

THE ROLE OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ALBA COUNTY

Scientific paper

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Abstract

The travel agencies play an important role in tourism development. Alba County can be considered an important touristic destination in Romania.

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to underline the role of travel agencies in sustaining tourism development in Alba County.

Design – A survey was conducted to find the opinion of these companies managers regarding the role they plays in the valorisation of touristic potential.

Methodology – The survey that was carried out was going to be a quantitative type of research. The means of communication with the investigated unit: interviews based on a questionnaire administered by the operators.

The primary data was collected out of a sample of 16 travel agencies operating in Alba county, from a total number of 20s. The sample for the target group has been identified using purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling method was applied to travel agencies managers' participants because this sample was considered to meet the objectives of the research, though it did not represent the whole population. The questionnaires were administered by face to face interviews with representatives of the participating travel agencies at the Albac Tourism Fair held between 6th-8th September 2013, but also at the agencies' headquarters.

Approach – Travel agencies operating both locally as well as nationally and internationally, should be encouraged to provide tourism products in the county. It is necessary to find solutions to improve the quality of tourism services in Alba County.

Findings – According to the acquired results, the most important factors affecting the implication of travel agencies in Alba County tourism development are the insufficient development of tourism resources in the area, lack of financial resources and poor general infrastructure. Less important are considered to be laws and excessive bureaucracy.

Originality – The paper presents the results of the first research of this kind on the travel agencies from Alba County

Keywords travel agencies, tourism development, tourists

INTRODUCTION

Regarded as an economic and social activity, tourism represents, through its content and role, a distinct field of activity, a highly important component of the economic and social life in a growing number of countries, and implicitly in our own country.

Tourism is a specific phenomenon in modern civilization and it is deeply rooted in the life of the society and, as such, it has influenced its evolution. Thus, being responsive to the dynamic changes in contemporary civilization, tourism evolves under their impact, joining the general process of development. Tourism also acts as a stimulating factor for the progress and evolution given the vast human and material potential engaged in its development and given the beneficial effects on the area of interference.

The tourism and hospitality industry is currently one of the most important industries worldwide. The Alba County takes full advantage of highly favorable and more than adequate conditions for the development of different forms of tourism.

This context encompasses the efforts of specialists to rigorously and scientifically define the categorist system integrated to tourism, its interdependencies with other parts of the economy and to quantify its effects.

In Alba County, tourism is seen by the local government as an opportunity for economic recovery and also as a chance to reveal - for Romanian as well as for foreign tourists - the unique and specific characteristics of the region.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In many developing countries, tourism is widely accepted as a way to contribute to economic development, job opportunities and foreign revenues. Due to these factors tourism worldwide has developed rapidly in the last decades. The advantages of tourism and the live examples from different parts of the world encourage countries with adequate resources to find out the ways of conducting efforts aiming sustainability in this area because sustainability can be easily connected to almost all kinds and scales of tourism activities and environments. On the other hand, tourism in developing countries is also considered as a growing environmental concern because of its affect on seasonality, lack of suitable infrastructures and planning.

The travel agencies are defined as a firm qualified to arrange for travel-related retail services on behalf of various tourism industry principals¹.

Analyze of current literature shows that there are many studies limited on travel agencies in a regional area².

Other studies have also investigated several different aspects of travel agencies, such as information technology needs³, travel agent's role in family decision-making⁴, advertising strategies⁵, the more effective use of relationship marketing⁶ and the selection attributes of travel agencies⁷.

¹ Goldblatt, J., Nelson, K. S." *The International Dictionary of Event Management*", Softcover, 2001 , ISBN 978-0-471-39453-2.

² Duke, C. R., Persia, M. A.," *Effects of distribution channel level on tour purchasing attributes and information sources*". *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 2 (2), 1993, pp. 37-56.

³ Bennett, M. M., " Information technology and travel agency: A customer service perspective", *Tourism Management*, 14, 1993, pp. 259-266.

⁴ Michie, D. A. , Sullivan, G. L.,. "The role(s) of the international travel agent in the travel decision process of client families". *Journal of Travel Research*, 29 (2), 1990, pp. 30-38.

⁵ Laskey, H. A., Seaton, B. ,Nicholls, J. A. F.," Effects of strategy and pictures in travel agency advertising" *Journal of Travel Research*, 32 (4), 1994, pp. 13-19.

⁶ Richter, P., ". Should travel companies be selling on-line?". *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 2 (3), 1996, pp. 277-285.

⁷ Persia, M. A. & Gitelson, R. J., "The difference among travel agency users in the importance ratings of agency service features". *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 1 (4), 1993, pp. 77-98.

Authors like Persia and Gitelson⁷ was developed many studies and reviewed a wide range of different studies on selection attributes of travel agencies.

In addition to basic service the literature suggested: *additional services and complementary services* provides additional utility, one of the key factors that differentiate one travel agency from another⁷.

The role of travel agencies in tourism development could be synthetized as follows:

- Travel agencies have a great power to influence and direct consumer demand comparing to other industries;
- Travel agencies are not just intermediaries, they act like as an interface between supply and different segments of demand;
- Modern travel agencies have many different forms and very complex relationships.

2. TOURIST TRAFFIC IN ALBA COUNTY¶

Making the most of the county's touristic potential, through the tourism forms mentioned above, can be expressed synthetically through statistical indicators already mentioned: touristic accommodation capacity, arrivals and overnight stays. The table below renders the evolution of these indicators between 2000-2013.

Table 1: **Touristic accommodation capacity and touristic activity in Alba county**

Years	Touristic accommodation capacity				Arrivals (thousands)	Variation %*	Overnight stays (thousands)	Variation %*
	Exist- ing	Variati- on %*	In use (thousa- nds)	Variati- on %*				
2000	1.641	100	484,9	100	49,3	100	86,2	100
2001	1.584	- 3,5	505,1	+ 4,2	59,9	+ 21,5	95,7	+ 11,0
2002	1.559	-5,0	418,9	- 13,6	48,6	- 1,4	95,3	+ 10,6
2003	1.397	-14,9	401,0	- 18,3	52,4	+ 6,3	98,5	+ 14,3
2004	1.276	-22,2	377,0	- 22,3	48,2	- 2,2	90,1	+ 4,5
2005	1.179	-28,2	362,0	- 25,3	49,0	- 0,6	94,6	+ 9,7
2006	1.544	- 5,9	489,4	+ 0,9	50,6	+ 2,6	103,2	+ 19,7
2007	1.830	+ 11,5	558,8	+ 15,2	54,1	+ 9,7	117,7	+ 36,5
2008	1.828	+ 11,4	588,6	+ 21,4	51,3	+ 4,1	111,1	+ 28,9
2009	2.137	+ 30,2	627,8	+ 29,5	44,3	- 10,1	100,8	+ 16,9
2010	2.109	+ 28,5	619,5	+ 27,8	47,8	- 3,0	101,1	+ 17,3
2011	3.027	+ 84,4	758,9	+ 56,5	78,4	+ 59	155,7	+ 80,6
2012	3.268	+ 99,1	1024,4	+ 111,1	95,19	+ 93	206,3	+ 139,3
2013	3.656	+ 122,7	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: <https://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>

* This percent data presents a decrease (-) or an increase (+) compared to the reference year 2000

The touristic operational accommodation capacity indicator (thousands of places / days) followed a similar pattern of evolution to that of the existing tourist accommodation capacity - increasing in 2012 by 111,1% compared to the year 2000.

Tourist arrivals in this county between 2000-2012 experienced fluctuations practically from one year to another. In 2009 and 2010 the arrivals, as number of tourists, were lower than in 2000. Between 2000 - 2010, the highest level of arrivals was reached in 2001. However, since 2011, the number of tourist arrivals has increased compared to 2001, thus, at the end of 2012 it was almost double compared to the base year (2000).

In the case of **the overnight stays** indicator, in 2004 the lowest values were observed, and the highest were recorded in 2011 and 2012, representing an increase of 80.6% and 139.3% respectively, compared to the reference year 2000.

The existing tourist accommodation capacity indicator (in number of places) in Alba County recorded its lowest value in 2005 - the analyzed period being between 2000 and 2013 - representing only 71.8% of the existing level in 2000. After this 5 year decline, there has been a significant increase, thus, in the year 2013, the existing tourist accommodation capacity was 122,7% higher compared to that of the year 2000.

3. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted in order to investigate the role of travel agencies in tourism development in Alba County. The descriptive research has been performed through the completion of 16 questionnaires with representatives of travel agencies.

The primary data were collected out of a sample of 16 travel agencies operating in Alba county, from a total number of 20 such agencies. The sample for the target group has been identified using purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling method was applied to travel agencies managers because this sample was considered to meet the objectives of the research, though it did not represent the whole population.

The question of the research is to find what's the role of travel agencies in tourism development in Alba County.

General objectives of the survey were as follows:

- O1. Analyzing the reputation of travel agencies
- O2. Measurement and evaluation of the activities of travel agencies
- O3. Outlining the customer profile for the services of travel agencies
- O4. Analysis of the communication strategy used by travel agencies.

By conducting this type of research the authors planned to offer a high degree of accuracy, relevance and also representativeness of the data.

The data gathered through the survey were analysed by computer based statistical program, SPSS 16.

4. RESULTS

Most travel agencies operating in Alba county are small agencies or subsidiaries of national tourism agencies, **with an average of 4 employees.**

Out of the surveyed travel agencies, 81% are **tour operators** and 19% of them are **retailers**. 56% of the investigated agencies are N.A.T.A. members (National Association of Travel Agencies).

Regarding **the range of products offered** by the surveyed travel agencies, 100% of them offer seaside trips and holidays to the mountains, 93.8 % of these offer spa treatments, 81.2% sell transport tickets and 75% offer city breaks.

Regarding the structure of travel agency staff, 81% of the total are managers or administrators and travel agents. Among the surveyed agencies, according to what the representatives stated, 43.33% of the employees have been specially trained.

Regarding the languages known by the agency staff, in all of them there are employees who speak English, 62.5% of all agencies work with employees who know French, 18.8% of them employed staff who know German and 12.5% know Hungarian and Spanish.

Among the difficulties encountered by travel agencies management in employing staff the most frequently mentioned were the lack of language learning.

In the opinion of travel agency representatives, the following travel agencies are the main competitors on the market: Parallel 45, Eximtur, Colibri Tour, Ana Travel, Albena Tour, Eurolines. All of the above mentioned have branches in Alba County. Their activity consists mainly of selling outgoing tourism services and less in attracting tourists to Alba - incoming tourism. However, there are newly established agencies that succeed in promoting and attracting tourists to the county's main tourist destinations.

One objective of the study was to assess the opinion that the representatives of travel agencies have regarding the degree to which different factors affect the role of the agency in tourism development. The importance of these factors was measured by a five level scale from 1- Unimportant to 5 – Very important. According to the acquired results, the most important factors are the insufficient development of tourism resources in the area, lack of financial resources and poor general infrastructure. Less important are considered to be laws and excessive bureaucracy (Tabel 2).

Table 2: **The importance of the factors which are influencing the role of travel agencies in tourism development**

Factors	The average importance
Poor valorification of the tourism resources in the area	2,78
Lack of financial resources	2,69
Poor development of the general infrastructure	2,57
Lack of qualified staff in the area	2,57
Insufficinet promotion	2,00
Unwiedly legislation and bureaucracy	1,92

Moreover, according to representatives of travel agencies, the most important factors affecting the tourism development and the region development are supporting investors and other factors related to the tourism offer. The least important factor is considered to be the increasing cooperation between travel agencies and tourist accommodation structures (Table 3).

Table 3: **The importance of some aspects for developing the agency's activity and region**

Factors	The average importance
Supporting the investors with funds/facilities from the government and the EU	2,50
Offering souvenirs and traditional products	2,46
The existence of specific services such as financial services, commercial services etc.	2,38
Increasing competitiveness through the introduction of modern technologies	2,30
Creation of consultancy centers and infrastructure for business	2,28
Cooperation with public authorities	2,28
Increasing the quality of local products and services	1,85
The range of services offered	1,84
Increasing professional and managerial skills through training	1,84
Increasing cooperation between travel agencies and accomodation structures	1,78

Most travel agencies use both direct and indirect distribution channels.

Using a constant sum scale, the survey subjects were asked to divide 100 points between the following categories of tourists, according to their share in the total of agency clients.

Tourists who use the services of travel agents in order to purchase packages are mostly families with children and business people. Furthermore, of relatively high importance are the tourists travelling in groups or just transiting the area. The services of travel agencies are less used by tourists who travel just for a weekend (Table 4).

Table 4: **The typology of tourists**

Typology of tourists	%
Families with children	28,57
Businessmen	27,57
Organized groups of tourists	13,57
People passing through the area	9,85
Young married couples	3,57
Tourists spending their week-ends	2,57

Most foreign tourists arriving in the county through travel agencies are from countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain, Holland, France, Switzerland, Hungary. An important part of them may be represented by Romanian people working in those countries and arriving in Romania to spend their vacation here.

Most tourists using a travel agency's services purchase holidays to destinations such as Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Romania, Croatia, Egypt, Tunisia. The average length of stay for Romanian tourists who use the services of travel agencies is 7 days. Foreign tourists arriving in Romania prevalently choose Prahova Valley, Moldavia, Maramures, Transalpine.

Others research results show the main forms of tourism practiced by tourists that have visited Alba County (Table5).

Table 5: **Forms of tourism**

Forms of tourism	%
Leisure Tourism	61,6
Balneary and Medical Tourism	16,6
Weekend tourism	8,11
Rural tourism and Agrotourism	5,33
Transit Tourism	3,44
Cultural and Religious Tourism	2,55
Business Tourism	1,77
Adventure Tourism	0,44
Gastronomic Tourism	-

Leisure tourism is placed on the top of hierarchy by 61,6% of tourism agency and is followed by balneary and medical tourism, weekend tourism and rural tourism.

According to the information gathered from representatives of surveyed travel agencies, incoming tourists mostly visit Alba Iulia Fortress, Sebes Valley, Transalpine, Cheile Rimetului, Apuseni Mountains, Aiud Valley (Rimetea).

When questioned " What would you recommend for a first time tourist to Alba County to visit?", the representatives of travel agencies most frequently answered: Alba Carolina Fortress, Rimet Monastery and Valley, Frumoasei Valley and Transalpine, Glacier from Scărișoara and other sights in Apuseni Mountains. For a winter stay, the representatives of travel agencies recommend Arieșeni and Șureanu ski area.

When asked "Where do tourists know your agency from?" The representatives of all travel agencies responded that they know from "friends, relatives, acquaintances", 84.6% answered "tourist leaflets, brochures or catalogs" and 76.9% recalled "the Internet".

Among the promotional activities used by travel agencies the following are included: advertising (leaflets, brochures, catalogs, radio advertising), online advertising and promotion by the sales force (direct communication).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Travel agencies operating both locally as well as nationally and internationally, should be encouraged to provide tourism products in the county.

It is necessary to improve cooperation between all those involved in the tourism activity in Alba County, so that they may offer high quality travel products to address the needs of tourists.

It is necessary to find solutions **to improve the quality of tourism services** in Alba County. As shown in the analysis and interpretation of collected data in the surveys, these solutions must particularly target:

- better staff training in the field, both in terms of the accumulation of expertise as well as acquiring knowledge of more than one foreign language; also very important is the training and development of both cultural and historical tourism guides - as well as mountaineering.
- offering additional services and several leisure options to tourists, so it will improve their level of satisfaction with the chosen destination, but will also help to increase the average length of stay.
- easy access to information for tourists, by placing in key tourist areas Tourism Info points or activating existing ones.
- properly signaling attractions.
- creating high-potential tourism products, specific to the touristic micro-regions of the county.

Defining these tourism products must start from the main attributes of such products and the characteristics (needs) of the tourist target segment.

Improving existing tourism products as well as creating new ones must take account of demographic changes among tourists and the implications these have on their preferences and motivations regarding the trip:

- young people increasingly seek more active forms of tourism such as adventure tourism
- adults and older people seek rest and recreation tourism (*wellness, spa, medical tourism*) as well as cultural and historical tourism

- an increasing number of people are *travelling with their pets*, and various studies show that their loyalty to a particular accommodation facility is heavily influenced by the approval of the pets in the rooms
- tourists increasingly use *the Internet* to get information on tourist destinations and booking (60% of reservations were made online in 2010)
- concern for the *environment* and its protection
- recommendations / suggestions / opinions expressed in tourist blogs or on social networking sites / profile forums - tend to have a growing influence on the choice of a certain tourist destination
- main motivating factors in choosing a particular tourist destinations tend to be represent by sustainable tourism and strong brands of tourist destinations.

The creation of new tourism products that can start from the potential of attracting tourists with certain cultural events (The Girls' Fair on Găina Mountain, the Dacian Fortresses Festival, The Dilema Veche Festival, The Alba Jazz festival or from the cultural and historical potential (other than that of the city of Alba Iulia) insufficiently developed, known and promoted.

Moreover, the gastronomic tourism is a form of tourism that can be developed, given the extremely favorable tourist feedback regarding dining services and the culinary specialties.

Organizational and time restrictions provide some limitations to this study:

- The research aimed to identify only certain aspects. The objectives of the study are predominantly quantitative, identifying and characterizing different situations and phenomena without solving problems: it makes the purpose limited;
- Statistical representativeness of the used samples was influenced by the imposed time limits, the primary data was not collected from all the touristic seasons that can be recorded in the county;

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