is to demonstrate students understanding of niche tourism products and associated benefits (social, economic and environmental) for local people and host communities, in other words how niche tourism can help build a distinctive tourism identity and promote a destination image.

Methodology: research methods are based on secondary analysis, i.e. analyzing data collected by Master Degree students’ research exploring areas of interest and summary of findings.

To achieve this aim, the study has set to fulfill the following objectives:

- evaluate students’ project work and summarize their findings;
– draw a profile of niche tourists; profiling the wine tourist, the spa visitor or golf, adventure and cultural tourist in particular, their needs and expectations as they shape a very distinctive market segment;
– identify areas for future research; research into the role of potential niche tourists for Bulgaria, the yoga tourist, the esoteric-minded tourist, the cultural tourist interested in Bulgarian festivals, arts, crafts and traditions and experiential tourist;
– study the image of a place/location/city/region and how it is defined by its reputation and representation as a festival venue;
– contribution of festivals and events to destination development;
– the role of festivals as a vital part of the urban/rural landscape in creating a brand image.

The study embraces research and findings of third year Bachelor degree students and Master Degree students with a major in tourism, studying at the University of Economics, Varna over the period 2012-2016. It presents a summary of their findings and conclusions aiming to cut substantial evidence on academic research done at the university and highlight the skills and abilities developed throughout their ESP course ‘The Language of Tourism’.

Educational Outcomes

On top of their niche tourism list students have placed ‘Festivals & Events’ tourism, followed by other niche forms in the order of singificance:

- Festivals and Events
- Wine Tourism
- Religious Tourism – this is a broad category encompassing other niche forms such as ‘Dark Tourism’, Sacred Tourism’ ‘Pilgrimage Tourism’ – visiting places of worship/old Bulgarian churches and monasteries;
- Megalithic Tourism – sites of ancient Thracian cults and sanctuaries;
- Health/Spa & Wellness Tourism
- Adventure: extreme and soft adventure tourism
- Tradition and culture-based tourism
- Culinary & gastro tourism
- Golf Tourism
- Photographic Tourism
- Bird-watching and fishing tourism
- Congress and convention tourism

Due to its wide variety of natural and cultural resources, Bulgaria offers a great potential for development of niche tourism. Wine tourism in particular, has shown a significant growth over the last ten years owing to the fact that traditionally, Bulgaria has been one of the wine-growing and wine producing regions on the Balkans. The Thracians have left their footprint in the Orphic rites. Wine and fire are essential part of the cult of Dionysius and wine dances. Some of the ancient grape varieties such as Mavrud, Pamid, Melnik are associated with Thracian times and they are said to carry the genetic memory of these varieties, storing the ancient knowledge of wine-making. Thracians celebrated life with many rituals
and festivals all of which related to the growing, making and drinking of Zelas, the Thracian word for ‘unmixed wine’.

The wineries of Chateau Kopsa, and Burgozone, the Midalidare Estate, Katarzhina Estate, Edoardo Miroglio winery, and brands such as Todoroff, No Man’s Land, Castra Rubra and Silver Angel showcase the excellent vintage wine produced on the territory of Bulgaria.

Apart from the above-mentioned niche forms, one of the more recently emerging forms of niche tourism is ‘Communist Heritage Tourism’ or ‘red tourism’. The communist heritage tourist is one who is emotionally related to the place they visit as they perceive it as part of their personal history.

Exploring further the theme ‘tourism and identity’, students address one of the more resonant themes in recent tourism development in Bulgaria, i.e., ‘cultural tourism’ with an emphasis on Bulgarian folklore and traditions recreated and revived through annual festivals and carnivals. The idea of finding authenticity in the culinary aspect of regional tourism, i.e. staying in guest houses, family hotels, farms or lodges, eating local food provided by local producers, drinking organic wines, fresh milk and honey, enjoying local dishes and specialties – all of these help visitors feel and experience local atmosphere, explore local geography and visit places of interest.

Some age-old traditions such as Nestinarstvo, Surva, Lazaruvane, and Koleduvane have also come into much prominence lately. Every year, the SURVA festival is a huge draw for international guests during the last week of January. With their colourful hand-made costumes and masks, the Kukeri processions energize the fabric of the festival in Pernik and rekindle the traditions of the region.

Regarding ‘Festivals and Events’ tourism, the Bulgarian cultural calendar is full of events. The Rozhen folk festival is perhaps one of those that have drawn considerable attention lately which in July, 2015 clocked a record number of 40 000 participants with 400 bagpipes resounding in the mountain air. The tradition dates back to 1898 and was resumed after nine years of hiatus. The feeling of belonging, national pride, empathy and sharing all this positive energy was one dominating the event. In full display, visitors were able to see ethnographic exhibitions, exhibitions of goats, sheep, dogs, cows, buffaloes. Dairy and meat products from the farm exhibitions of organic food and drinks, wrestling, culinary shows and barbeque, horse attractions, folk festivities and fire games.

Another form of niche tourism gaining in popularity is ‘esoteric tourism’ which offers the spiritually minded visitors a chance to seek a different type of experience in Bulgaria. Evidence of this is the ‘Mystic Bulgaria’ on-line sequence promoting unique energy sites and places: saints depicted with angel’s wings are to be found in some Bulgarian churches (the church of St. Petka in the village of Vidin). One vising the church can still feel the aroma of incense lingering inside the church interior. Hollow rocks with healing powers are spread across Strandzha and the Eastern Rhodopi mountains, believed to be related to Thracian times.
and rituals, or the little church of St George in which lived Prepodobna Stoyna, considered to be a prophet and to have powerful psychic and healing powers. There are places in Bulgaria that are turned into sites attracting not only people who are interested in landscapes and history but also those who believe that they will discover something otherworldly there. The itinerary of ‘Mystic Bulgaria’ is mapped out to include haunted villages, sites frequented by UFO which rub shoulders with miraculous springs and rocks and prophecies of extraordinary events. Hereinafter you may find some of the most popular sites giving the tourist a unique, transforming experience:

**Rupite** – a supposed energy vortex and the shrine of Vanga, a Bulgarian clairvoyant

**Tomb of Bastet** – the supposed grave of an Egyptian goddess where supposedly, the knowledge of the world is hidden

**Belintash** – ‘wise rock’, ancient Thracian shrine and UFO sightings

**The circle dance, or the white brotherhood sacred dance** – a symbol of one of the most popular esoteric teachings in Bulgaria/ the spiritual teaching of Petar Danov

**Demir Baba Tekke** – a Muslim saint’s shrine venerated by all religions. To make things even more complicated, the tekke was built over the remains of an ancient Thracian shrine

**Energy vortexes** – all around Bulgaria – places with supposedly ‘cosmic powers’ Some of Bulgaria’s most popular tourist sites, such as the Madara Horseman near Shumen and Perperikon in the Eastern Rhodope are natural phenomena including Pobiti Kamani (the Petrified Forest) near Varna. What links them together is their capacity to make the visitor energized, dizzy or mesmerized or all of these.

**Summary of Conclusions**

Bulgaria has a great potential for developing certain types of niche tourism among which cultural tourism, events tourism, spa and wellness tourism, esoteric tourism, golf tourism, adventure and nature based tourism, experiential tourism, to name but a few as the country is rich in natural and socio-cultural resources. Even though Bulgaria lacks iconic architecture, it can still capitalize on its tangible and intangible heritage to successfully develop tourism as a cultural tourism destination. The profile of tourists has been also outlined as visitors in the 35 – 55 age bracket seeking a different experience, to feel and experience the people and places of a region, their lifestyles and traditions. Further on, the emergence of the so-called ‘creative class’ starts to have a bearing on today’s tourist profile as these are young and technologically minded people such as web-designers, computer animators, video producers or software engineers who have enough disposable income to spare on travel, looking for immersive experiences in authentic settings and social encounters with the host community, having developed different consumption skills and needs.
To summarize the above, we can say that building a strong tourist brand, to be readily identifiable in the mind of tourists, is not an easy thing to do. This is where ‘Niche Tourism’ can get us one step ahead through its potential to address various needs and offer visitors engaging and immersive experiences. Newly emerging niche tourism concepts go hand-in-hand with creativity as for example, the staging of a ballet performance (Swan Lake, performed by Sofia Opera and Ballet in 2016) for up-market tourists, against the dramatic décor of the Belogradchik rocks, one of the natural wonders of Bulgaria. Events tourism in the form of film festivals, folklore and crafts festivals is becoming an important tool in destination marketing too as it brings into focus various festivals and fairs from the rich folklore calendar of Bulgaria and helps fight chronic seasonality and extend the tourist season all the year round.

References


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