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## **PRAGUE AS THE DESTINATION FOR MACEDONIANS IN THE PRODUCT OF TOURISM AGENCIES**

***Abstract:** The subject of this paper is the travel arrangements to visit Prague organized by travel agencies in the Republic of Macedonia. Prague, as an attractive destination has been present on the tourism market in Macedonia for the last ten years, but only a small number of tour operators organize trips to this famous European center. The paper contains an analysis and presents the contents of the arrangements to visit Prague, their prices and duration, the period in which they are realized, additional activities and optional excursions offered to the Macedonian tourists, the number of participants and tour operators who organize and popularize urban tourism.*

***Key words:** travel agencies, Prague, travel arrangements, Macedonia, national holidays*

***JEL Classification:** L83*

### **Introduction**

The Golden city, the city of 100 towers, are just some of the superlatives that can be found in brochures, catalogs and websites of travel agencies from Macedonia that organize trips to Prague for Macedonian tourists. Macedonia is a country located in Southern/Mediterranean Europe [1]. It has a favorable geographical position as it is situated in the center of the Balkan Peninsula and covers an area of 25,713 km<sup>2</sup> [2]. The total population is 2 022 547 inhabitants. The country's capital Skopje has 506 926 inhabitants [3]. Other larger towns - emissive centers of tourism are: Tetovo, Kumanovo, Bitola, Prilep, Strumica, Stip, etc. Most of the travel agencies are located in these towns.

Tourist agencies are commercial entities dealing with the preparation, organization and mediation services related to traveling and accommodation, by third parties, or in such combination as own services (travel arrangement) offered to the tourist clientele [4]. According to the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS level 3), Macedonia is divided into eight statistical regions [5] (the Czech Republic is divided into 14 regions). In Macedonia there are 402 travel agencies, 196 of which have License A (tour operators - with the opportunity to organize a trip abroad), while 206 agencies have License B (for the most part they act as tour operators intermediaries and are able to organize trips within the country) [6]. Table 1 shows that most of the travel agencies are located in the Skopje region, 192 exactly. These agencies, according to their field of business are emissive, since they act on the territory that makes the largest tourist clientele - the capital Skopje, which is the market with the highest tourism demand in the country. Their task is to activate potential tourists to engage in tourist movements. Second largest region with 54

travel agencies is the Southwest region. These agencies are mostly of receptive character, due to the lake resorts from Ohrid and Struga. The main activity of these travel agencies is providing conditions to meet the travel needs within the tourist environment. The Polog region (with 48 travel agencies) and the Pelagonia region (with 36 travel agencies) are regions dominated by tourist agencies of combined character, as well as the remaining four regions are: North-east, South, East and Vardar.

**Table 1: Regional dispersion of travel agencies in Macedonia**

<i>Region</i>	<i>Number of travel agencies</i>	<i>License A</i>	<i>License B</i>
<i>East</i>	12	8	4
<i>Skopje</i>	192	125	67
<i>Vardar</i>	10	7	3
<i>North-east</i>	29	7	22
<i>South-west</i>	54	14	40
<i>South-east</i>	21	9	12
<i>Polog</i>	48	10	38
<i>Pelagonia</i>	36	16	20
<i>Total</i>	402	196	206

**Source: Ministry of economy, Department of tourism and hospitality. Register of travel agencies, 2013**

Visits to cities across Europe is typical for Macedonian tourists during national holidays, high school and senior year excursions. Organized travel arrangements to visit European cities during the summer season in Macedonia are not offered on the market or may be found very rarely. National holidays, due to free days from work, represent an opportunity for making arrangements of trips abroad that last for several days. Macedonian national holidays are: New Year (December 31st), October 11th (National Uprising Day), September 8th (Independence Day), May 24th (Day of Slavic educators Ss. Cyril and Methodius), 1 May (Labour Day), Orthodox Easter (Resurrection of Christ) and March 8th (International Women's Day). Traditionally, during these national holidays, Macedonian tourists engage in mass tourist traveling. Trips that are organized during the national holidays last from two to fourteen days, but most frequently these tours last from three to five days. Regardless of the character of the national holiday, all organized arrangements for Prague are identical in their content.

High school excursions take place in September, October, November or April and last three to five days. Senior year excursions take place in May, last up to three weeks, a period during which students visit the most important historical, cultural and economic centers in Europe, including Prague (either as bus sightseeing tour or as organized one-night accommodation and tours with a local tour guide). As a means of transport in the implementation of package tours to Prague, tourist agencies prefer tourist class buses, and in the past there were flight arrangements.

Apart from organized trips to Prague, there are also individual trips to this destination. Tourists from Macedonia who individually visit Prague are motivated by the following reasons: visit to friends and relatives, business, sports, events, study opportunities, transit trips, etc. In order to meet such needs, a regular bus line was established from the Republic of Macedonia to the Czech Republic and vice versa, the bus departing from Skopje every Saturday at 08:30 and arriving in Prague at 09:00 pm the following day. TOTO is the carrier company. This line's established stopover is in the city of Brno, where it picks up and leaves passengers. The price of the bus tickets is 81 euro in one direction and 141 euro for a ticket in both directions. Tourists, travelling by bus by arrangement or individually from Macedonia to Prague, travel through the following countries: Serbia, Hungary and Slovakia. In regard to Macedonian citizens traveling to the Czech Republic, there are no visa restrictions, i.e. they may reside within the countries of the European Union for up to 90 days.

The type of tourism related to a visit to cities by tourists can be defined as urban or city tourism. Urban tourism is associated with tourist attractions of a city. Such type of tourism is characterized by mass participation, high consumption and relatively short stay. Seasonal concentration is not emphasized, and certain differences in the number of visitors during some months are more as a result of general tourist mobility in that time interval. It is believed that this type of tourism in relation to all other types has the most balanced arrangement of tourist trade [7]. Urban tourism is a phenomenon that fascinates and can be felt in everyday conversations of people who had visited another city and exchange their experience. For people who seek uniqueness in the places they visit, urban tourism is an integral part of modern life [8]. Urban tourism is slowly, but surely becoming a major source of employment, income and perspective for European cities. As the competition between cities to attract tourists grows, the willingness of organizations from the private and public sector working in the field of urban tourism becomes very important, too. Such organizations are constantly improving the hotel reservation systems, trade, information on tourism product and customer relationship management systems [9].

In Macedonia, there is a wide range of travel arrangements to visit European cities such as Prague, Vienna, Paris, Rome, Venice, Milan, Ljubljana, Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Sofia, Istanbul, Barcelona, Bucharest, Warsaw, Munich, Budapest, Athens, Krakow, Moscow, etc. It's a challenge to make a profile of Macedonian tourists who visit these urban centers, since the arrangements organized by the travel agencies in Macedonia are group arrangements and are used by tourists of different age, sex, social status, profession, etc.

Apart from the offers to visit European cities, there are travel agencies in Macedonia that organize travel arrangements for visiting urban centers on other continents, such as Beijing, Jerusalem, New York, Dubai, Havana, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and more.

**Table 2: Travel arrangements to visit selected cities for the “11th October” holiday 2013**

<i>Travel agency</i>	<i>Prague</i>	<i>Vienna</i>	<i>Budapest</i>	<i>Krakow</i>	<i>Istanbul</i>
<i>Falcon travel</i>	149€	139€	95€	159€	/
<i>Fibula</i>	159€	/	99€	/	109€
<i>Magelan travel</i>	149€	139€	105€	/	115€
<i>Nehar travel</i>	135€	/	99€	139€	129€
<i>Camellia travel</i>	125€	165€	155€	/	/
<i>Balkan turist</i>	140€	/	99€	/	125€

**Source: Official web pages of selected travel agencies, October 2013**

Table 2 presents the offers to visit selected cities for the holiday “11 October” by the travel agencies that organize visits to Prague. According to the price of the arrangements, we can observe that the cost for visiting Prague is higher than the cost of the arrangements for visiting cities like Budapest, Vienna and Istanbul, and it is lower than the price of the arrangements for visiting Krakow. The table does not consider arrangements for visiting Milan and Munich, which are more expensive for up to 30% than Prague arrangements. Considering this data, we can conclude that the travel arrangements for visiting Prague are neither with the lowest nor the highest price on the Macedonian tourist market for visiting European cities, and they may be considered “a happy medium”.

Our subject of interest are travel agencies that organize travel arrangements to visit Prague, and the research that was carried out has shown that there are 6 out of 196 travel agencies that have the right to organize such trips. Five out of six travel agencies are located in the Skopje region with seat of business in the city of Skopje (Falcon travel, Fibula, Magelan travel, Nehar travel and Camellia travel), and one travel agency is located in the Vardar region-based city of Kavadarci (Balkan turist). These travel agencies have a history of operating for several years continuously in the field of tourism; have already established business relationships with partners in the Czech Republic and all of the agencies belong to the group of small and medium enterprises (up to 10 employees). Although the organization of travel arrangements to Prague is done by a small number of travel agencies in Macedonia, it should be noted that most of the travel agencies provide a visit to Prague in their arrangements, or perform sales for a certain commission for the account of the organizers of the arrangements. On annual basis, there are organized visits to Prague for approximately 2000 Macedonian tourists who realize approximately 6000 overnight stays. According to the Czech Statistical Office, the number of tourists visiting Prague in 2012 was 5,394,283 tourists who realized 13,601,964 overnight stays [10]. According to such data, we may conclude that Macedonian tourists account for a very small proportion of the total number of tourists visiting Prague.

## **Analysis of the contents of package holidays to visit Prague during the “11th October” national holiday**

Lately, in the process of collecting data, the Internet has been increasingly used as a global computer network that can provide information from many fields of interest [11]. Today, it has become one of the most important sources of secondary data and a replacement for a number of traditional sources. Its greater use in research of tourism market consists in the ability to collect a variety of information ranging from individual businesses to the situation on the global market. The main sources of information used in this paper are the official websites of the travel agencies in Macedonia that organize visits to Prague in October, during the “11th October” national holiday. An analysis of the contents of the existing travel arrangements offered to Macedonian tourists has been done. Apart from the analysis of the official websites, informal interviews with employees and managers of these travel agencies were conducted. Informal interviews or unstructured interviews [12] are interviews without any pre-formulated questions, but the questions stem from the overall conversation and are being adapted to a specific situation. The questions vary from subject to subject, and final conclusion is drawn upon the basis of the answers provided.

Traveling, whether for business or pleasure, requires a certain type of arrangement [13]. In order for tourists not to waste their time and money for the organization of trips, they turn to travel agencies. Package holidays are the most important product that is created and marketed by a travel agency and it includes a set of services such as transportation, accommodation and additional services [14]. Organized trips are made on the basis of previously researched market and as a rule intended for a wide range of consumers, and in some circumstances for specific segments of the tourism market (retirees, high school and college students and others). In both cases, arrangement clients are not made known to the travel agency during the creation of the arrangement, thus the agency creates arrangements solely at its discretion and decisions, based on the experience gained, as well as the results of the market research and monitoring [15].

The first organized trips and offers to visit Prague as a tourist destination by travel agencies in Macedonia started ten years ago. Table 3 provides an overview of the Macedonian travel agencies that organize visit to Prague during the “11 October” national holiday in 2013. Table 3 points out the fact that the duration of organized arrangements for Prague may be 4 or 5 days, with 2 or 3 overnight stays respectively. The trip in one direction lasts 24 hours on average, which means that tourists spend 48 hours on the bus in both directions. Hotels providing accommodation for Macedonian tourists in Prague are usually with three stars, such as: Fortuna West and City, Golf, Albion, Top hotel, Olympia, Club hotel, etc., while in periods like New Year and Easter when visits by foreign tourists are increased, the vicinity of Prague is also considered a place for providing accommodation to Macedonian tourists (in a radius of 20-30 km). During this period, arrangements rates are higher by 20%, as opposed to arrangements organized during the year.

In Table 3, we note that two of the six existing arrangements in Prague in their offer include visits and tours of Vienna, one arrangement includes a one-day visit and tour of Dresden,

and one arrangement includes a visit to Vienna and Dresden. Only two of the arrangements in Prague don't have a combination of visiting another city, i.e. complete concentration and accommodation of tourists takes place in Prague.

**Table 3: Travel arrangements to visit Prague during the “11th October” national holiday 2013**

<i>Travel agency</i>	<i>Arrangement</i>	<i>Price</i>	<i>Period, days and nights</i>	<i>Web pages</i>
<i>Falcon travel</i>	Prague	149€	09-13.10.2013 5 days, 3 nights	falcon.com.mk
<i>Fibula</i>	Prague and Vienna	159€	10-14.10.2013 5 days, 3 nights	fibula.com.mk
<i>Magelan travel</i>	Prague, Dresden and Vienna	149€	09-13.10.2013 5 days, 3 nights	magelantravel.com.mk
<i>Nehar travel</i>	Prague and Vienna	135€	10-13.10.2013 4 days, 2 nights	nehartravel.com.mk
<i>Camellia travel</i>	Prague and Dresden	125€	10-14.10.2013 4 days, 2 nights	camelliatravel.com.mk
<i>Balkan tourist</i>	Prague	140€	10-14.10.2013 4 days, 2 nights	balkanturist.com.mk

**Source: Official web pages of selected travel agencies, October 2013**

All arrangements to visit Prague are on bed-and-breakfast basis. Tourists during their stay in Prague have time for sightseeing and leisure activities. Travel agencies also provide visits to discoes and nightclubs in the evening hours, and most often visited are: Honey Bunny (Ocko), Yes club, Duplex, Mecca, Mish Mash, Costel, etc. The most often visited beer saloons are Staropramen, Beer Factory and others. If we analyze package holidays to Prague, one can come to a conclusion that all arrangements during the entire trip specify official escort provided by the travel agency. All travel agencies in their offers include sightseeing of Prague. Sightseeing is performed by local licensed tour guide and includes the following facilities and places in the city: Old Town, Charles Bridge, Maltese Square, the monument of Charles IV, King's road, the Jewish Quarter, Paris Street, Old Town Square with the Astronomical clock - Orloj, Loreto church, Municipal House, Dusty Tower, the National Museum, Prague castle, the Cathedral of St.Vito and other. The sightseeing lasts 4-5 hours. Local guides present the beauty of Prague to Macedonian tourists in Serbian or Croatian language, because the city doesn't provide a licensed tour guide for Macedonian language. Since Macedonia in the past was part of former Yugoslavia, language barrier in understanding the full presentation of guidelines exists only for generations of tourists born after 1991. If one looks at the pricing arrangements for Prague, a conclusion can be drawn that they range from 125 to 159 euros per person. The price of the arrangement includes transportation, three-star hotel accommodation on bed-and-breakfast basis and a licensed tour escort during the trip and city tours with a local licensed guide.

Table 4 presents additional activities offered in arrangements, such as: Vltava river cruise, dinner in a traditional Czech restaurant or beer saloon and an excursion to Karlovy Vary, excursion to Dresden. The small number of additional activities points out the fact that there is a need to increase the number of additional activities and to expand the offer during the stay of tourists in Prague.

**Table 4: Additional activities offered in package holidays to visit Prague during the “11th October” national holiday 2013**

<i>Travel agency</i>	<i>Vltava river cruise</i>	<i>Dinner in traditional restaurant or beer saloon</i>	<i>Karlovy Vary</i>
<i>Falcon travel</i>	10€	25€	20€
<i>Fibula</i>	15€	/	20€
<i>Magelan travel</i>	25€	/	25€
<i>Nehar travel</i>	15€	25€	25€
<i>Camellia travel</i>	/	/	/
<i>Balkan turist</i>	10€	25€	20€

**Source: Official web pages of selected travel agencies, October 2013**

Vltava river cruise lasts one to two hours (depending on whether lunch or dinner is included) and takes place in the downtown area. From informal interviews that were conducted with travel agencies staff, it was found that about 70% of tourists participate in such cruises. Prices for Vltava river cruises depend on the travel agency and usually range from 10-25 €.

Dinner at a traditional Czech restaurant takes two to three hours and usually involves the following menu: appetizer, soup, main dish - goulash or pork shanks and Medovník (Czech honey cake) as dessert. About 60% of Macedonian tourists visit a traditional Czech restaurant during their visit to Prague. Traditional Czech restaurants that are often part of the offer by Macedonian travel agencies are Obcanska Plovarna, U Pavouka, U Fleku, etc.

An optional visit, in addition to arrangements for Prague, involves a full day trip to Karlovy Vary, famous spa in the Czech Republic and the favorite spot for European aristocracy. During the excursion, the tourist groups are led by local and licensed guides. This optional excursion is most interesting to Macedonian tourists and it involves 80-90% of tourists, depending on the type of groups.

If one calculates the prices of all additional activities, a conclusion may be drawn that Macedonian tourists spend 55 to 75 euro on optional outings. A more specific research should be carried out in order to obtain information on total costs that tourists have during their visit to Prague.

## Conclusion

Macedonian tourists have a great interest in visiting European cities, usually during national holidays. The results of the research in this paper show that travel agencies publish travel arrangements to Prague (as part of their offer) on their official websites one month prior to the trip. Package holidays to Prague, compared to arrangements to visit other European capitals, according to arrangement prices, are neither the most expensive nor the cheapest. Such arrangements usually take place over a period of four to five days and include two or three nights with breakfast. Most arrangements involve a combined visit to Vienna or Dresden. Due to the short period of time, the number of additional activities for tourists during their stay is limited and includes a Vltava river cruise, dinner at a traditional restaurant and a visit to Karlovy Vary. All arrangements to visit Prague involve city tour with a local guide explaining the beauty of the city in Serbian or Croatian language. It is advisable in future that a licensed and local tourist guide in Macedonian language is provided. The number of travel agencies in Macedonia that organize visit to Prague is small, but these travel agencies cooperate with other agencies acting as intermediaries offering arrangements for a commission. The exact number of Macedonian tourists who visit Prague is not available in the official statistics. From the informal interviews with managers and employees of six travel agencies that bring tourists to this city, an unofficial number of 2,000 tourists who visit Prague on a yearly basis was obtained. Also, there isn't any official data regarding the Macedonian tourists' consumption in Prague, but the estimates of travel agencies show that the consumption amounts to more than 60 Euro per day. Extensive research needs to be carried out in order to obtain such information. From informal interviews, we learned that the travel agencies from Macedonia have long and fruitful cooperation with their partners from Prague, and they are satisfied with the professional attitude. The difficulties travel agencies from Macedonia are faced with are related to border-crossing with Serbia and Hungary during the holidays, due to the increase in traffic, which prolongs the travelling time.

One thing is certain, travel agencies in Macedonia offering trips to Prague largely contribute to the popularization of this tourist destination. They continuously advertise, informing potential tourists about the attractiveness of the city and, of course, providing high quality of the organization and implementation of such trips, thus positioning the image of Prague on the Macedonian market.

## Literature

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