BEST PRACTICES IN GREEK RURAL TOURISM

BUNE PRACTICI IN TURISMUL RURAL GRECESC

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Abstract: *Greece is the ideal country for tourism due to the mild climate and the variety of scenary, together with the largest biodiversity in Europe. The contribution of tourism (direct and indirect impact) to the Greek economy represents 18,2% of GDP. The "hotel and restaurant" sector represents half of tourism activities and directly contributes 10,4% to GDP. Taking into account international tourist, which in 2008, totaling EUR 11 military, this is equivalent of EUR 1200 for each resident, placing Greece in the fifth position in the world tourism. It is estimated that 840.000 people are employed directly and indirectly in the tourism sector, 19% of the workforce.*

Key words*: Greece, tourism, rural tourism, best practices in tourism*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism is a tourism development or activity that respects and helps preserve, in the longterm natural, cultural and social resources and contributes positively and equitably to the economic development and general benefit of those individuals who live, work and stay in the locality. In Greece, to ensure sustainable tourism follow three basic principles: protection of the environment, economic viability, social equity. The most viable form of tourism to obtain sustainability in the rural areas is rural tourism. The key challenges for its development are: preserving and developing resources by setting limits on their usage, developing a balanced tourism activity, both temporally and spatially, sharing equitably local revenue derived from tourism, convincing tourism actors of the economic viability to invest in rural tourism. In Greece, the briefly the issues related to the local development of rural tourism are: infrastructura and capital development, accessibility issues and transport

policy, choice of sites for development, measuring the impact of all projects: environmental, cultural and social.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This paper represents an analysis of rural tourism sector in Greece, the analysis made in a project which tried to adopt best practices in Greek rural tourism in Romania. According to the statistics there are 1500 businesses in 45 prefectures of Greece that are dedicated to rural tourism. These companies are: hotels and guesthouses, restaurants, manufacturing companies of tradițional products and the centres that hosting outdoor, sports, nature lover's activities and local events as well. Also according to our statistics, Epirus, Thessaly and Peloponnese are the regions of Greece with the biggest investment activity in lodgings, restaurants, manufacturing units of tradițional products and sports activities centres. In Greece, 35,7% of all rural hotels provide only accommodation, 46,2% offer breakfast as well, 6,7% bed, breakfast and meals, and 1,4% offer room with use of a kitchen. There are many individual companies, farmers or independent persons who work in the rural areas in Greece. Many of them own family business and they lack the know-how and the training to adjust their company to the needs of the tourism market

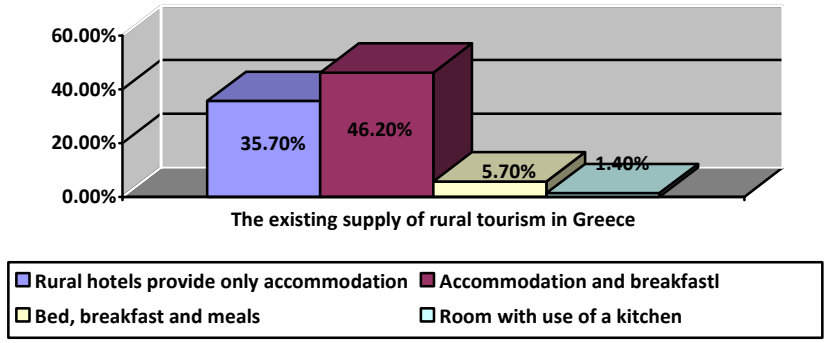
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Tourism is an important sector of the Greek economy and a priority in the național agenda. Greece has rich cultural and natural heritage which is an important asset for the development of tourism. The challenge of current tourism planning in Greece is to develop a strategy which offers opportunities for investment and employment but also respects and enhances the country's rich endowment in the long term and contributes to the broader development strategy of the country. Greece has developed a 10-year strategy plan in which the main objectives are: upqrading, diversifyinq and enriching the quality of our tourism product. Tourism is developed in coherence with the național strategy for sustainable development. The strategy will contribute to: a new handling of Greece and a stronger positioning of the destination internationally, capitalizing on the opportunities that exist in order to diversify the product, through the

development of special types of tourism such as wellness, cultural, MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions), nautical, agrotourism and over all rural tourism, promoting Greece as an opportunity for investment.

Figure 1

Existing capacities in Greek rural tourism



The strategic guidelines for the greek rural tourism sector arise from the following reasons: which are the opportunities that could be exploited, taking advantage of the strengths and taking into consideration the weaknesses of the sector and which are the existing weaknesses that should be reduced and the threats that could be counteracted? The european sector is characterised by a great number of destinations with a consolidated position in the market and by many new destinations that are emerging with competitive offers. Greece has the basic resources to have success in this sector. Notwithstanding, the rural tourism industry is consent and implements a marketing plan able to face the great issues that are affecting the sector: to attract more tourists, to increase their average expenditure, to increase their average length of stay. Greece has the opportunity to create a powerful rural offer based on a differentiated concept, related to the most famous features of the country: Greek culture (lifestyle, hospitality, customs, etc.), olives, vineyards, picturesque villages, and so on. For that reason, the market goalforthe rural tourism of Greece is the following: establish a highly differentiated rural tourism sector based on the authentic Greek lifestyle. A key decision of the marketing plan is the identificantion of the targets, by defining the segments of the demand that should beattracted. The strategic targets for the rural sector of Greece are defined

considering the following aspects: visitor's quality, evolution, average spending, adequacy to the greek offer. The target group of Greece is constituted by those customers willing to experience undiscovered and alternative countryside destinations and authentic products, based on tradition and lifestyle. These are customers: with a "creative" mindset and forward-thinking attitudes: when travelling, they prefer to elude crowded destinations, searching for authenticity, for intimacy, for nostalgia - a desire to "go home", searching for human contact, curious with rural lifestyles or reaffirming tradițional values, desiring for new experiences (ridinga horse, observingfarm practices, visiting old villages, cooking etc.), health conscious (a desire for home-grown food), desiring to discover unspoiled landscapes, gastronomy, sports on nature. The description ofthese customers matches the profile of the so-called "creative" segment. The "creative" segment is composed by those customers occupied in professions requiring ingenious and inventive resources: lawyers, designers, marketing managers, advisers, etc. Because of their profession and their personal gratification, they are socially integrated, internationally conscious and used to latest technologies; they are fashion awake and they like to be informed on last trends; often they are the trend-setters of their reference group. Their motivation when travelling (even if it is not the main motivation, it is always present) is to explore countries, understand cultures, appreciate local traditions and taste gastronomies. This motivation is so strong that travelling is actually a part of their year planning. They are wealthy and willing to spend time and money to travel. Before they travel, they consult various sources (internet, friends, travel guides, magazines, internațional press, etc.). They have already been in well-known and cliche destinations and they want to discover mo re and unsaturated destinations, often just to *be* those who "discover it" among their friends. With the objective of rationalizing the marketing efforts it is necessary to identify a priority among geographical markets. As a conclusion to this assessment, the two markets, for example, that we have the highest priority for the Greek rural tourism are: Great Britain and Germany. On a second level, some of the countries with high priority are: Belgium, Italy, Netherlands, France, USA,Russia, etc. It is relevant to notice that, within each country, there are quite great differences in regional terms. A regional approach is extremely relevant when planning the promotion and the commercialisation of tourism; just three regions produce almost 30% of the European Countryside trips:

Central England, West and South Holland. When addressing Germany, it should be considered that more than 40% of the total rural tourism trips are generated by 2 regions: Nordrhein-Westfalen and Baden-Wurttemberg. Central England generates almost 45% of the Great Britain Countryside trips. When addressing Netherlands, it should be considered that almost 50% of the total rural tourism trips are generated by l region: West Holland.
Considering the conditions of the competitive set and the potențial of Greece, a system of marketing objectives and strategies are set in order to achieve the market goal. Develop the product based on themed experiences, qualitv, the main issues of the sector are related to the need of continuous improvement in terms of organization of the rural tourism offer, enhancement of supporting infrastructure, training of human resources, quality of rural accommodations, variety of experiences based on Greek customs and traditions, etc. With regard to increase the presence on internet and in intermediaries' portfolios, most of rural tourists book in advance, being Internet the main channel followed by travel agencies and direct booking. Additionally, internet is also the main source of information, followed at a distance by recommendation of friends and travel agencies.The main strategies are: product related strategies, sales and distribution strategies, communication strategy. The product related strategies is the attractiveness/competitiveness methodology is a useful tool, in order to define the product market in which to focus the efforts of development, it considers: the attractiveness of the product markets, based on the volume of present demand, its prospected evolution and the profitability of the sector: average tourists' expenditure, extension of the tourism season, geographical concentration of markets, etc, and the competitiveness, resulting by the 5 competitive forces (rivalry among destinations, threats of new entrances and substitute products, bargaining power of demand and supply). Product development strategies are directed mainly to the enhancement of the competitiveness: the development of rural tourism experiences through the creation of a set "the best Greek rural tourism experiences" constitutes a key element of the value offered to the customer: wine and olive oii routes, Greek temples routes, gastronomy courses, trails of mythology, etc. A second strategy for rural tourism in Greece is about l' improve the general organization.Greece is improving the organization level of the sector by developing a rural association to helpthe "family run" establishments on aspects such as quality, promotion and

poşitioning. Clusters were created to structure thematic areas based on unique concepts (heritage, nature, traditions, gastronomy, etc.). A third strategy is increase quality and specialization of tourist services. Greece is increasing the overall quality of the rural tourism offer. On the one side, aims to improve the quality of accommodation, activities, restaurants and other related services. On the other side, the creation of human resource programmes has the objective of enhancing the quality of services provided by the countryside entrepreneurs and human resources in terms of skills, languages knowledge, and quality and customer attention culture.

In terms of specific products, the development of wineries and wine routes is interesting since the country produce high quality wines. Moreover, there is an increasing interest for gastronomy vacations amongtravellers with high expenditure potențial.

The development of olive oii routes is also among the priorities, since Greece has a great potențial to compete in this market. The demand forthis kind of products is still very specific and limited, but it is expected to grown in the near future.

The sales and distribution strategies in Greece are: as internet and travel agencies are the main booking channels for rural tourism, specific strategies have been identified to increase the presence on the web and in the portfolios of intermediaries. The rural tourism of Greece has increased the sales by tourism intermediaries in source markets, therefore a series of actions has be designed, utilising the potențial of internet and other new types of technology systems to facilitate the commercialization by trade. With the aim of makingthe intermediaries suggest offers to theirs customers including Greek rural tourism, a recommendation programme need to be developed, by organizing familiarization trips and by offering benefits and advantages to encourage them to become specialists in selling the "rural Greece". The Greek rural tourism goal is to facilitate more direct bookings through internet by the customers. Within this frame, a uniform system for allowing reservations and a system to organize the vacation ("do-it-yourself travel kit") need to be developed, incorporating the latesttechnological applications to facilitate the travel planning of the potențial independent tourists.

Currently, Greece is about to be known for its rural tourism offer in internațional markets. According to a study elaborated for the Ministry of Tourism of Greece, the bold figures of the rural tourism market in Europe

are identified as following: more than 18 million internațional arrivals realized by Europeans in 2008, approximately 7% of the total internațional arrivals, business volume over 13.000 million euros, mean expenditure between 600€ and 700€ per trip and around 70€ per day, rowth around 20% in number of trips between 2000 and 2008: average annual growth rate of 3 - 4% and annual increase in spending per trip slightly greater than 1%. The communication strategy is directed at creating awareness amongtarget segments in the selected geo-markets and at being one of the destinations considered when tourists plan rural tourism vacations. That's why a group of communication strategies have been defined for consumers, trade (intermediaries) and media. Following the trend of increasing interest in high value experiences involving discovering, learning and contribution in local traditions, many specialized magazines, thematic sections, specific TV programmes, etc. have been created. Together with other media directed to the "creative customers" described above, they are vehicles we use tp communicate efficiently and effectively the rural tourism sector of Greece to the target segments. Internet is the main source of Information for rural tourists. Attractive, organized and clear information, including itineraries and routes, maps and details on type of experiences and a sophisticated system of links to access the accommodation offer is been provided through the web, for facilitating the choice and the travel planning of the potențial tourists. The references from recognized opinion leaders and testimonials are very important, in orderto generate positive recommendations on specialized press/ media and on the internet.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The landscape's beauty and uniqueness gives Greece its competitive advantage. In the various regions, the tourist can experience different sceneries, climate, colours, gastronomy, customs, etc. The Greek mountains cover 70% of Greece's total area, while the şea is always close.
2. Gastronomy is one of the main assets of the Greek tourism offer. Wine routes are already a feature of the tourism product but still many things are to be done, especially in terms of promotion.

3. Greece has a rich Orthodox religious heritage: Greece is full of beautiful and invaluable churches and monasteries that cover a wide range of historical periods.
4. A Rural vacation in Greece can be also associated with the experience of local traditions and daily life in tradițional villages (central village square, church, "kafenio"- Greek typical cafe of a village, tavern, etc.).
5. Tradițional customs and the local open festivals take place across all Greek regions throughout the year and are open to the public. They are about gastronomy (wine, cheese, local tastes, etc.) ancient theatre, dance festivals.
6. Greece is undiscovered and less exploited than other Mediterranean places. Greek rural areas still manages to preserve their tradițional and authentic character.

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