

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF TOURISM IN ORDER TO INCREASE THE TOURIST OFFER AND ATTRACTIVENESS – THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Biljana Nikolovska

Public Secondary School for Tourism and Catering “Lazar Tanev” - Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, nikolovska.biljana@yahoo.com

Zoran Nikolovski

Public Secondary School for Tourism and Catering “Lazar Tanev” - Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, nikolovskizoran@yahoo.com

Abstract: Alternative tourism means a wide range of tourist activities, most of which take place in mountainous or rural areas. Considering that a particularly high percentage of the area of the Republic of North Macedonia belongs to mountainous area, especially mountains with an altitude higher than 1500m, it can be undoubtedly concluded how important the role of the alternative tourism in the country is, which if properly directed can contribute to a large extent to further economic development. In line with the above, alternative tourism offers opportunities for various tourism activities that can especially enrich the tourist offer both for domestic and foreign tourists. In addition, the main forms of tourism in this context can be skiing, horseback riding, herbal tourism, paragliding, mountain biking, visiting rural villages with archaeological and cultural heritage and so forth. This paper presents an overview of the alternative forms of tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia. It is a particularly extensive topic that needs to be presented in a concrete way, with data that in the future will have their own real applicability. The main and sub-objectives of the paper are presented in order to provide a detailed description of the opportunities and existing facilities, as well as the offer for alternative tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia. Additionally, it is important to point out the creation of the tourist offer, i.e., the way in which the existing factors, but also the available resources affect the current situation of alternative tourism in the country, as well as their share in improving the current situation. Furthermore, a particularly important part of the paper is the presentation of alternative tourism by developing a detailed SWOT analysis, because it is based on the use of comparative method, method of generalization and specification of existing facts and achieved results, but also data on future projections for improving this sector as an economic activity. Regarding the methodological framework, a special part in proving the relevance of the topic has the application of empirical research in order to analyze and interpret the main topic, i.e., to what extent the interest of domestic and foreign tourists is, based on the tourist offer of the travel agencies, in context of alternative forms of tourism. Thereby, quantitative empirical analysis is used, by applying a survey questionnaire, with questions asked on a scale, in order to see the gradation of the attitude of the respondents, also tourist managers, for the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. The main conclusion of the paper is to show that alternative tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia has a special potential for extensive growth and progress. In order to achieve the same in the future, cooperation between the private sector and state authorities is needed, as well as from the organizations and institutions that are committed to encouraging the attractiveness of the natural and cultural regions, through additional assistance and support of creative and innovative plans for continuous improvement of the attractiveness of the tourist offer for alternative forms of tourism.

Keywords: alternative tourism, tourist offer, domestic, foreign, tourist, economic growth

1. INTRODUCTION

Alternative tourism means a wide range of tourist activities that take place in rural, mountain and cultural-archaeological space. This type of tourism offers opportunities for various mountain tourism activities, while as the main types of tourism in the alternative sense, it can be considered horseback riding, herbal tourism, paragliding, mountain biking, lake tourism and the like (Jovicik, 2016).

Morphological heterogeneity of the mountains in the Republic of North Macedonia give the opportunity and potential for pleasant walks through the space, both on arranged trails and on trails that should be arranged in the future and properly marked for the lovers of mountain tourism. The very clean and fresh mountain air encourages the attractiveness for the population, especially for getting out of the polluted urban areas. In addition to the offer of alternative tourism, sports competitions, music activities and additional opportunities for extreme tourism are organized. Moreover, rural tourism can greatly complement alternative tourism, especially in offering delicious traditional food and local customs. In this regard, when considering the promotion of rural tourism, within the alternative tourism, it is necessary to pay attention to the following: the importance of local households and some

established standards for landscaping; appearance and development of the rural households; as well as the participation of the local community in the rural development policy (Savic et al., 2017).

It is important to point out that by increasing investments and financial resources, the image of the region improves, not only in front of domestic tourists but also in the foreign tourist market.

The main impact for the processing of the mentioned issues is the fact that the Republic of North Macedonia has untouched nature and diverse natural and cultural wealth with recognizable flora and fauna. All this is, to some extent is insufficiently known, ie insufficiently promoted for tourists, especially for foreign tourists, on the basis of which there is a possibility to find a thread for applicability of the obtained research data to improve the strategic presentation of alternative tourism within the national documents and regulations (Kosar, 2016).

The main goal of this paper is to motivate foreign tourists, as well as domestic tourists, in order to escape from highly urbanized stressful places, to visit the destinations of the Republic of North Macedonia, which offer natural environment, untouched environment, original food, local products, as well as complete comfort of the local way of life with a touch of local tradition and colorful ethnicity. In addition, it is a country with exceptional wealth, historical, cultural heritage, with its high potential for quality tourist offer in various tourist categories, with special emphasis on alternative tourism. Consequently, the country has a rich tourist offer in the field of alternative tourism, including tourist features and natural beauties, traditions and customs, as well as attractive archeological sites, with a special emphasis on national gastronomy as a world trend in tourism.

According with the above, the main recommendation within the paper is to channel the potentials of alternative tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia, both to domestic and foreign tourists. All this can be achieved to a large extent through creative and content tourist offers and excursions. Namely, it is of particular importance at the state level to have an appropriate strategic vision for the promotion of alternative tourism in the country, which will be adapted to the capacities of small and medium businesses, as well as managers of locations and activities that are available to existing opportunities. In addition, there is an indisputable fact that the current accommodation capacities in the field of alternative tourism are minimal, however, if the offer and the attractiveness of the existing comfort of alternative tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia are positively affected, it will affect the positive affirmation of international and competitive market. In that direction, it is important to influence the continuous offer, based on a strong tradition and above all with the existence of a highly established tourist infrastructure. All this, supplemented with an appropriate platform, would greatly influence the achievement of a quality and professional approach within the offer of alternative tourism (Dimitrov, Koteski, 2015).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Within this paper, a wide range of information was obtained, primarily on a secondary basis. These are data related to the current state of alternative tourism, as well as projections regarding its improvement, but also appropriate guidance of existing facilities, through the application of positive practices. The data are obtained from several sources: state capacity - institutions responsible for regular monitoring, constant inspection and promotion of alternative tourism, primarily the Ministry of Economy - Tourism, as well as the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning.

According with the above, the use of a comparative method is of particular importance. Namely, a comparative analysis of the current situation with the envisaged aspects for alternative and rural tourism has been applied, within the strategically existing national documents. The comparison is mostly the application when comparing the data and their presentation in the set SWOT analysis.

Regarding the quantitative methods used for collection and processing of empirical data required for analysis in assessing the possibilities and capacities of alternative tourism on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, a survey questionnaire is applied with claims set on a Likert scale, in order to a gradation of the attitude from negative to positive. It is a survey conducted by a group of 100 respondents, tourism managers, with the main purpose to see the availability of an offer for alternative tourism and its response in terms of interest by domestic and foreign tourists.

The scientific sources of data used in the research are from a theoretical and practical nature. In addition to secondary data sources, primary sources are used depending on the degree of their availability.

3. RESULTS

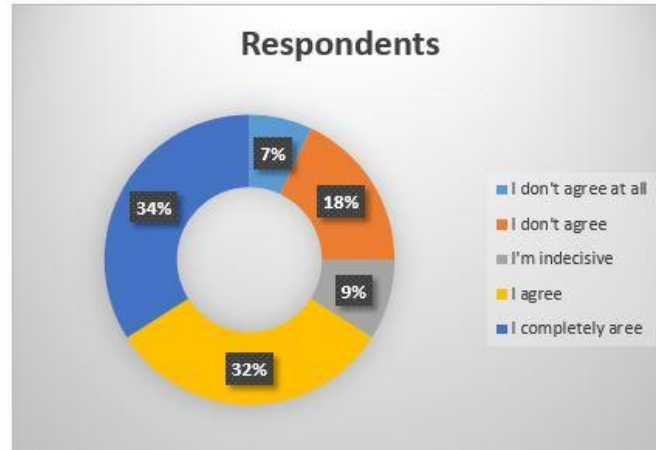
The general hypothesis that is analyzed and interpreted is: "If the offer of alternative tourism includes a detailed affirmation of all existing facilities, regularly updated, then the interest of domestic and foreign tourists is expected to be constantly increasing". The hypothesis is analyzed on the basis of data obtained from tourism managers, as the most relevant to give their scientific contribution to the analysis and improvement of the current situation within the Republic of North Macedonia. The empirical research was conducted within the period of 10.05. – 25.05.2021.

This hypothesis is analyzed and interpreted through the answers to the statement (question):

- Number 7 of the survey questionnaire, "There is a regular upgrade of the database regarding the existing facilities and opportunities for continuous development of alternative tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia".
- Number 11 of the survey questionnaire, "There is greater interest among foreign tourists than domestic tourists to develop alternative tourism".

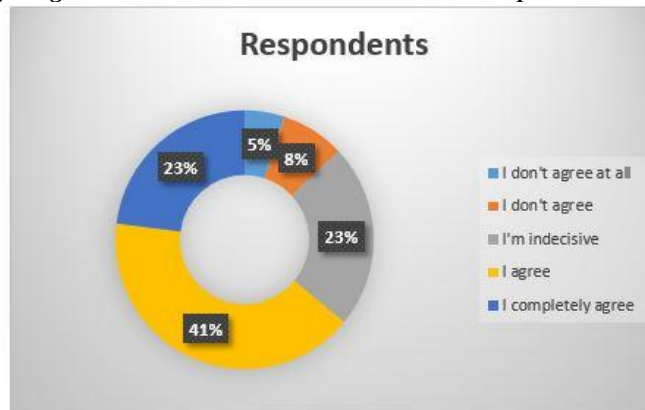
The following results were obtained:

Figure 1. Respondents' answers of statement (question) number 7 "There is a regular upgrade of the database regarding the existing facilities and opportunities for continuous development of alternative tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia"



Source: Author's own research

Figure 2. Respondents' answers of statement (question) number 11 "There is greater interest among foreign tourists than domestic tourists to develop alternative tourism."



Source: Author's own research

4. DISCUSSIONS

Regarding the capacities for the existence of alternative tourism, as well as certain opportunities for development and functioning of alternative forms of tourism, it is of particular importance to take into account the following existing situation in the Republic of North Macedonia:

- Unequal spatial distribution, i.e., southwestern region in relation to the northeastern region which is not sufficiently visited (MZSPP, 2014, p. 3);
- Insufficient scientific research on tourism, especially in terms of specific tourism facilities that will correspond to different alternative forms of tourism;
- Insufficient maintenance and monitoring of many natural and cultural attractions;
- Insufficient support from institutions for development of alternative forms of tourism;

- Inadequate markings for tourists especially when it comes to active tourism types as part of the alternative tourism;
- Inadequate standards in many hotels, especially in the mountainous region;
- Insufficient representation of alternative tourism types in the tourist offer of travel agencies and their promotion.

Regardless of the form of alternative tourism in question, it is of particular importance to unify the model, i.e., timely prediction of the preconditions of the environment, some own advantages, as well as the preconditions of its own household. In that direction, alternative tourism needs to offer, respectively (Ackovska, 2009):

- Catering services in the household - only by renting rooms, apartments or holiday homes;
- Eco-food in order to encourage the traditional spirit of the landscape;
- Sport and recreation activities with appropriate guides;
- Mountain tours;
- Participation in joint work, in the field of food preparation, agricultural work, horseback riding, hunting and the like.

In order to realize alternative tourism in a form that will be long-term and that will initiate continuous supply and quality, in the Republic of North Macedonia assistance is offered by the Government, through the financial support of the Sector for Rural Development, and also the Agency for Financial Support in Agriculture and Rural Development was established as well as the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism that gave systemic support for development of rural and mountain tourism.

It is of particular importance to increase the cooperation between state institutions and the business sector in order to jointly create policies, to prevent unfair competition, as one of the basic postulates for the development of mountain tourism, and tourism in general (Hrabovski, 2017).

Table 1: SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ground factor of presence - central area of the balance 2. Strategic location 3. Support from local self-government 4. Regional acceptability 5. Development standards for tourism 6. Compliance with set regulations 7. Assistance from projects for social responsibility and encouragement of mountain tourism, with special reference to rural tourism 8. Growing interest of the local population in providing services in the development of alternative tourism 9. Increasing the role of local development foundations in the commercialization of the accommodation offer, as well as additional tourist activities 10. Increasing the number of tourists for mountain activities and extreme sports 11. Individual approach to the guests for authenticity during the stay 12. Increased orientation towards "green tourism" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of unified management standards and guidelines 2. Lack of key skills for creative expression when offering activities 3. Lack of sorted supply of traditional food, continuously 4. Lack of training of the management and staff to improve the skills for alternative tourism 5. Lack of knowledge, perception and awareness of new trends in the field of alternative tourism 6. Limited professional education and training 7. Undefined institutional framework 8. Poor strategic applicability in relation to the growth of alternative tourism - at the state level 9. Unequal offer quality 10. Insufficient professional competence 11. Inadequate promotion, especially internationally
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Young population, with a desire for prosperity in the field of alternative tourism 2. Association of catering facilities within the framework of strategic action 3. Really available procedures for new prosperity and opportunities in alternative tourism 4. Need for fasting and setting up a global brand 5. Segmentation in the domain of service offer in the direction of additional expertise 6. Use of available funds through EU funds / programs 7. Private-public cooperation - partnership 8. Demand is more pronounced in the sphere of "special interests", especially - rural mountain tourism, mountain biking, paragliding, horseback riding and the like 9. Application of international examples from good practice 10. Using modern forms of activity promotion and accommodation 11. Favorable conditions for co-financing investments in new facilities or renovation of existing mountain tourism 12. Many abandoned sites that can be rebuilt. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Geographical and strategic position of the center for alternative tourism (sufficiently accessible for communication with appropriate infrastructure) 2. Daily appearance of competition 3. Variable climatic conditions 4. Insufficient knowledge of the socio-cultural habits of the target group 5. Competition with global rivals (in the context of the tourist service) 6. Inadequate infrastructural connection - ecological and functional degradation of the space 7. Image of a cheap tourist destination 8. Difficult and expensive process for connecting electricity 9. Financial and COVID-19 crisis that can slow down the process of investments and additional tourism activities, as well as the sustainability of existing ones.

Source: Author's own research

Based on the data provided in Figure 1 and Figure 2, as well as the SWOT analysis, it is seen that in the Macedonian society, there is a regular offer regarding alternative tourism, however, it is more interesting for foreign tourists than for domestic tourists. Consequently, it is important to keep an eye on the overall situation in order to make improvements, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, when domestic tourism is becoming a priority.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper provides a detailed overview of the current situation and future projections related to alternative tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia. It is of particular importance to point out the current situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, which to some extent prevented fieldwork in relation to improving the quality of the thesis. However, there is a high relevance of the data used as well as their compatibility with the set main goal and sub-goals, when drawing overall conclusions.

Based on the set goal, the following conclusions were drawn:

- The alternative tourism sector in the country is insufficiently competitive, compared to world standards;
- Alternative tourism is still dependent on other sectors and resources on the basis of which a coherent approach to it is not implemented, in order to encourage its development in new forms and types of tourism with a higher level of attractiveness for tourists;
- There are classified forms of alternative tourism that have a particularly positive effect on the range of offer of this type of tourism;
- At the national level, there is not enough clear insight into the potential of alternative forms of tourism;
- There is a positive opportunity for a combination of mountain tourism with rural tourism in order to improve the promotional offer, i.e., to supplement the offer of mountain tourism;
- here are attractive already existing locations for promotion of alternative tourism and increase of its attractiveness for domestic and foreign visitors;
- There is a need to renovate the existing facilities on the basis of which there is an opportunity to use funds from foreign foundations that invest in the development of eco-tourism;
- The existing alternative tourism has creative activities, as well as extreme sports, which are of particular interest to domestic and foreign tourists;
- The local self-government shows significant interest in investing in alternative forms of tourism;
- There is still no complete correlation of alternative tourism with the opportunities and capacities of rural tourism, in terms of accommodation, customs and offer of traditional food;
- Lack of knowledge and appropriate training to encourage and direct the forms and activities of alternative tourism, based on more effective use of existing location facilities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to each individual (respondent) who contributed to get a realistic picture of the research framework, on a topic that is not yet clear and precise within the Macedonian society.

REFERENCES

- Hrabovski, Tomić, E. (2017). *Selektivni oblici turizma*, Sremska Kamenica, Fakultet za uslužni biznis
- Kosar, Lj. (2016). *Hotelijerstvo*, Beograd: Viša hotelijerska škola
- Ацковска, М. (2009). *Туризмот и економскиот развој на Република Македонија*, Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј“ – Скопје, Скопје: Економски институт – Скопје
- Димитров, В. Н., & Котески, Ц. (2015). *Туристичка географија*, Штип: УГД
- Димитров, В. Н. (2015) *Планински туризам*, Штип: УГД, Факултет за туризам и бизнис логистика
- Јаковлев, З. (2001). *Туристичка анимација и туристичка понуда*, Економија и бизнис, списание за теорија и практика, Еуро – Мак – Компани, Скопје, Ноември, 26.
- Јаковлев, З., & Ангелкова, Т. (2011). *Слободно време и алтернативен туризам, авторизирани предавања – скрипта за интерна употреба*, Гевгелија – Штип – Скопје
- Јовичиќ, Д. (2016). *Увод у туризмологију и туристичку географију*. Београд: ТОН ПЛУС,
- МИНИСТЕРСТВО за животна средина и просторно планирање - МЖСПП, (2014). *Трет национален план за климатски промени*, Скопје: Национална и универзитетска библиотека „Св. Климент Охридски“, Скопје
- МИНИСТЕРСТВО за економија, Сектор за Туризам, (2012-2017), *Национална стратегија за рурален туризам 2012 – 2017* – Скопје

- Савић, З., Братић, М., & Стоиљковић, Н. (2017). *Рекреативни туризам, организација зимовања и летовања са аспекта наставе активности у природи*, Спортске науке и здравље, Република Српска, Босна и Херцеговина
- Станковић, М. С. (2016). *Туристичка географија*, Београд