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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

Rural areas in North Macedonia are rich in diverse natural and cultural preconditions favorable for practicing rural tourism. The paper summarizes the results of accomplished activities in the rural environment in the line of developing rural tourism in North Macedonia. The overview of activities and results is based on three parameters: (i) By following the methodology and goals set within the Strategy for rural tourism development of Macedonia 2012-2017; (ii) By obtaining results from specific tailor-made field research; and (iii) By following the general criteria of standardization according to the European Federation for Rural Tourism EUROGEST. The findings highlight the characteristics of rural tourism in North Macedonia in eight statistical regions, fifteen draft rural destinations, thirty rural areas, and fifteen rural settlements whereas rural tourism is practiced.

Keywords: Rural areas; Rural tourism; Tourist destinations; North Macedonia

Introduction

North Macedonia has many rural areas with diverse natural and cultural prerequisites suitable for developing rural tourism. Generally, it is a rural country since about 97% of the territory belongs to a rural area.¹ The country has a total of 1,767 settlements out of which 34 are urban (with an urban area of 582 km² or 2.26%) and 1,733 are rural settlements.

Based on the wide range of activities it comprises, rural tourism unites several types of tourism: farm tourism; tourism to other farm dwellings; sports-recreational tourism; adventure tourism; health tourism; educational tourism; transit tourism; camping tourism; cultural tourism; religious tourism; hunting tourism; fishing tourism; wine tasting tourism; gastronomic tourism; eco-tourism (Kushen, 1995). In this line, the rural tourism in North Macedonia unites lake tourism, monastery tourism, mountain tourism and spa tourism (Dimitrov & Petrevska, 2012). Furthermore, it must be noted that rural tourism currently has strong advantages in the international tourism market, as it already has a key role to play in the development of some rural areas that were in economic and social depression (Dernoi, 1991, Blaine & Golan, 1993; Ploeg & Renting, 2000; Ploeg et al. 2000; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Hall & Richards, 2002; Simpson, 2008; Chuang, 2010; Dimitrov & Petrevska, 2012).

¹ The data on urban area of cities is calculated from the Arc program, old AREC GIS portal, area measurement, Real Estate Cadastre Agency (<http://gis.katastar.gov.mk/arec>).

Table 1a. General characteristics of rural tourism by statistical regions, tourist destinations, zones and rural tourist settlements in North Macedonia, 2019

No.	Statistical Planning Region	Municipalities with rural tourism conditions ¹	Rural tourist destinations	Rural tourist zones	Rural settlements with tourism-catering services	Rural settlements with tourism potential
1.	Vardar	Veles, Gradsko, Demir Kapija, Kavadarci, Lozovo, Negotino, Rosoman, Sveti Nikole, Chashka (9)	Azot, Tikves (2)	Azot, Tikvesh, Vitachevo-Bosava(3)	Bogomila, Papradshite, Nezilovo, Gradsko, Rosoman, Lozovo (6)	Gorno Vranovci, Begnishite, Teovo, Bogoslovec, Oreshe, Izvor, Sogle, Teovo, Mlnica, Gorno Jabolchishite, Rosoman, Vatasha, Konopishite, Chashka...(14)
2.	Eastern	Berovo, Vinica, Delchevo, Zrnovci, Karbinci, Kocani, Makedonska Kamenica, Pehchevo, Probitip, Cheshinovo-Obleshevo, Stip (11)	Maleshevo (1)	Maleshevia, Zrnovci-Piachkovica, Pianec, Oveche Pole-Mangovica (4)	Leunovo, Rusinovo, Zrnovci (3)	Razlovo, Banje, Zletovo, Stalkovica, Vladimirovo Morodvis, Karbinci, Radanja, Blatec, Gradec, Sasa, Zvegog, Budinarci, Istibanja, Golak, Ratevo,... (16)
3.	Southwest	Vevcani, Debar, Debarca, Kicevo, Makedonski Brod, Ohrid, Plasnica, Struga, Centar Zupa (9)	Debar-Kichevo, Vevcani, Ohrid-Prespa ethno-eco region, Mavrovo-Rostushe (4)	Galicica, Drimkol, Malesia, Debarca, Kichevia, Poreche (6)	Vevcani, Gorna Belica, Radozda, Kalista, Baniste, Dolno Kosovrasti, Pestani, Trejca, Ljubanishita, Kuratica, Onenica, Leskoc, Velgoshiti, Velestovo, Dolno Konjsko, Shipokno, Elshani, Orovnik, Orman, Podmole, Veshita, Misleshevo, Shum, Gorenci, Volino, Gari, Peshna, Belica, Knezina(29)	Lukovo, Modrich, Jablanica, Boroec, Zbazi, Kodzadzik, Vishni, Serbatno, Samokov, Banishte, Labumista, Zajas, Izvor, Vraneshtica, Mesheishita, Lokov, Trebenishite, Blizansko, Zdunje, Velmej, Brezani, Belchishita, Ieshani, Popoce, Cer, Novak, Brezani, Plasnica, Mogorche, Centar Zhupa, Kozadzik, Ostomej...(33)
4.	Southeast	Bogdanci, Bosilovo, Valandovo, Vasilevo, Gevgelija, Dojran, Konche, Novo Selo, Radovish, Strumica (10)	Ethno and spa region Belasica (1)	Kozuf, Boimia, Belasica, Mantovo-Sertia, Jurukluk(5)	Koeshino, Mokrievo, Smolari, Gabrovo, Bansko, Stojakovo, Bogorodica, Star Dojran, Nov Dojran, Sretenovo, Negorci, Mirzenci, Miravci(13)	Sermenin, Konjsko, Vodocha, Veljusa, Vasilevo, Moim, Huma, Nikolich, Konche, Podaresh, Oraovica, Marvinci, Smokvica, Inevo, Dedino, Gradoshorci, Chalakli...(17)

No.	Statistical Planning Region	Municipalities with rural tourism conditions ¹	Rural tourist destinations	Rural tourist zones	Rural settlements with tourism-catering services	Rural settlements with tourism potential
5.	Pelagonia	Bitola, Demir Hisar, Dolneni, Krivogashani, Krushevo, Mogila, Novaci, Prilep, Resen (9)	Krushevo, Pelagonia, Mariovo (3)	Dolina Prespa, Pelister, Demir Hisar-Krushevo, Pelagonia, Mariovo, Raec-Trojanci(6)	Brajchino, Ljubojno, Pretor, Stenje, Nise Pole, Dihovo, Trnovo, Magarevo, Bukovo, Carev Dvor, Konjsko, Smilevo (12)	Malovishte, Velushina, Capari, Rotino, Gopesh, Brusnik, Vitolishte, Staravina, Gradshnica, Devich, Slepche, Babino, Zurcha, Zvan, Zelezec, Brezovo, Dolenci, Velmevci, Virovo, Sloeshitica, Golemo Ilino, Zrze, Pista Reka, Belovodica, Dune, Topolchani, Dolno Dupeni, Asamati, Arvati, Krrani, Slivnica, Grnchari, Kurbinovo, Shtrbovo, Debreshite, Dolneni, Lazani,... (37)
6.	Polog	Bogovinje, Brvenica, Vrapeshite, Gostivar, Zelino, Jegunovce, Mavrovo-Rostusha, Teorce, Tetovo (9)	Polog (1)	Polog, Mavrovo – Rostushe (2)	Janche, Lazaropole, Galichnik, Mavrovo, Trmica, Teorce, Vratnica (7)	Leunovo, Nikiforovo, Tresonche, Kichinica, Bitushe, Zirovnica, Izvor, Vrutok, Rostushe, Trebishte, Velebrdo, Brodec, Jegunovce, Çelopek, Forino, Bogovinje, Volkovia, Lechok, Chepshite, Setole, Vrapeshite, Jeoarce, Dobri Dol, Gradeç,...(24)
7.	Northeast	Kratovo, Kriva Palanka, Kumanovo, Lipkovo, Rankovce, Staro Nagorichane (6)	Osoгово, Kumanovo (2)	Osogovia, Lipkovo – Kumanovo, Kozjacia (3)	Staro Nagorichane, Rankovce, Ginovci (3)	Dobrevo, Matejche, Lipkovo, German, Luke, Dragomance, Rankovce, Kuklica, Kokino, Trnovo, Konopnica, Psacha, Klechevce, Pelince,... (14)
8.	Skopski	Arachinovo, Butel, Gazi Baba, Gjorche Petrov, Zelenikovo, Ilinden, Petrovec, Kisela Voda, Saraj, Sopishte, Studenichani Chucher Sandevo (12)	Rural Skopje (1)	Karsiak-Torbesia- Blatia(1)	Ljubanci, Volkovo, Oreshani, Katlanovo, Dolna Matka, Drachevo, Ilinden, Petrovec, Batinci (9)	Nova Breznica, Sopishte, Kuchevishte, Chucher Sandevo, Kuchovo, Iaor, Ljuboten, Zelenikovo, Kolicani, Sopishte, Patishka Reka, Studenichani, Rastak,...(13)
Σ	8	75	15	30	82	168 >

Notes: ¹Municipalities of Aerodrom, Karposh, Centar, Chair, Suto Orizari are part of the City of Skopje and have no rural tourism settlements; Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Ministry of Economy. (2012); Dimitrov & Petrevska (2012); Metodijeski & Dimitrov (2018); Real Estate Cadastre Agency; Field research.

This paper summarizes the results of the activities carried out in the rural environment towards the development of rural tourism in North Macedonia, based on three parameters: (i) Following the methodology and objectives set in the Rural Tourism Development Strategy of Macedonia 2012-2017 (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Ministry of Economy, 2012); (ii) Presenting results of specific field surveys; and (iii) Following the general standardization criteria according to the EUROGEST European Rural Tourism Federation. The findings emphasize the characteristics of rural tourism in North Macedonia in eight statistical regions, fifteen draft rural destinations, thirty rural areas and eighty rural settlements. On the other hand, different forms of rural activities are practiced, but only in fifteen rural settlements throughout the year. Hence, the results indicate that North Macedonia, unlike many tourism oriented countries, has very modest results in this area.

Materials and methods

The research applied quantitative and qualitative approach. Various analyses are made upon field surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, calculation data from the electronic system of the state cadastre, stylized statistics from available secondary data, as well as literature review.

Results and discussion

According to the Law on Territorial Organization of Local Self-Government, as of 2013 North Macedonia is territorially organized in 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje, as a separate unit of local self-government, of which 43 (including 10 in the City of Skopje) are urban, and 37 are rural. According to the State Statistical Office, there are 1,767 settlements in 2014, of which 34 are municipalities and 1,733 are rural settlements.

From Table 1a and Table 1b it can be seen that the Southwest region is the most rural with 4 rural tourist destinations, 6 rural tourist zones, 29 rural settlements with tourist-catering services and 9 municipalities with rural tourism conditions. Unlike ten years ago, today all regions of the country practice different forms of rural tourism. However, many problems emerged thus hoping to be systematically addressed in the new up-dated version of the national rural tourism strategy. The main focus and intention is to guide the development of rural tourism in accordance with the criteria for standardization of the European Federation of Rural Tourism EUROGEST.

Based on the filed research, it was found that out of 1,733 rural settlements, 82 rural settlements offer tourist and catering services (4.7%), out of which only 30 rural settlements (1.7%) are in the rural area of rural municipalities, while the rest of 52 rural settlements (3.0%) are in the rural area of urban municipalities. Most of the rural settlements in the urban municipalities are located some 10-15 km. from the city. Yet, there are few exceptions of rural settlements being located in pure rural areas and far away from urban settlements.

According to the dominant type of tourist service that provide, the identified 82 rural settlements that offer tourist-catering services (like: stay in country houses, apartments, villas, catering hotels, etc.) in and around the geographical area of the rural settlement, can be grouped like:

- Rural settlements for lake tourism (15 villages);

- Rural settlements for mountain and sport tourism (15 villages);
- Rural settlements for monastery tourism (10 villages),
- Rural settlements for spa tourism (5 villages); and
- Rural settlements for combined tourism (37 villages) (like: nature walks, visiting waterfalls, caves, cultural and historical monuments and traditional events, tasting and consuming gastronomic specialties, donkey and horse riding, cycling, fishing, hunting, etc.).

Table 1b. General characteristics of rural tourism by statistical regions, tourist destinations, zones and rural tourist settlements in North Macedonia, 2019

No.	Statistical Planning Region	Municipalities with rural tourism conditions ¹	Rural tourist destinations	Rural tourist zones	Rural settlements with tourism-catering services	Rural settlements with tourism potential
1	Vardar	9	2	3	6	14
2	Eastern	11	1	4	3	16
3	Southwest	9	4	6	29	33
4	Southeast	10	1	5	13	17
5	Pelagonia	9	3	6	12	37
6	Polog	9	1	2	7	24
7	Northeast	6	2	3	3	14
8	Skopje	12	1	1	9	13
Σ	8	75	15	30	82	168

Notes:¹Municipalities of Aerodrom, Karposh, Centar, Chair, Suto Orizari are part of the City of Skopje and have no rural tourism settlements; Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Ministry of Economy. (2012); Dimitrov & Petrevska (2012); Metodijeski&Dimitrov (2018); Real Estate Cadastre Agency; Field research.

It must be noted that all above noted activities in the rural settlements have a high seasonal character with the highest realization in summer (with the exception of Mavrovo and Nizo Pole where due to ski tourism, the activities take place in winter).

Only a small number of rural settlements dealing with rural tourism are visited by organized groups of foreign tourists throughout the year. Most of the rural settlements are visited by organized groups of tourists only for the main season, which in general is the summer. Based on the field research, it was found that not even the domestic tourists visit rural tourist areas during the whole year, but rather only for the season. This confirms the lack of promotional strategy for rural tourism development, along with the lack of benefits for tour operators, tourist agencies and tour guides that may institutionally present the potentials of the rural environment.

Generally, in almost all rural settlements that provide accommodation and catering services, tourists are offered stay in renovated old authentic country houses, or in new holiday homes, apartments and family-run small hotels. Yet, their number is still very modest. There are marked hiking trails in the countryside in 44 rural settlements and official tourist signposts for tourist visits in 34 settlements. Despite the significance of this type of tourist infrastructure for leading the visitors from the rural settlement to a sightseeing spot (monastery, church, cultural monument, waterfall, cave, mountain lodge, mountain peak, etc.), most of them are in a poor condition and are barely maintained. This goes along with the large number of rural settlements that do not have sufficient basic infrastructure and cannot offer anything for

tourism purposes. So, one-third of the sampled 82 villages (from the field survey) have real problems, like: lack of drinking water, waste disposal, lack of sanitation, roads in very bad condition, poor electricity supply, lack of staff, etc. This emerges an instant need for defining a new strategy for rural development being focused on capital infrastructure interventions in the rural areas, along with granting subsidies for reconstruction of old rural houses and their transformation for tourist purposes.

According to the Rural Development Network of North Macedonia (Macedonia-NTEF), the following forms of rural tourism are noted: agrotourism, ecotourism, cultural and ethnical village, spiritual and physical discipline tourism, mountain tourism, eno-gastronomic, hunting and fishing, medical, spa tourism, wine tourism, sport tourism and iver tourism. Despite the fact that rural tourism can be explained as farm tourism or agro tourism, it must be noted that both categories are sub-components of rural tourism. Moreover,

- Agri-tourism is when the purpose of the visit has a specific focus on agriculture, as well as contact with domestic animals or a visit to a vineyard;
- Farm tourism is when the accommodation of tourists is on the farms. The main activities are carried out in the wider rural area (hiking, fishing), yet most of the visitors are housed on farms (farms operating or transformed into accommodation facilities); and
- Other forms of rural tourism that include the above, but also include camp parks, safari tours, craft markets, cultural exhibitions, adventure sports, hiking trails, historical heritage sites, music events, in fact all tourist activities that may take place in rural areas.

Table 2. Type of geographical area and basic activities for rural tourism

Type of geographical area	Number of municipalities and settlements	Basic activities for rural tourism			
		Accommodation	Hospitality	Trails	Tourist sightseeing
Rural area in rural municipalities	municipalities	25	37	14	11
	settlements	30	30	24	16
Rural space in urban municipalities	municipalities	21	38	18	14
	settlements	52	52	20	18
Total	municipalities	46	75	32	25
	settlements	82	82	44	34

Source: Authors' survey

From Table 2, it can be seen that there are basic tourism activities in terms of accommodation and catering services in 82 rural settlements. Furthermore, in 44 rural settlements there are marked hiking trails being generally used for mountain or religious tourism, like hiking to the mountain, visiting a monastery, and so. Finally, 34 rural settlements possess an opportunity for tourist sightseeing in the neighboring surroundings. The research found that out of 82 rural settlements, about 20 have access to accommodation throughout the year, while the rest can be used only in the summer. This clearly presents the lack of institutional support, pointing that central and local government must take initiatives to strengthen and boost current modest rural tourism. Therefore, the current diverse structure of attractiveness should

be accompanied by appropriate policies, as poor investment leads to poor development. As a result, the need to introduce different fiscal and economic measures, such as subsidies, tax deductions, employment opportunities, audits and controls, can be argued. In this line, there is an urgent need to take measures in: infrastructure improvement, housing renovation, electricity upgrading, private sector resuscitation in rural communities, revival of neglected and forgotten traditional professions, education and training on the positive effects of rural tourism, preservation of natural, anthropogenic, cultural values, etc.

Recommendations

North Macedonia has unique and well-preserved natural and anthropogenic resources with a large number of traditional rural households. Yet, major challenges for development of rural tourism in the country occurred, pointing to some suggestions for future creation of different types of tourism related to rural areas, such as: agricultural tourism, ecotourism, gastronomic tourism, camping tourism, ethno tourism, hunting and fishing and wine tourism. It is expected that all these types of tourism may be complemented by:

- Various recreational activities (like: horse and donkey riding, cycling, hiking, swimming, hunting and fishing, bird watching, herb collection, fruit and farming, catching insects, etc.); and
- Various educational rural activities (like: knitting, weaving, cooking traditional dishes, practicing traditional work and art -playing dances, singing, drawing, playing folk instruments, etc.).

In addition, many other positive impulses can be observed in the area of: construction of rural housing; signaling for tourist traffic; introducing volunteering to the younger generation; launching cooperation with worldwide rural tour operators; launching training centers; establishing partnerships with educational institutions; strong motivation of the local community; initiating branding in this area; raising a larger budget for promotion of rural tourism at central and local level; organizing local events and rural exhibitions; introduction of opportunities for establishing different types of associations that can support rural tourism development zones; launching new types of rural tourism products and so on.

So, some future new-updated strategic document may contain more features for creating rural tourism product associated to agriculture, fishery, etc., in term of:

- Residence in rural area - village, with accommodation and meals;
- Visiting or transit via the rural settlement with a short-stay (sightseeing, visit to a religious facility, museum visit, natural objects etc.);
- Farm stay - bed and meal, accommodation and activities provoked by traditional farming where visitors feel becoming a part of the “family” and the stay has a specific focus on agricultural activity (field work, barn, garden, orchard, vineyard, apiary etc.), contact with pets, visiting a wine cellar, craft workshop, etc.;
- Rural stay - the focus is on the ambient and the environment with less agricultural activities and more recreational hiking, cultural and sports activities;
- Rural self-service units - accommodation in custom stables, cottages, etc.;
- Camp locations, camp parks - attractive access and shade areas, sheltered by trees and equipped with guest facilities (camp houses, tents, showers, toilets, etc.);

- Backpacker tourists - a form of tourism that is more difficult to define. Tourists should be offered a wide range of accommodation facilities, with a range of additional activities such as “experiencing” (special activities, events, etc.);
- Adventure-rural accommodation is associated with specific activities such as rock climbing, horse riding, hunting, etc.;
- Cultural heritage - buildings that have strong historical or cultural features;
- Ecotourism, features natural or created area with important ecological attractions, where the visitor expects to learn something as part of the experience.

Furthermore, in the line of creating new rural tourism development strategy, the following recommendations for specifying various forms of rural tourism, may be taken into consideration:

- Creating a list of natural (geology, geomorphology, geography - relief forms, figures, caves, waterfalls, river springs, lakes, etc.) and anthropogens (cultural historical monuments, architecture, tradition, museums, manifestations, gastronomy, etc.) resources;
- Identifying an appropriate material-technical base (types of accommodation and food in terms of traditional rural houses, holiday homes, villas, camps, apartments, lodges, hotels, etc.);
- Inventorization of types of accommodation facilities (country houses or rural houses with traditional architecture with main house and complementary facilities and a farm yard, rural houses with guest rooms for renting, small rural cottages, rural apartments, rooms in houses with modern architecture (villas, holiday homes), eco-friendly farms, small family-run hotels, etc.);
- Capacity building in terms of human factor (local population, staff, etc.);
 - o Initiating institutional support (local community, tourist information bureaus, travel agencies, etc.);
 - o Supporting and building social and production infrastructure;
 - o Taking care for ensuring constant demand for rural tourism product and effective utilization of accommodation capacities; etc.

Future strategic development of rural tourism in North Macedonia may set out additional criteria for exploring rural areas and rural settlements. Such criteria may be: geographical, economic, infrastructure and tourism criteria. Moreover,

- o Geographical criteria:
 - Geographical area (by height zones, orographic conditions, number of inhabitants, distance from national and regional road, from the municipality center or the center of the region, etc.); and
 - Geographical-demographic (number of inhabitants, gender and age structure, national, religious, educational and economic structure);
- o Economic criteria: (economically developed, medium developed and underdeveloped villages);
- o Infrastructure criteria: (road network equipment, power grids, water supply, waste disposal, telecommunications); and
- o Tourist criteria:
 - Natural motives (mountains, caves, water, springs, rivers, waterfalls, lakes, geomorphology, geology, biogeography, etc.);

- Anthropogenic motives (history, religious buildings, monuments, architecture, tradition, gastronomy, manifestations, etc.);
- Communication motives (road network, marked roads, landscaped views, picnic areas for rest and recreation, baskets, tables, educated staff, professional tour guides, etc.); and
- Receptive motives (catering and accommodation facilities).

Conclusion

The research identifies rural tourist destinations, tourist zones, active and potential rural tourist-catering settlements in North Macedonia. Moreover, it presents an overview of the current state of rural tourism and gives recommendations for future development of tourism in rural areas in North Macedonia. The results point to a valuable fact that in 75 rural municipalities exist 82 rural settlements that more or less offer tourist and catering services. Data are provided on basic activities in rural tourism, such as accommodation, catering, walking and hiking trails and tourist sightseeing spots, all in terms of geographical area. According to the economic effects of the development of rural tourism, depending on the supply and distribution of tourism revenue, there is still a so-called “soft” effect in the country. Accommodation is in houses, small family-run hotels and other accommodation owned by entrepreneurs who are permanently or temporarily living in rural areas, and the benefits of rural tourism remain partly in rural areas (Dimitrov & Petrevska, 2012).

All identified rural settlements have a significant base for rural tourism development with accommodation and sightseeing facilities. In addition, they all have catering resources and the opportunity to include sightseeing as the main precondition for rural tourism development. However, poor road infrastructure is a limiting factor complemented by a lack of institutional support and adequate policy. If this is solved, rural tourism in North Macedonia has the initial potential to emerge as a major factor for economic development by spreading economic and social impacts at regional and local level, especially in areas where rural tourism activities are taking place.

In addition, the field research identifies that rural tourism must have a significant place in regional programs and new national development strategy needs to be defined. To achieve this, it is necessary to take serious measures and activities at central and local level. In addition, the modest recent results in this area underpin the need to identify and develop a new effective strategic framework for improving rural tourism. Still rural tourism in North Macedonia, for the most parts, is reduced only to staying in village accommodation facilities with a limited number of additional activities that tourists can practice. For these reasons, rural tourism is still in the first phase of its development, whereas is expected to result with an increase of tourist number, new rural tourism products, opening new businesses and cooperation between them. According to Gartner and Lime (2000), the second phase of rural tourism development involves the reconstruction of rural areas and the process of tourism development in a broader sense.

A major obstacle to the sustainable development of rural tourism is the season of demand, as well as a mismatched strategic and even institutional approach. This, along with the lack of promoting the development of rural tourism, points to the need of creating a tailor-made strategy for each individual tourism product related to the rural environment.

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