Spa and wellness tourism in tackling with seasonality of tourism services in South-Western Bulgaria.

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Abstract: This report examines the problems caused by seasonality of some classic tourist services prevailing in the tourism profile in South-Western Bulgaria. Options have been considered to solve or minimize the problem by focusing on spa and wellness services. The findings could help tourism organizations and/or owners and managers of tourism companies to optimize their activities in the medium and long term perspective.

Keywords: spa tourism, wellness tourism, seasonality issues, development strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern tourism is a trillion-dollar-multinational business. Its issues and weaknesses are highly profitable to explore. This research is dealing with a traditionally problematic issue, especially influential on Bulgarian tourism - seasonality. This field of research is practically endless, as soon as new attractions for tourists, new programs and services are discovered every day. Some ideas, implemented here, will surely help managers and tourist companies in optimizing their yearly-round business programs in a medium and long term perspective.

2. METHODS OF RESEARCH

Methods, used in this study, are statistical and empirical. We rely on statistics to discover the problems and tendencies from previous periods until now. Then, with the help of our practical experience and imagination, we could suggest solutions and set up future practices. Using statistical data we apply the method of comparison as well. The reliability of data is very high, because it is received by the National statistical institute of the country.

3. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

At this essential part of the research the main problems will be figured out, and some ideas and prescriptions for their solving will be suggested.
3.1. Seasonality features

Seasonality is a very specific feature in the traditional tourist services. It is very notably observed in tourist sectors like: sea and winter tourism. Unfortunately, these two general branches are the basic of Bulgarian tourism. In this situation, seasonality appears to be a major obstacle for a full load of hotel and tourist facilities in the country. This sets difficult problems in business management. Many places in hotel accommodation remains empty during big parts of the year, qualified labour forces remain unemployed seasonally, etc. Any chances for more even load of tourist capacities will be welcomed and will relieve business seriously.

Typical seasonal activities in Bulgaria are:
During the summer it is mostly visiting the Black sea coast. Sea resorts accept the majority of the tourists during the year, especially foreign ones. Leading one is undoubtedly Sunny beach.
During the winter – ski activities practiced in Bulgarian winter resorts, most of which are concentrated in three main places – Bansko (Pirin Mountain), Borovets (Rila) and Pamporovo (Rhodopes)

3.2. Statistical data

With the help of statistics from the National Statistical Institute we can visualize how strong the influence of seasonality in Bulgaria is.

**OCCUPANCY OF THE PLACES OF SHELTER AND ACCOMODATION**

According to Eurostat, in June 2012 occupancy in accommodation places in Bulgaria reached 89.4%. According to this indicator, our country ranks first in the EU. The data reveals, that more than three quarters of all rooms rented in Bulgaria, Cyprus and Malta, were employed. After Bulgaria, ranking on this indicator, stand Cyprus (77.4%), Malta (75.7%), United Kingdom (72%), France (69%) and Germany (62.2%).

Accommodation bed occupancy rates in m. June 2012 in Bulgaria was 49.6 %, as the country is among the top ten countries in Europe in this respect. Compared with June 2011 employment beds in the EU fell by 2.5 percent, the highest in Cyprus, 81.8%, and lowest in Slovakia and Romania, 28.2%.

According to NSI data during the months of the summer season (June, July and August) of 2012 means for the shelter and accommodation across the country have welcomed a total of 2,589,461 tourists, of which 61% were foreigners. Revenues from overnights in the summer season of 2012 reached 503.7279 million BGN, of which 81.5% were made by foreigners.

**OCCUPANCY OF RESORT COMPLEXES IN JUNE, JULY AND AUGUST 2012**

During the months of June, July and August of 2012, according to NSI data our summer resorts have achieved high occupancy rate. Highest was the average rate of employment in Albena, Sunny Beach and Dunes, respectively - 84%, 82% and 76%.

Borovets and Pamporovo realized an average occupancy rate during the summer months is 20% and 16\%.^{1}
Here is the first comparison between actively loaded tourist resorts and the ones working actively in the opposite season. At the time, when summer resorts reach the fascinating 70+ and 80+ % of occupation, what is happening in the winter resorts, such as Borovets, and Pamporovo is: a very poor occupation rate.

According to the absolute number of overnights data show exactly the same results. The important thing here is that the total capacity of the resorts is making the difference. In this context Sunny Beach stands as the biggest resort of Bulgaria as a material base and as realized overnights on a yearly basis.

Sunny Beach is ranked first in number of fulfilled overnights - 3 233 834, about 76% of whom are made by foreigners, followed by the Golden Sands, where they made 2 243 105 overnights, 75% of whom are foreigners and Albena realized 1 246 891 overnights, of which 84% were realized by foreigners.

Of course we can predict that these data can be valuable in the opposite, winter season, but in reverse way. During the winter, the focus is moved from the Black sea, to the highest Bulgarian mountains.

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1 “Occupancy of the places of shelter and accommodation”, Ministry of Economics and Tourism of Bulgaria, section tourism, based on the data of National statistical institute (www.nsi.bg)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resorts</th>
<th>Overnights</th>
<th>Foreign overnights</th>
<th>Capacity for Overnights</th>
<th>Fulfilled Overnights</th>
<th>Average Load in %</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>in %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Albena</td>
<td>193 056</td>
<td>131 834</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>1 484 865</td>
<td>1 246 891</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Golden Sands</td>
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<td>91</td>
<td>2 988 924</td>
<td>2 243 105</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>420 489</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>4 236 975</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3 440</td>
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<td>307 327</td>
<td>61 100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pamporovo</td>
<td>12 342</td>
<td>1 235</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>241 094</td>
<td>38 123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2 “Absolute number of overnights in some resorts in Bulgaria in June, July and August 2012”

These numbers are so illustrative, that there is no doubt – seasonality makes great influence in the working capacity of our traditional tourist resorts. The ranges between 10-20% and 80-90% fulfilled overnights are tremendous. So here comes the question: how can we optimize the work in a way, that it wouldn’t suffer this year-round discrepancy? The probable answer - we can turn to other activities – not traditional, mainly new for the national business, but with great potential for attracting tourists during the whole year. These are the recreational, SPA and wellness tourist products.

3.3. Problems

The basic problems come from the ineffective load of tourist facilities. Big hotels with great number of beds remain almost empty nearly (or sometimes more than) half the year. This set up difficulties in facility maintenance, in keeping the qualified personnel, slows down the investment refunds and many other problems.

An interesting observation is the size of hotels, where seasonality plays a big role. In order to achieve big money, investments build enormously big hotels. This can be easily noticed in Sunny Beach, Borovets etc. The purpose – to accept as bigger part as possible, when the active season begins and the flow of tourists is incredibly massive. When we research SPA and wellness resorts, where seasonality is barely observed, we don’t find hotels from this big scale.

3.4. Common recommendations for the business

3.4.1. Doubling the investment

Entrepreneurs must strive to keep the qualified personnel. This is very important. One possible solution, for those who can afford it, is: doubling the investment. This means, if you own a hotel at a summer resort, you must build another one, with similar capacity in the winter
resort. Thus you can keep the staff employed at the both places for half the year each. This practice has been empirically checked during the years and showed good results.

3.4.2. Introduction of year round activities and products

The key moment here is to do it with what you have available. Of course, it would be splendid if we suddenly receive unlimited access to thermal mineral water, but we must think real. What can we do with the resources we have, to overcome seasonality? Can we afford big investments for that purpose or not? At what level will it worth it? In the next chapter I will suggest some products and activities, which can help, and won’t require big financial investments.

3.5. Specific recommendations for the business

These recommendations are focused on minimum investments with notable effect, using the resources we have, without claiming new resources. In other words – these advices are very economically and practically efficient.

- Salt room and salt therapy

It requires one or few tones of salt and a room for therapies. Is it healthy and efficient? Here’s what scientists say:

“For more than 20 years dry salt aerosol, administered in specially-designed halochambers, has been used to treat upper and lower respiratory conditions such as cold and flu, allergy, asthma, bronchitis, cystic fibrosis, sinus infection, sinusitis, rhinitis, hay fever and emphysema. In addition, the anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory properties of dry sodium chloride aerosol has been show to effectively treat ear infection and conditions of the skin such as eczema, dermatitis and psoriasis. Some of the many benefits you’ll receive from The Salt Room halotherapy include:

- Abatement of bronchial inflammation
- Removal of airborne pollen particles from airways
- Strengthening of immune system that decreases allergic reaction to pollens
- Cleansing and sanitation of the airways
- Prevention and treatment of common cold and flu
- Improvement of dermatological disorders such as acne, dermatitis and psoriasis
- Reduction of snoring
- Better sleep”

2According to Orlando salt therapy respiratory treatment center, Orlando, USA http://www.saltroomorlando.com/about-salt-therapy.html
• Meditation and yoga practices

“Meditation can give you a sense of calm, peace and balance that benefits both your emotional well-being and your overall health. And these benefits don’t end when your meditation session ends. Meditation can help carry you more calmly through your day and may improve certain medical conditions. When you meditate, you clear away the information overload that builds up every day and contributes to your stress. Meditation might also be useful if you have a medical condition, especially one that may be worsened by stress. While a growing body of scientific research supports the health benefits of meditation, some researchers believe it’s not yet possible to draw conclusions about the possible benefits of meditation.”

The benefits of practicing yoga are undoubtedly recognized worldwide. Among the most popular are: Flexibility, Strength, Muscle tone, Balance, Joint Health, Pain Prevention, Better Breathing, Mental Calmness, Stress Reduction, Body Awareness etc.

Delivering these types of services and trainings you attract people, who are open-minded, aware of their health, intelligent and with potentially good financial status

• Psychological consulting and trainings for personal development

They become more and more popular every day. People take care about their self confidence, emotional and physical comfort. A good solution is to hire specialists and advertise as wide as possible these new attractive programs that you support at your hotel.

• Sports and nutrition programs

A growing number of people are considerably concerned about their health and body status. You can attract them with a number of sports and nutrition programs during all the seasons. The accent is health for the common people, not at achieving high sport results. Buying some equipment and hiring good specialists will create many new opportunities for your business.

• Health and recreational procedures (without big investments or new resources)

Figure out what possibilities do you have in this area. Invite health consultants and therapists, and present new health and recreational procedures. They can be simple and familiar or more rare and exotic, regulated or non-regulated. There are hundreds of examples: sauna with pine needles, Ayurvedic massage, hot stone therapy and many others.

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- Congress tourism, Team buildings, Musical and Cultural events, Festivals

The key moment here is to have the necessary halls and facilities. You can use all your capacity to create ones, if you don’t have any. A little investment in technical equipment is unavoidable. Advertise in specialized editions, send offers to many companies and producers and prepare to welcome the business people. Qualified management and staff are very important here, not only to create new services, but also to maintain them in a long term perspective, to renew them and to create new products. You have to be very careful not to miss the right specialists, as well as to keep them at a later stage.

- Great discount offers in combination with visiting during the active season

It is better, when your offers are variable and flexible. In order to achieve more even year round load of your hotel, you must create attractive offers. Try to stimulate the regular customers by combining offers in the non-active season with discounts during the active one.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Once you have fulfilled any of the above mentioned measures and services, your regular customers will increase rapidly. The year round cycle of the business will become steadier. These measures were intended to help the business in South-Western part of Bulgaria, but they are valid on the whole of the territory and for any other country as well. Considering South-Western Bulgaria we essentially fight seasonal irregularities in the winter tourism. But the measures recommended above are universally helpful and valid.

5. REFERENCES


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5.3. http://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858 - Mayo Clinic Organization, USA