STUDY REPORT ON CURRENT STATUS OF RURAL AND AGROTOURISM SECTOR IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT
In connection with the implementation of project “Quality Certification System in Agrotourism - CerTour” and Activity 1.1 of its plan a study of the current status of the agrotourism sector in Bulgaria was conducted. The purpose of this study was to develop a clear understanding of the current situation in the agrotourism sector in Bulgaria; to assess the level of the services provided; to investigate the existence of official and unofficial standards. The following report contains the results from this study as well as a profile of the agrotourism enterprise and entrepreneur and characteristics of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the rural/agrotourism sector in the form of a SWOT analysis.

Key words: current status, agrotourism sector, services, results, standards;

INTRODUCTION
In global aspect tourism is one of the most dynamic and fast developing industries. It impacts the quality of life and diversifies into new alternative forms of tourism to respond to the new trends in tourism demand directed not only toward change and relaxation but toward spiritual environment and new experiences as well. Farm based rural tourism is an alternative sustainable type of tourism, boosting the economic development of rural areas and providing an additional income for their residents.

The concept of agrotourism combines two main sectors of the economy - tourism and agriculture. Therefore, it can be considered as a business supplementing agriculture and as a form of recreation in rural houses and private farms. Bulgaria has a great potential for the development of rural and agrotourism as the protected areas with a unspoiled countryside, preserved biodiversity /there are 3750 types of plants, 763 of which are included in the Red Book of Endangered Species; 750 medicinal plants; a great variety of animals and unique local breeds/and means of living, account for 5% of the country’s territory. Most of the Bulgarian villages boast of a picturesque nature, quiet atmosphere and cosy houses. The hospitality of local people, unique local cuisine, preserved folklore, traditions and local crafts, the
architectural reserves are strong prerequisites for the development of rural tourism in Bulgaria.

Rural tourism represents an economic alternative for the development of rural areas, especially the underdeveloped ones and a real opportunity for alternative income for farmers, given the challenges of the environment in which they are located. 231 municipalities with a population of 3612,9 th. out of all 264 Bulgarian municipalities are rural and 77 of them with a population of 1008,9 th. are underdeveloped. The greater part of the farms and agricultural labour force are concentrated in the rural areas. The rural and agrotourism give these areas a real opportunity for revival and sustainable development.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order the study to be carried out five geographic regions of Bulgaria were chosen according to the criteria “near - remote from big city”, “well - less developed tourism infrastructure” and “upland- lowland”. The four research areas were: South-Central Bulgaria, districts Smolyan and Kardjali, comprising 599 villages in the Rhodope area, investigated Krastatitsa, Levochevo, Glavatartsi, Yabalkovets, Gela, Zabardo, Trigrad, Yagodina; North-Central Bulgaria, districts Veliko Tarnovo and Gabrovo, comprising 673 villages, investigated Arbanasi, Musina, Ruhovtsi, Merdanya, situated in the Balkan mountain; North-Eastern Zone, district Varna, 150 villages in a low land area, investigated Asparuhovo, Durankulak, Palamaritsa, Balgarevo; South-Eastern Zone, districts Stara Zagora and Bourgas, comprising 434 villages, part of them situated in a low land, the other part in Strandja mountain, investigated Granit, Enina, Shipka. A small part of South-Western Zone has been investigated, because of the availability of some very attractive rural tourism destinations - the architectural reserve Kovachevitsa, villages with unique characteristics - Leshten, Klyuch, Belitsa, Kremen, Rupite, Rojen, Melnik, etc.

After a comprehensive review of existing literature on rural tourism and rural tourism enterprise regional development programs, studies evaluating the effects of those programs, investment assistance programs, a questionnaire for entrepreneurs
was constructed. Pilot interviews with the questionnaire were carried out, after which the questionnaire was corrected and the final version was used for the implementation of the study. Apart from the questionnaire other data collection methods were used as well: telephone interviews, direct interviews, talking with people and organisations, comprehensive literature research, email survey. In the research areas different kind of organizations, and enterprises were questioned: institutions, local authorities and communities (municipalities in villages), transportation, accommodation and catering companies, entrepreneurs and members of the staff of tourism enterprises, intermediaries: tourist operators, tourist agencies, tourist information centers, tourist guides.

Some of the institutions and organizations were located outside the research areas. They comprise organizations and institutions on a central level - ministries, departments and other organizations and associations.

The conclusions are made on the base of logical induction method.

RESULTS

1. The concept of rural and agrotourism
To identify the term "agrotourism", it is necessary to take into account the view of authors from different disciplines over the past few decades. Among the various points of view stands the general opinion for a direct link between rural tourism, ecotourism and agrotourism. In accordance with the interpretation of the EU "Rural tourism has a broad sense and refers to any type of tourism activity in a rural environment, including tourism in farming estates and agrotourism".

This definition shows that agrotourism is a subcategory of rural tourism offered at the farm. In Anglo-American literature the term "farm tourism" is used. Here are some of the definitions of agrotourism of various authors:

Holyland: Agrotourism provides temporary lodge and/or indirect opportunities for recreation (refreshment) into a working farm.

Frater: Tourism enterprises that are built on working farms in addition to the existing farming activities.
Murphy: Working farms that complement their core function with some form of tourism.

Pearce: Farm tourism represents a further ownership of farm estate and an active participation of farmers in a tourism risk-taking.

Denmann-Denmaun: Actively providing facilities for tourists in a working farm.

Agnoli: Activity using rural goods, lifestyle and culture of rural communities.

Cals-Capella-Vaqui: Tourism activities relating to agriculture.

The variety of definitions of agrotourism, ecotourism, or also called green tourism and rural tourism, make it difficult to differentiate them. Therefore, this report will use the term “rural tourism”, taking into account that it incorporates the concept of agrotourism.

Tourism in rural areas is an economic alternative for many rural regions all over Europe. It is a real opportunity for alternative income for farmers, given the challenges of the environment in which they are located. Tourism in rural areas is considered an important segment of tourism in Europe (second in importance as a motivation for travel), it is considered that due to its multiplier effect the annual income reaches 65 billion euros.

Rural tourism is a rapidly growing industry, both in Europe and worldwide. It is an economic activity that occurs when people connect their journey with products, services and experiences within the system of agriculture.

The concept of agrotourism combines two main sectors of the economy - tourism and agriculture. Therefore, it can be considered as a business supplementing agriculture and as a form of recreation in rural houses and private farms.

In both cases, leading is the economic interest - it helps to increase income and stimulates the development of the region.

Agrotourism has the unique ability to integrate the natural resources of a region, its agricultural livelihood, traditional crafts and cultural attractions in collective tourism product. The added value is that it allows the tourist to get in contact with the local folklore and customs of rural communities.
Tourists are increasingly willing to taste rural life, to meet and communicate with local people. Rural tourism encompasses all tourism activities carried out in the country. Tourists expect to take part in the daily life of the household: to pick fruits and vegetables, to prepare traditional dishes, to take part in the customs and events of the area, to be trained in local crafts, folklore and agricultural traditions. These activities are usually accompanied with hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, visiting monasteries, museums, archaeological and other sights.

Rural and agrotourism as a recreation in the countryside are not just fashion, but a necessity, given the environmental pollution, the dynamics and intensity of life in cities, which naturally lead people to search for tranquility and relaxation in a clean environment and secluded places. This type of tourism is a characteristic of highly urbanized and developed countries because of the desire to return to nature. In many countries it is stimulated at national level and is considered a good alternative of the mass tourism, which is entirely economically oriented and largely ignores the environmental, social and moral values.

In almost all visits to villages for the purpose of tourism tourists travel with family or friends. They can choose between accommodation in small cottages or farms, rural inns, family hotels, guest houses, etc. The location of the site is of great significance - whether it is in an area with a preserved environment, close to water areas, close to a natural phenomenon and ecological paths, in the mountain or in a cultural and architectural reserves.

The development of rural tourism requires diversity of tourism resources: natural resources (special geographical characteristics, climate, flora and fauna, landmarks, etc.); historical heritage (architectural and archaeological monuments, churches and monasteries); cultural heritage (folklore and ethnographic heritage, traditional arts and crafts, traditional festivals and customs, traditional food and more; local country life (stock-breeding and agricultural practices, local food and drinks, etc.).

Analysing and summarizing what has been said so far, rural tourism can be defined as “tourism in rural regions, which satisfies interests of the tourists for traditions, customs, culture, agriculture and other specific activities as well as for natural, historical and cultural resources of a region”.
1.1 The essence of rural tourism

1. Complex motivational basis. Practicing rural tourism corresponds to many incentives and on that basis may include a variety of activities such as:
   - Exploring folklore, customs, traditions and religion of the local population;
   - Practice or observation of agricultural activities;
   - Exploring local flora;
   - Hunting, fishing, hiking and other activities amidst nature.

2. Short-distance trips

3. Prevalence of the private car as a means of transport.

4. No need of extensive construction of infrastructure and facilities for accommodation.

5. Relatively slight seasonality within the year.

6. Concentration of supply and demand at the end of the week, especially in the villa tourism.

7. The absence of a high concentration of tourists in the same place at the same time.

8. Tolerance to local culture and traditions.

9. The hosts are retail farmers.

10. Lack of isolation between host and guest. On the contrary, in rural tourism there is an intensive contact between host and guest, which implies a high degree of customization of the service.

11. Agrotourism, unlike mass tourism is predominantly individual, unorganized or partially organized.

Characteristics of the tourism experience in rural tourism that attract tourists and explain why people enjoy the countryside are:

- Distance and solitude;
- Silence and tranquility, relaxing environment;
- Adventure and challenge, opportunities for practicing sport or hobby;
- Health care and clean air;
- Interest in environmental issues;
- A study of rural communities, culture and lifestyle;
- Good opportunity to be with friends and family;
- Change of everyday urban life;
• Participation in various rural activities;
• Studying the historical identity, interest in cultural heritage.

1.2. Factors affecting the development of rural tourism are:
• Industrialization, urbanization;
• Improvement of transport;
• Enhancement of prosperity;
• Increasing of leisure time;
• Social and cultural changes associated with greater interest in the historical and cultural heritage;
• Concern for the environment;
• Healthy lifestyle
• Denial of mass consumer culture;
• Development of society.

2. Rural regions in Bulgaria

According to the national definition rural regions in Bulgaria are “municipalities that do not have a town with a population exceeding 30,000 people and the density of the population is under 150 people on a square kilometre”. Bulgaria is divided into 6 regions for planning (level NUTS 2), 28 administrative districts (level NUTS 3) and 264 municipalities (level LAU 1), 231 out of which are rural. Rural areas account for 98.8% of the territory and 84.3% of the population. The density of population is two times lower than the average of the country. The natural population growth in rural areas is negative. The migration from rural to urban areas is a contributing factor to the negative growth of the population. The proportion of people in working age is lower than in urban areas. The educational level of the population in rural areas is lower compared to this in urban zones. There is a significant imbalance in socio-economic development between rural and urban zones as well.
3. Characteristics of the current development of rural tourism in Bulgaria

3.1. General characteristics

Bulgaria has a remarkable natural, cultural and historical resources for the development of rural tourism. The Bulgarian heritage undoubtedly provokes great interest among Bulgarian and foreign tourists. In recent years we have seen an increasing number of tourists from Germany, France, England, Israel, the Netherlands, the U. S., Scandinavia and Japan. A number of agencies, family hotels, guest houses and sports clubs emerged, providing services in this area. Many citizens of Europe settle down in Bulgarian villages and small towns.

The lack of clearly defined concepts about the nature and content of rural tourism, as well as other forms of tourism, different from the mass tourism, makes it difficult to determine the content and requirements for the offered tourist services, and respectively to meet the expectations of tourists.

According to the Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecotourism the rural tourism is: "Partial or complete" immersion "in rural areas: staying in a farmhouse with a rural garden, farmyard and its inhabitants, unplanned and informal contacts with local people, fresh organic food, tangible touch to a natural, slightly modified, dotted with bucolic pictures landscapes."

Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (BAAT) formulates the definition like this: "Agrotourism is a form of alternative tourism, characterized by a stay in a rural environment (house or arranged near campsite or other accommodation facilities), contact with the owner, access to the farm. It can be a part of a tour, a stay for the weekend or for a week. In both cases, tourists expect to be involved in the daily life of the household: picking of fruits and vegetables, herbs, preparation of traditional dishes, participation in the customs and festivals of the region, observation and training of local crafts, folklore and agricultural traditions. These activities are usually supplemented with various active and cultural tourism (hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, visiting monasteries, museums, archaeological
and other attractions, School of Crafts) and the most common is a mix of all that.

Another definition of rural tourism: „Rural tourism is tourism in rural areas, which meets the interests of the tourists toward the traditions, customs, culture, agriculture and toward other specific activities as well as natural, historical and cultural resources of the region, accompanied by calm and relaxed human relationships.“

Rural tourism in Bulgaria is developing in individual and collective form. The first involves the accommodation and food supply in rural rooms or guest houses, family or other small hotels, villas and light type buildings. The second form represents complexes that are consistent with the main features of the settlements in Bulgaria: compactness, territorial delimitation. Both forms allow the development of perspective family business.

The last official report of National Institute of Statistics shows that in 2012 in the country functioned 2758 state and private accommodation establishments - hotels, motels, lodges, camps and other accommodation establishments with more than 10 beds. The total number of nights spent in the accommodation base in 2012 was 20,252,038. The number of nights spent by foreigners was 13 451 440, which accounted for 67% of all nights. Almost all foreigners - 97.8% preferred to stay in hotels, while other type of accommodation establishments (camping, cabins and other non-accommodation) were chosen by only 2.2%.

The structure of nights spent by foreigners in 2012 showed that the highest proportion of overnight stays is in accommodation establishments with four and five stars (57.0%), followed by those with three stars (31.7%) and with one or two stars (11.3%). Having in mind that rural tourism accommodation base is rarely with more than 3 stars, we can assume that rural tourism customers fall in the category of those 43% without knowing their precise percentage. Unfortunately in the official statistics in Bulgaria there are no accounting records for the development of rural and agricultural tourism as a form of tourism. For this reason, a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the main indicators characterizing agrotourism business is not possible.

In practical terms, an unofficial data exist for about 300 households in the villages who develop this type of activity in authentic rural houses (from the total number of 803 091 rural households, this represents 0.04%).
According to the Bulgarian Association of Alternative Tourism in Bulgaria only 0.1% of tourists practice rural tourism and it generates only 0.5% of total revenues in tourism. About 90% of the tourists in this segment are foreigners. The domestic market, despite the growth in recent years, is generally underdeveloped.

For a long period of time measures that enable the development of rural tourism were not working and almost nothing was done in this direction. There were objective reasons for that, as for example were the unclear zoning and inclusion of eligible municipalities that could take money for rural tourism. In 2012 the situation changed and the utilization of funds under the Programme for Rural Development for the development of rural tourism increased. One of the main priorities of RDP 2007 - 2013 was to diversify the rural economy and accelerate the development of an integrated rural tourism by implementing measures:

- Measure 3.1.1 "Diversification into non-agricultural activities"
- Measure 3.1.2 "Support for the creation and development of micro enterprises"
- Measure 3.1.3 "Encouragement of tourism activities"

In 2012 Fund "Agriculture" approved grants totaling 7.3 million BGN. Of these 4,797,745 were for measure 3.1.1 from the Program for Rural Development - "Diversification into non-agricultural activities" and 3.1.2 - "Support for the creation and development of micro enterprises". Ten projects were approved for building of guest houses for 6 to 28 beds. Significant investments in rural tourism had to be made under measure 313 - "Encouragement of tourism activities" as well. Under this measure Fund "Agriculture" signed contracts for 2.5 million BGN.

3.2. Factors determining the significance of rural and agrotourism in Bulgaria

- Rural and agrotourism have a great potential for development as sustainable, because of the greater opportunities for the accommodation facilities to be in harmony with the environment - smaller size, lack of concentration, location in the less urban, rural areas;
- The significant share of foreign tourists, which have visited Bulgaria, who identify themselves as attracted to rural tourism;
- Rural and agrotourism provide opportunities to attract national and international tourists with a strong affinity for a undisturbed holiday in a clean and
preserved natural environment, as it is in the rural areas;

- Improve the image of Bulgaria as a tourist destination, developing many types of tourism;

- Comply with EU priorities for the development of rural areas and improves opportunities for attracting and better use of EU funds;

- The agrotourism creates opportunities to increase the value of agricultural products through their realization on the spot and as a food for the tourists in the accommodation and catering facilities;

- Stimulate the diversification of agricultural production in areas required to meet the needs of tourists. This in turn allows for a more complete and more efficient use of land resources of Bulgaria;

- Stimulate the creation or revival of various handicrafts, the product of which is available as a regionally specific. This on one hand creates additional income for the local population and on the other hand increases the interest of tourists to Bulgarian culture and traditions, improves the image of Bulgaria as a country with rich traditions, crafts and mastership of the local population;

- Stimulate the creation or improvement of the micro-enterprises, producing primarily processed food for tourists and locals on the basis of local raw materials. This on one hand, creates employment and income inside the microenterprises and on the other - encourages the agricultural production;

- Stimulate the improvement or creation of new types of services in rural areas with double sided effect: satisfaction of the tourism demand and the needs of the local population and improvement of the image and quality of life in rural areas of Bulgaria;

- Create conditions for the use of the traditions and lifestyle of the local people as a resource highly appreciated by tourists;

- Improve the identity of local communities;

- Contribute to the reduction of regional disparities in tourism infrastructure in Bulgaria focusing on accommodation facilities in less populated and visited rural areas;

- Create jobs in rural areas directly or indirectly related to tourism;

- Positive influence on the development and preservation of settlements in rural areas through the creation of employment in activities directly related to
tourism and the creation of conditions for development;
- Contribute to the preservation and improvement of local, cultural, historical, domestic, folklore heritage."

National Strategy For Sustainable Development Of Tourism In Bulgaria 2009-2013, (adopted by the Council of Ministers on 2.4.2009) displays the main characteristics of this type of tourism in Bulgaria and outlines the strategic objectives for its development.

3.3. Participants in the formation and implementation of agrotourism product

Participants in the formation and implementation of tourism product are: institutions, local authorities and communities, "producers" of tourism product, tourists, tour operators and agencies.

Institutions identify the attractions by region, measure the qualities of tourist resources, build infrastructure, provide publicity and advertising. In Bulgaria the sphere of tourism, including rural and agrotourism, is regulated by Ministry of Economy and Energy. The Ministry of Economy and Energy has the responsibility to implement the state policy in the field of tourism and to coordinate the activities of the ministries and other institutions towards its implementation. The major priorities of its activities are the interstate relations in the field of tourism, the regulatory provision for tourist activities, national marketing and advertising, assisting the activities of the regional, local and branch tourist organisations, procurement, marketing research, analyses and forecasts for the tourist market, development of the tourist product and training the staff employed in tourism.

The National Tourist Council functions as a consultative body under the authority of Minister of Economy and Energy. It aims to assist in the implementation of the national tourism policy. Members of the National Tourist Council, in addition to representatives of the state, include representatives of the tourism associations, associations of air, land and water carriers nationally represented consumer organizations and the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic Bulgaria.

Branch Tourist Organisations: Bulgarian Association of Tourist Agencies, Bulgarian Hotel and Restaurant Association, Bulgarian Tourist Chamber; Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism; Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecological Tourism;

Local and Regional Tourist Organisations: Pirin Tourism Forum, Bourgas Regional Tourist Association, Stara Planina Regional Association, Varna Tourist Chamber; local Tourism Boards, non-profit organisations uniting companies and organisations of the respective levels interested in the development of tourism, etc.

In the process of creating rural tourism product a key role play territorial communities. Behind their initiative is the Leader approach, which contributes to the achievement of priorities of the Program for Rural Development 2007-2013, related to improving the quality of life and diversification of the employment in rural areas. LEADER approach supports the creation and functioning of local action groups in areas with a population of 10 000 to 100 000 inhabitants.

Local authorities and communities are important factors affecting natural and cultural resources, as well as an important component of rural tourism. The number of municipalities in Bulgaria, focusing on the construction of infrastructure, access to major attractions and their promotion, is increasing.

Local government in the face of municipalities and mayors promote the development of alternative tourism mainly by improving technical and social infrastructure, as well as creating an appropriate regulatory base - resolutions, ordinances, regulations, orders. Municipal mayors categorize hotels in lower categories, houses and guest rooms. The Tourism Act provides for the establishment of municipal development funds of tourism. Municipalities can be valuable partners
with local businesses and non-governmental organizations through participation in various projects connected with alternative tourism. They develop strategies for tourism development as well. The tourism councils of the municipalities can facilitate the cooperation between local authorities and entrepreneurs. At district level structures are created aiming at consolidation of the tourism product and supporting strategic planning and infrastructure improvement. The activities of the National Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria are very important as well.

**Tour operators** are the originators of the agrotourism supply. Homeowners who already have experience in dealing with tourists know that the best advertising is the satisfied customer. In Bulgaria there are 2700 officially registered tour operators and tourist agents. The majority of them provide tourist offers within the range of all types of tourism including rural tourism, but usually small tour operators undertake the formation and offering of rural tourism products.

**Entrepreneurs**

The total number of the entrepreneurs included in the survey was 72, part of them were reluctant to communicate, so the final number of respondents was 40. The most common and significant results of the survey among entrepreneurs in the research regions and villages are as follows (percentages are rounded to the nearest integer):

- 68% of the surveyed entrepreneurs have established their enterprise in the last 10 years;
- 40% of them own a guest house, 38% a family hotel and 22% a farm or a house with a farmyard. Most of the places are with 1 or 2 stars (95%). There are some tourism sites, which are not categorized;
- The share of the respondents, who do not use hired labor /their business involves members of the family/ is 65%;
- 68% of those engaged in rural and agrotourism don’t have an university degree or any tourism education;
- 78% don’t have any education connected with tourism
- In 25% of the tourism enterprises small part of the staff has tourism education and in 75% nobody has such qualification
- 65% of the entrepreneurs speak one foreign language;
• In 25% of the enterprises only a small part of the stuff speaks foreign languages, in 45% small part speaks foreign languages, in 30% nobody speaks foreign languages;
  • 52% of the respondents use a computer for reservations and promotion;
  • 25% promote via web page
  • The most common channels of promotion are Internet 35%, brochures 25%, catalogues 10%, visit cards 42%. Verbal communication is considered to be the most successful way of national promotion (95%);
  • 70% of the entrepreneurs explore the tourist market through Internet, 25% use tourist guides and only 3% use the services of marketing agencies
  • The greatest part of the respondents in the research areas don’t use the services of a tourist information centers (80%) and only half of them those of a tourist agency (56).
  • The greatest part (88%) doesn’t have any quality certificate apart from the categorization and 78% are not members of any tourist association. No one of the interviewed entrepreneurs has ever attended a course for the improvement of management culture;
  • 78% point out that quality control has been exercised over their business without pointing the responsible authority;
  • The additional services which are most often offered to the tourists are guided tours 75%, short walks 88%, long walks 62%, horse riding 25%, cooking local food 65%, traditional handicraft 33%, agricultural process 30%;
  • 100% point out the increasing of the number of tourists as the main objective of their business, 56% want to improve the quality of the tourism product and 46% - to improve the efficiency of the tourism enterprise;
  • 75% indicate that they want their business to be certified
  • As main problems, hindering the prosperity of rural tourism business the entrepreneurs point out the poor infrastructure of the region (85%), the insufficient transport links (85%), the poor road infrastructure (85%) and the large bureaucracy of administrative procedures, required for starting and conducting tourism business (78%).
Profile of rural tourism enterprise an and entrepreneur

Point large bureaucracy as problem hindering the...
Point poor road infrastructure as problem...
Point poor transport links as problem hindering the...
Point poor infrastructure as problem hindering the...
Want certification of the business
Want to attract more international tourists
Want to increase the efficiency of the tourism...
Want to increase the quality of the tourism product
Point increasing the number of tourists as main...
Agricultural process
Traditional handicraft
Provide cooking of local food
Provide picnic/BBQ
Provide cycling
Provide horse riding
Provide long walk/hiking
Provide short walk
Provide guided tour
Quality control exercised over
Attended course for improvement of management...
Members of tourist association
Have quality certificate
Use services of tourist agencies
Use services of information centres
Use services of marketing agencies
Use tourist guides
Explore market via Internet
Promote via verbal communication
Promote via visit cards
Promote via catalogues
Promote via brochures
Promote via Internet
Promote via web page
Use comp. for reservation and promotion
Enterprises where nobody speaks foreign language
Enterprises where small part of the staff speaks...
Enterprises where great part of the staff speaks...
Speak one foreign language
Nobody has tourism qualification
Small part of the staff has tourism education
With tourism education
Without university degree/tourism education
Do not use hired labor
1&2 star places
Enterprises with more than 10 beds
Owners of farm or house with farmyard
Owners of family hotel
Owners of guest house
Business established in last 10 years
3.4. Advantages of rural tourism in Bulgaria

- There are a lot of incentives for rural tourism customers and on that basis it may include a variety of activities such as:
  - exploring the folklore, customs, traditions and religion of the local population;
  - participation in agricultural production activities;
  - exploring local flora and fauna;
  - hunting, fishing, horseback riding, hiking and more activities in nature.
- There is great potential for the sustainable development of rural and agrotourism because of the greater opportunities the accommodation facilities to be in harmony with the environment - smaller size, lack of concentration and location in less urbanized rural areas;
- Complies with EU priorities for rural development and improves the opportunities for attracting and better use of EU funds;
- Creates opportunities (particularly the agrotourism) to increase the value of agricultural products through their implementation on the spot and as a food for the tourists in the accommodation and catering facilities;
- Stimulate the diversification of agricultural production in areas required to meet the needs of tourists. This in turn allows for a more complete and more efficient use of land resources of Bulgaria;
- Stimulate the creation or revival of various handicrafts, the product of which is available as a regionally specific. this on one hand creates additional income for the local population and the other hand increases the interest of tourists to Bulgarian culture and traditions, improves the image of Bulgaria as a country with rich traditions, crafts and mastership of the local population;
- Stimulates the creation or improvement of the micro-enterprises, producing primarily processed food for tourists and locals on the basis of local raw materials. This on one hand, creates employment and income inside the microenterprises and on the other - encourages the agricultural production ;
- Stimulates the improvement or creation of new types of services in rural areas with double sided effect : satisfaction of the tourism demand and the needs of the local population and improvement of the image and quality of life in rural areas of
Bulgaria;

- Creates conditions for the use of the traditions and lifestyle of the local people as a resource highly appreciated by tourists;
- Improves the identity of local communities;
- Contributes to the reduction of regional disparities in tourism infrastructure in Bulgaria focusing on accommodation facilities in less populated and visited rural areas;
- Creates jobs in rural areas directly or indirectly related to tourism;
- Positive influence on the development and preservation of settlements in rural areas through the creation of employment in activities directly related to tourism and the creation of conditions for development;

High degree of personalization of the services

3.5. Disadvantages of rural tourism in Bulgaria:

- Lack of a clear vision and strategy for the development of rural tourism.
- Lack of information in a systematic way for development resources of rural tourism;
- Poor quality of services;
- Poorly trained staff providing tourism services in the field of rural tourism;
- There are no accepted standards for information management in rural tourism, and no mechanisms for effective, inexpensive and rapid exchange of information between suppliers, manufacturers and the market;
- Insufficiently developed products and services in rural tourism sector;
- Lack of chains consolidating entrepreneurs in rural tourism for common activities including advertising, and for protection of their interests;
- Insufficient or ineffective promotion of Bulgaria as a rural tourism destination;
- Lack of clarity about the functions and powers of NGOs for improving the awareness of employees in the sector and for decision making on the development of rural tourism;
- Lack of information about the needs and expectations of tourists in the rural and agrotourism sector;
- Lack of partnership between entrepreneurs;
- Poor common infrastructure in some rural areas;
- Problems with the transport and water and sewage system in most of the villages in the rural areas;
- Lack or remoteness of the healthcare system in a large number of villages in the rural areas;
Lack of solutions for public-private partnerships for solving problems in the field of establishing common prerequisites for the development of rural tourism.

3.6. Existence of official and unofficial standards in rural and agrotourism sector in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria there is only one official system of standards concerning rural and agrotourism and it is the Ordinance for Categorization of Accommodation, Hospitality and Catering and Entertainment in the framework of Tourism Act. The categorization of the places for accommodation, which prevail in rural tourism sector, is compulsory, but in small villages, as was the case with some of the tourism sites in the research areas, many of the entrepreneurs and owners of the houses and villas choose not to be involved in the complex procedures of categorization. Consequently these very small enterprises fall out of any kind of registers and stay out of statistics. Their number nationwide is considerable and this is one of the reasons for the lack of accurate information about the size of the sector.

The international standards ISO 9001 and ISO 22000 are very rarely applied for rural/agrotourism enterprises because they are very expensive and hard to maintain.

In Bulgaria there are several informal tourism associations providing quality certificates for rural and agrotourism:

- Independent quality mark in tourism of Association “Authentic Bulgaria”, which is awarded to small hotels, guest houses and restaurants that meet the requirements of authenticity and original tourism product.
- “Green House”- brand image of quality tourism product of the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (BAAT), consistent with the criteria of the European Association for Rural Tourism and ECEAT Eurogites.

At regional level:

- Quality mark of Regional Tourist Association "Stara Planina"
- Quality mark of Nature Park "Strandja"
Unlike the categorization, which is compulsory, the quality certification systems are voluntary.

The percentage of entrepreneurs aiming at certification is low. They don’t consider the quality certificate as a factor contributing to the effectiveness of the tourism enterprise.

3.7. Prerequisites for the development and expansion of the market share of rural tourism

In Bulgaria there are favorable conditions for the development of rural tourism, because our country is rich in tourism resources and there has always been an ambition these resources to be used to the best advantage.

In many rural areas of Bulgaria there is a considerable tourism resource, through the use of which a positive socio-economic impact could be achieved. The "rural tourism" niche in this country is not busy enough, on contrary it is almost free, and there are enough preconditions for its future development. There are some prerequisites for the development and expansion of the market share of rural tourism in the country:

- The share of rural population above working age with low income /pensions, rents of agricultural land/ is expanding;
- Due to unfavorable natural and climatic conditions, lack of funds for investment or because of their old age, many rural residents are unable to provide any additional income through agricultural activity - breeding of animals, land cultivation, fruit- and vegetables-growing;
- There is a significant residential area in the villages left unused. Due to the growing trend of depopulation of Bulgarian villages, especially in mountainous areas, many rural houses - well kept and maintained - are abandoned;
- The famous hospitality of Bulgarians, their legendary penchant for casual communication, the existing tradition of winemaking, culinary skills and old recipes, the ancient crafts are a guarantee for pleasant experience for tourists.

The diversity of natural resources, combined with the unique mountain scenery, create conditions for various activities - fishing, hiking, horse tours and more.

The rich cultural heritage, particularly our ancient history is a significant
advantage. Among the regional tourism values are historical monuments, monasteries, churches, caves. The remains of ancient civilizations, and representation of events from the life of extinct nations allow to enrich the culture of the modern generation and preserve the cultural heritage of a region.

- The searching of new forms of business determined by the economic crisis and high level of unemployment. Together with the development of small enterprises in the rural municipalities, the development of rural tourism creates real opportunities to provide jobs for their residents.

 Development of tourism in rural areas aims at improving the social and economic life of the population in these undeveloped regions through:

- The creation of new jobs;
- Development of infrastructure in an environmentally friendly manner, bringing together private and public sector;
- Promoting the exchanges between rural areas and the development of positive attitudes and knowledge of rural communities;
- Reducing the number of young people who leave their villages and move to the cities, and the emigration to other countries, which will help to stabilize the population in the underdeveloped regions;
- Creating opportunities for the preservation of traditional agricultural activities and practices, rural atmosphere and way of life;
- Contribution to the preservation of historical, architectural, cultural and ethnographic identity of the region;
- Encourage the preservation of the environment and contribute to the conservation of rare and endangered plants and animals;
- Maintaining the family relationships into the rural communities;
- Promoting the development of small local enterprises, this way encouraging diversity in economic activities in rural areas;

3.8. Categorization of the accommodation base

The accommodation base of rural tourism in the country can be categorized as follows:

- Villages and small towns with original Renaissance architectural design;
• Reception areas around attractive villages, beautiful landscapes, ponds and more. Built mostly around rivers and lakes - Tunja, Ropotamo River, lakes in the Rila, Rhodopes, dams Jrebchevo, Sopot, Rositsa, Ivaylovgrad Kalamanitsa, Batak and others;
  • Places connected with natural phenomena - Pobiti Kamani, Belogradchishki Skali, Vratsata, Trigradsko Gorge, Erma River Gorge and more;
    • Holy places /mainly monasteries, chapels, shrines/ - Rila, Melnik, Bachkovski, Dryanovski, Zemenski, Kelifarevski monasteries and others;
    • National Parks - Pirin, Rila and Stara Planina, Rhodope, Troyan, Murgash and others.
  • Cultural Monuments - Madara Horseman, Karanovska mound, the old capitals and simulation models such as the Etar.

Strong invasion of the mass tourism strongly violates the attractive image of some small towns with a distinctive architecture and coloring.

In the classification of accommodation facilities the following parameters are used:
  • Average big village;
  • Favorable socio-demographic structure of the population;
  • Preserved architecture and traditions (entirely or partially);
  • Clean area with beautiful scenery and non-polluting industries in the village;
  • Existence of well established transport and other infrastructure, including electricity, water supply, good road network, regular bus connection, etc.

Various interesting opportunities to visit or join during the stay, including attractions in the village or nearby, natural phenomena, ethnographic peculiarities, crafts, folklore, opportunities for hunting and fishing, hiking, picnicking and more. According to the statistics in our country there are 5098 villages, of which 2011 have a population of 200 inhabitants. An important motive for the active development of rural tourism is not only the products of the folk art and the way they are made of distinctive local craftsmen - potters, bronze and wood carvers, weavers of rugs, carpets, folk costumes and more, but the means by which all this wealth is created as well - water, natural dyes, the fire of the fireplace, the forge, the hooks and knitting skewers, the primitive wooden loom. All this can be
seen only in the village - in the farmhouse, in the farmyard. On the territory of these villages are organized fairs, folk games and parades - with mummers, for Christmas, for vine-growers, for weddings, etc. Development of sectors such as agriculture, horticulture, viticulture, vegetable farming, is also a subject of attention. Undoubted interest for the Western tourists are the historical and cultural monuments of our nation, the streets in traditional style, old churches, monasteries and mosques.

Crucial to the successful development of rural tourism is the good organization. It is an illusion to believe that individual homeowners or small travel companies can have a lasting market success. They face two options - to rely on limited private contacts or to look for an effective way to reach the tourist. The second option can only be achieved with the help of tour operators and travel agents, which promote the propose tourism product, i.e. what the peasant offers in his own house, in his own garden in his own yard. The tour operator is the one who introduces this product to the client, who wishes to take advantage of rural tourism. By tour operators tourism product offered by those wishing to develop tourism business reaches the client and the specialized market for rural tourism. Besides the tour operator for development of rural tourism contributes BARET, voluntary tourism companies, consulting firms and local authorities.

3.9. Problems in rural tourism

- Farmers of old age are not able to perform the necessary contact with the young and can not provide satisfactory services even if they wish.

- The hygiene, especially in the maintenance of toilets, bathrooms and courtyards is not at the required level;

- Sometimes the food offered to the tourists do not meet their tastes, particularly the taste of foreign guests. For those tourists who prefer to eat out a major problem is the quality of food. Hygiene of most rural pubs and cafes is beneath any level, there is isn’t any comfort as well;

- Rural shops are boring, there are no souvenirs, not even ordinary postcards with views of the local area or the local attractions;

- Most of the information is in Bulgarian. Local postal services are
unsatisfactory and provoke bewilderment in foreign tourists;

- Considering most of these problems, some marketing experts argue that for a successful and high quality rural tourism in the country, the government has to establish consistent state politics at first place, and only then to develop local municipal politics.

Excessive development of rural tourism leads to some negative effects too. Large accumulation of tourists leads to blurring of rural region’s characteristics. Strong commercialization may cause deterioration of performance, by unifying them and reducing their capacity.

In rural tourism the need to preserve the originality and authenticity opposes the seeking of comfort from the tourist. Simplicity of accommodation and surroundings is attractive and a sign of authenticity, tradition, features and characteristics of a high quality natural product. The difficulty is to achieve a balance between the values of the past and the present demand, between the expectations of the consumers and the real rural reality.

3.10. Laws and regulations
The development of rural tourism in Bulgaria must be carried out according to a number of legislative and strategic documents, including:

- Tourism Act; Ordinance for categorization of accommodation places and catering and entertainment places
- Law on Consumer Protection
- Law on Environmental Protection;
- Biodiversity Act;
- Law on Spatial Planning;
- Law on regional development;
- Law on Monuments and museums;
- Law on Protection and Development of Culture;
- Law on Ownership and use of agricultural land;
- Forest Act;
- Law on Hunting and Game Protection
- Health Act;
• Ordinance № 3 of 15.05.2003 on National Ecolabel scheme.

3.11. National and regional strategic planning documents
• Draft of National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria 2008-2013;
• National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in Bulgaria for the period 2008 - 2013;
• National Strategic Reference Framework;
• Strategy for accelerated economic development of the Republic of Bulgaria;
• Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Republic of Bulgaria;
• National Strategy for the Conservation of Biological Diversity;
• National Development Plan /2007-2013/;
• National Strategy for Integrated Development of Infrastructure of the Republic of Bulgaria and Operational Implementation Plan for the period 2006 to 2015;
• National Environmental Strategy and National Action Plan for 2005 - 2014 period;
• National Plan for Biodiversity;
• National Plan for Agriculture and Rural Development 2007-2013;
• National Strategic Plan for Fisheries and Aquaculture 2007-2013;
• National Programme for Control of Waste;
• National Strategy for the management and development of the water sector in Bulgaria 2015;
• Programme for Rural Development for the period 2007-2013, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food;
• Regional development plans for the areas of planning for 2007-2013;

4. SWOT analysis of rural tourism sector in Bulgaria
4.1. Strengths
Nationally represented and branch organizations BAAT and BARET unite the efforts of those involved in this business and contribute to the formation of active citizenship on the development of rural tourism nationwide.

Regional and local organizations - where they are supported by private business and state structures are functioning well and are a major stimulus for the
development of rural tourism. An important role play: the departments of the Vratsa Balkan, Vitosha Mountain, Blue Ridge, Ruse Lom, Strandja.

Major factor represents organizations and programs such as UNDP, ARE, Peace Corpus, Open Society, Beautiful Bulgaria, SAP ARE, British Know Now Found etc, subsidizing various projects in the fields of training, institutional development, the formation of tourism product studies etc. in the field of specialized tourism.

Over 90% of the accommodation and other facilities in the field of tourist services are privately owned. Medium and small business has the advantage to be more flexible and quickly structuring around the ever-changing demands and expectations of customers.

Given the macroeconomic environment Bulgaria can still maintain lower prices for packages of specialized rural, countryside, walking, cycling or horse riding tourism. Price of the main and additional services is the main competitive tool.

Currently there are tourism programs for hiking /in the big mountains/, for tours with horses and bicycles, snowshoes and skis. The quality of this product is the reason for Bulgaria to be the leading destination in Eastern Europe in this regard. There are proposals for ornithological tours, accommodation in villages in order tourists to get acquainted with the crafts, folklore and lifestyle /associated with major folk festivals/. Programs with historical, archaeological and cultural activities, as well as "outdoor" activities such as caving, rock climbing and paragliding, rafting are rare or almost absent.

Increasingly common are initiatives by local entrepreneurs with regard to the additional and specialized services - craft demonstration, providing services by local and mountain guides, offering itineraries, tours with horses and bicycles, folklore shows, wine tasting, etc. Alternative forms of rural tourism seek their place in the Internet. There is some information (still incomplete), on the resources and partly on their including in packages.

The number of tourism organizations and tourism associations, that have decided to deal with rural tourism is constantly increasing. Tours are created for foreign journalists and tour operators.

There is progress in issuing leaflets for the promotion of local and regional tourism product by regional institutions and organizations. In the Internet portal of the Bulgarian tourism /www.bulgariatravel.org/ a serious attention to rural tourism
has been paid, brochures and other informational materials have been developed.

On the Bulgarian media market new and quality publications have appeared. The concerns and the importance of rural tourism and its alternative forms are being discussed very often recently.

4.2. Weaknesses

There has not been achieved compliance at national level on the development strategy of tourism in general and in particular of rural tourism and on the priority areas and activities.

Throughout the country various travel funds and programs fund local and regional projects, among which however lacks consistency and communication between entities.

Regional associations face problems in activating the local population. Local authorities are insufficiently involved, and in some places they are completely disinterested.

The utilization of resources is insufficient and where the degree of utilization is high, the principles of sustainability and environmental friendliness are not obeyed. The majority of entrepreneurs are improperly oriented on the investment of resources and don’t seek expert advice.

The most common problem for the involved in tourism is the lack of available resources for short-term financing and investment.

General infrastructure - roads, signs, communications, is in poor condition. Data centers are not functioning properly. Extremely complicated is the travel of tourists by public transport within the country, especially in areas away from the main routs.

In mountainous and rural areas where the potential for development of rural tourism is high, the educational and age structure of the population is poor.

Approximately 90% of directly employed in the tourism business have not the necessary qualifications. Foreign language skills are poor, the entrepreneurs and staff do not know the core business mechanisms, the culture of service level is very
law, just a small part of the employees use a computer.

The higher education institutions are not paying enough attention to the disciplines associated with alternative forms of tourism.

There are no specialized professional training centers in mountainous, rural and eco tourism.

Due to the relatively low cost of the product tourists with low financial capacity prevail.

Limited range of travel products. A small number of tourism organizations and tourism associations.

There isn’t any marketing strategy. The publication of promotional materials is chaotic, the participation in international exhibitions and fairs is week.

There isn’t a common Internet portal for Bulgarian tourism and in particular for rural tourism.

4.3. Threats to rural tourism in Bulgaria

Unstable internal and external environment, as well as confusing and inadequate legal framework are prerequisites for the lack of confidence among the entrepreneurs.

Limited financial resources, and lack of professional competence lead to the provision of services with poor quality, which is likely to create a negative attitude and expectations among potential tourists.

Relatively low price levels threaten to build the image of a “cheap destination” for our country in the field of rural tourism.

Lack of an overall marketing strategy can prevent or delay the introduction of the product of rural tourism in international markets.

Insufficient proposals oriented to the Bulgarian client will intensify the trend of loss of clientele at the expense of neighboring destinations in this tourism.
Excessive use, overloading and resource depletion in some areas threaten with environmental disaster areas of Bansko, Dobrinishte, Popina Laka /Pirin/, Maliovitsa /Rila/, Vitosha.

4.4. Opportunities for the rural tourism in Bulgaria

Major opportunity for the development of rural tourism in Bulgaria represents the still unused and undiscovered natural, cultural and historical resources. Inventories are only made in villages around the natural parks and surrounding areas operating under the JOBS programme (Job Opportunities through Business Support).

A number of programs and projects fund activities directly or indirectly related to tourism. Major role in the development of rural tourism plays SAPARD programme.

Systematic marketing researches and trainings of those involved in the industry will lead to the formation of an integral product in the field of rural tourism. Development of thematic itineraries and trails is a major prospect for the development of various forms of rural tourism.

Introduction of uniform standards of service to tourists and a system of categorization of places for guests in the mountains and villages requires the integration of these places into a single network and the creation of a brand that guarantees quality of tourist services.

The potential of tourists staying at coastal resorts should be used. Through appropriate proposals for rural tourism their stay in the country could be prolonged. The opportunities for yachting, underwater archeology, tours with kayaks and catamarans around rocky shores, visits to the farmhouse, farmyard, our reserves along the Black Sea and the Danube River are not completely used. The same is the situation with the transit travelers. Tours covering the cultural and historical treasures of the Balkan countries are very perspective.
CONCLUSION

The interest in specialized types of tourism in Europe and in Bulgaria has increased in the last two decades. The main advantage for the existing travel agencies and players on the tourism market is that there are no initial capital requirements for them. One of the characteristics of this kind of tourism is that it provides opportunities for both large and small tourism businesses.

You could say that the location, availability of tourism resources, marketing approaches, the quality of the tourist experience combined with the concern for the ecological balance and environment are key factors for the successful development of specialized tourism in the next decade.

However, it can be concluded that despite the great progress in the development of rural tourism in the last few years, it should not be considered as the only tool that will solve the complex socio-economic problems of sustainable development of rural areas. Readjustment towards increasing the share of people benefiting from the services of rural and agricultural tourism product and the economic interest of such business involves in addition to other things, a change in the mindset of Bulgarians. This will be a long and difficult process requiring at least period of 10-15 years. Only then we can expect that the standards and scale of western type of rural and agrotourism will be reached.

In order to facilitate the further development of this branch of tourism industry, it is necessary to activate the various local organizations, associations etc. in solving specific problems. Their employees could register the willing and suitable for the business people, to draw a balance between positive and negative conditions, to assist in reconstruction and development of tourism places and activities of the local village culture such as old houses, monasteries, historical sites, traditional holidays and others. Moreover, the conditions and opportunities for the use of the financial support from various foreign funds and programs should be transparent, clear and accessible to all interested parties.

Tourism in Europe is a priority of the government, local authorities and other institutions as an important sector of the national and local economy. Bulgaria is a
country endowed with fabulous natural places, preserved traditions, specific folklore, customs, which are a prerequisite for the development of strong rural tourism. Construction of a developed rural tourism market in Bulgaria can be accomplished by uniting the efforts of the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, municipalities, associations and farmers themselves.

Tourism is becoming an important, in some countries even basic, economic sector, providing large profit and employment. For all segments of the population of developed countries, tourism has become not only affordable, but also unique as an alternative for human recovery and exploration of the world.

The history of tourism is a combination of social, economic, cultural and political events where the main driver is the motivation of people to recover by travelling and explore new places and cultures.