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FREE CITY TOURS AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR PRESENTING LOCAL TOURIST LANDMARKS /FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF THE CITY OF PLOVDIV/

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Abstract

The article deals with the city tours of foreigners in the city of Plovdiv organized and guided by a tour guide not connected or linked to any tourist agency or tour operator. Questions related to the profile of tourists visiting Plovdiv are discussed, also tourists' motivation for visiting and their evaluation of the destination as well as the typical tourist behavior during the stay. Reasons are given justifying the need to develop travel packages that allow the extension of stay, diversification of offered tourist services and increase of the income from tourists, as well packages focused on young tourists who visit Plovdiv independently without using a travel agency.

Keywords: free city tour, tourist destination, city landmarks, tourists' profile, tourist behavior during the stay, guide, assessment of stay.

INTRODUCTION

The city of Plovdiv is the center of Plovdiv district and is the second largest city in Bulgaria. Plovdiv is also one of the oldest towns in Europe, famous for its cultural and historical heritage dating back to Thracian times.

Plovdiv is one of the established and recognizable destinations in Bulgaria on the international tourist market. A proof of this is the choice of the city for European Capital of Culture.

In this regard, the city of Plovdiv is also the center of the tourist region of Thrace (Fig. 1).

Tourist region of Thrace is characterized by an abundance of cultural and historical sites, vineyards and wine processing enterprises. This is the basis for choosing a major tourism specialization, cultural and wine tourism (Concept, 2015). It is this specificity of resources tourist region of Thrace, in particular the city center, and based on international experience and best practices arises the need for introducing the service "Free city tours".

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on the establishment of the possibilities of the service "Free city tours" as one of the main marketing tools for promotion and presentation of tourist attractions in the city of Plovdiv. For this purpose it is necessary to establish and analyze the state and opportunities for development of tourism in the city of Plovdiv, as well as the survey of the opinion of the users of the service "Free city tours".



Fig. 1. Tourist zoning of Bulgaria - tourist region of Thrace.

Source: Concept for tourist zoning of Bulgaria, 2015: 53.

In this regard, the possibilities of SWOT analysis and survey were used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the state of tourism in the city of Plovdiv

To determine the state and opportunities for tourism development in the city of Plovdiv, the possibilities of the SWOT analysis were used (Table 1).

Table. 1. SWOT analysis of tourism in the city of Plovdiv

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● high levels of accessibility and development of transport structures; ● International Airport Plovdiv ● climate favorable to practice year-round tourism; ● availability of a modern hotel base; ● abundance of cultural-historical, archeological and architectural sites; ● • variety of restaurants and animation in the city; ● tendency to increase loyalty to the destination; ● structured municipal enterprise "Tourism"; ● two functioning tourist information centers; ● traditions in the provision of specialized tourist services; ● very good levels of public-private partnerships and interaction between local government and the tourism business; ● high level of development of the light industry accompanying tourism; ● • accredited universities in the professional field 3.9 Tourism; ● good strategic planning of tourism and its consideration as a priority sector for the city and the district. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● low level of accessibility from Northern Bulgaria; ● access to all tourist resources of the city for people with disabilities is not provided; ● poor capacity utilization at Plovdiv Airport; ● insufficient and inefficient use of the available tourist potential; ● "encapsulation" of the strategy for tourism development in Plovdiv only within the city; ● lack of a tourist brand of the city; ● Insufficient level of interaction between the stakeholders in the development of tourism; ● Insufficient parking spaces in the city; ● difficult access to the Old Town.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● creation of a tourist brand of Plovdiv; ● increasing partnerships and forms of interaction with stakeholders in the development of tourism; ● "opening" of the strategy for development of tourism in the city of Plovdiv to neighboring villages and municipalities; ● offering an integrated tourist service; ● development of niche types of tourism in the regions with appropriate resources; ● improving the information service of the city; ● increasing the quality of the offered tourist service; ● approval of quality standards of the offered tourist services in the city; ● imposition and more intensive use of the "Free city tours" service; ● more active collaboration with universities offering training in professional fields 3.9 Tourism; ● more active use of Plovdiv Airport; ● registration of a management board of the tourist region of Thrace; ● introduction of quality standards in the aesthetization of the urban environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Insufficient interest of the partners in the construction and structuring of the regional tourist product; ● lack of adequate management at destination level (destination management organization); ● strong competitive pressure from direct domestic competitors - Sofia, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, etc.; ● low levels of competitiveness in the international tourism market (especially compared to Ohrid, Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Bucharest, Budapest); ● Insufficient funding for marketing measures for destination development; ● low levels of communication and interaction between business, science, local government and consumer associations ● high levels of pollution of the general environment of the destination; ● insufficient support by state institutions in the marketing of destination Plovdiv.

Formulation of the problem and research approach

The concept of free city tours is relatively new. It has emerged on the basis of traditional paid tours with a tour guide organized by tourist agencies. By contrast, free city tours are organized by non-professional guides, united in non-governmental organizations (NGOs); these guides themselves allocate their commitments between each other relying on voluntary payment at the end of the tour which depends exclusively on their dedication and improvisational skills.

In other words, the concept of Free City Tours is built on the famous game theory principle “I win, you win”. The profit for the tourist consists of the opportunity to acquire an authentic impression of the city landmarks while paying as much as they deem appropriate; on the other hand the guide’s “profit” is a non-guaranteed payment directly related to their presentational and interpretative skills. Of course, there is a “third party” winning as well, and this is the local business - restaurants, hotels, souvenir shops, transport companies, museums, etc., recommended by the guide or on the route of the tour - the survey data showed that as many as 93% of the respondents used paid tourist services during their stay in Plovdiv.

Free Plovdiv Tour is a pedestrian city tour in the city of Plovdiv, organized by 365 Association, a voluntary association of local guides; the Association offers daily tours (twice a day during the summer months) to tourist groups of 20-50 people, with duration of about 2.5 hours. The route starts at the Municipality building (a.k.a. City Hall) on Plovdiv’s main street, right next to the Central fountain and includes a visit to:

1. Coat of Arms & motto
2. Graffiti on Sahat Hill
3. The Statue of Milyo the Crazy
4. The Roman Stadium
5. Maina, Aylyak and Kapana
6. The Old Town and Houses
7. Balabanov’s house and Hisar Kapia
8. The Ethnographic Museum (Kîyumdzioglu House)
9. The Hills
10. Constantine and Helena Church and Mevlevi Haane
11. The Ancient Theatre
12. The Yellow School and Sasho the Sweetheart
13. Tsanko Lavrenov
14. Assumption of Mary Cathedral
15. The Unification

The present research focuses on Free Plovdiv Tour as a post-modern marketing communication channel for “discovering” and interpreting by tourists the city landmarks in the oldest permanently inhabited city in Europe – Plovdiv. **The objectives** we have set in this research project can be defined as follows:

- a) description of the socio-demographic characteristics of the tourists who participated in the survey – age, nationality and with whom they travel;
- b) finding the main “tourist magnets” of Plovdiv according to the opinion of the participants in the survey;
- c) finding the basic parameters of tourist behaviour of the respondents – route, whether their visit is organized or individual, sequence of the visit, length of stay, activities during the stay, etc.;
- d) consumer evaluation of the tour, the guide, and the city of Plovdiv as a tourist destination, provided by the respondents;
- e) field testing of the hypothesis that the preferred way of travelling to Plovdiv is with low-cost airlines, and the most frequently chosen way of booking – via Airbnb or similar platform.

The survey was conducted as a field study by five students, second year, majoring in Agricultural Tourism at the Agricultural University - Plovdiv and included 4 free city tours, in which a total of 100 people were surveyed.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

Who visits Plovdiv?

Plovdiv was visited mainly by young tourists /65% were up to 35 years/, from Western Europe /40%/, followed by those from Eastern Europe /22%/, Israel /14%/, USA /5%/, etc., who travelled together with friends /39%/, their family /37%/, and often alone /17%/. A major part of the visitors came to Plovdiv for the first time /87%/, 5% for the second time and 8% for the third and more times.

What attracts tourists in Plovdiv?

As leading tourist attractions in Plovdiv the participants in the tour mentioned *the Old town* /35%/, *the Ancient theatre* /33%/, followed by *Kapana* /24%/ and *the Ancient stadium* /23%/, etc.

How is Plovdiv rated as a tourist destination?

The survey showed quite high levels of

satisfaction both from Plovdiv as a tourist destination and from the tour organization and the guide's presentation skills. Practically, all /97%/ of the respondents, who were visiting Plovdiv, were very or rather satisfied with their first stay /87% of the respondents declared this was their first visit to the city/ in Plovdiv.

Similar evaluations were observed in terms of the tour /88% rated it as excellent or very good/ and its guide /96% rated the guide as excellent or very good/. More than 2/3 of the respondents said they would recommend Plovdiv to their relatives and friends, none of them answered they would not. The data were also confirmed by the content analysis of the feedback provided by the participants in the Free Plovdiv Tour published on the Trip Advisor.

Therefore it can be assumed that there are significant city landmarks in Plovdiv, highly appreciated by tourists, and along with that, Plovdiv has found the right formula and the right people who can present these landmarks to its guests.

What do tourists do when they are in Plovdiv?

The typical participant in the Free Plovdiv Tour visited the city for the first time and stayed in it up to a day, without accommodation /52%/; at the same time it was not unusual for them to stay for 2 or more nights /29%/, and every fifth visitor realized at least 1 night /19%/. Their visit was focused mainly on our country /79% of the respondents said that the only country included in their program was Bulgaria, and only 14% indicated that their visit to Plovdiv was a part of their European tour, while 7% said it was a part of their Balkan tour.

The main expenses that tourists made during their visit to Plovdiv were connected with lunch or dinner (70%), hotel accommodation (36%), purchase of souvenirs and gifts (26%), museum visit fees (19%), renting a car fees 19% /.

How do the tourists organize their trip to Plovdiv?

Our respondents most often came to Plovdiv through individually organized trips /79%/, only 20% of them said they used travel packages. *In that regard, more than half of the tourists /60%/ claimed they travelled with low-cost airlines and half of them used the services of airbnb or a similar platform.*

CONCLUSION

Bulgaria is capable of attracting tourists who plan a visit only to our country (79%) and not

as part of a European or Balkan tour. Plovdiv is a good destination for young "budget" tourists who avoid travel agencies and organize their own trips using platforms similar to airbnb and low-cost airlines such as Ryanair and Wizzair for that purpose.

Half of the respondents indicated that the duration of their visit was usually one day (without accommodation in the city), which leads to a reduction in tourist expenses (only 36% of the tourists said they spent the night in the city). Integration of visits outside Plovdiv /Bachkovo Monastery, Starosel, Hisar, etc./ would be of great help in extending this duration.

Plovdiv does not rely on tourists from only one region; it succeeds in attracting a mix of tourists from different countries /from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Israel, etc./, which is a guarantee for sustainable development of the destination.

The research did not provide an answer to the question 'What were the motives of those 13% of the respondents who said this was their second, even third visit to the city?'. It is logical to assume that these are travelers, quite satisfied with their previous stay, who discover something new on their next visit to the city. *It makes sense to invest in extending not only the length of tourists' stay, but also in increasing the segment of tourists who carry out subsequent visits as a source to increase tourist flow.*

Although only 7% of the respondents did not use tourist services during their stay in Plovdiv, more work should be done to diversify the services offered, especially with regard to the income from a tourist. *Special attention should be paid to the development of travel packages aimed at young "budget" travelers who organize their own trips.*

The Free Plovdiv Tour formula works both for the benefit of the well-known post-modern segment of tourists, who cannot afford /or do not want to use/ the services of a professional tour guide, and for the benefit of local guides, who play the role of confidants for tourists in front of the local business /restaurants, car rental companies, museums, souvenir shops, etc./ recommended by them.

ENCLOSURE

Questionnaire

1. How many times have you been to Plovdiv?
 - a/ it is my first time - 87%
 - b/ it is my second time – 5 %
 - c/ it is my third, etc. time – 8 %

2. *How long are you going to stay in Plovdiv?*
 - a/ one afternoon – 17%
 - b/ one full day /without accommodation/– 35%
 - c/ two days /with accommodation in Plovdiv/– 19%
 - d/ more than 2 days-29%
3. *How do you rate the tour?*
 - a/ excellent – 48 %
 - b/ very good – 40 %
 - c/ good – 12 %
 - d/ poor – 0 %
 - e/ very poor – 0 %
4. *How do you rate the guide?*
 - a/ excellent – 67 %
 - b/ very good – 31 %
 - c/ good – 4 %
 - d/ poor – 0 %
 - e/ very poor – 0 %
5. *Are you satisfied with your stay in Plovdiv?*
 - a/ very satisfied – 71 %
 - b/ mainly satisfied – 26 %
 - c/ somewhat satisfied – 3 %
 - d/ mainly dissatisfied – 0 %
 - e/ dissatisfied – 0 %
6. *Your trip includes:*
 - a/ visiting Bulgaria only-79%
 - b/ visiting several Balkan countries – 7%
 - c/ Visiting several European countries – 14%
7. *Specify the tourist destination you liked the most in Plovdiv*
 - a/ The Old Town – 35%
 - b/ The Ancient Theatre – 33%
 - c/ Kapana – 24%
 - d/ The Roman Stadium 23%
 - e/ everything – 18%
 - f/ The Ethnographic Museum – 4%
 - g/ Rahat Tepe – 3%
 - h/ other – 3 %
8. *Which of these services did you use during your stay in Plovdiv?*
 - a/ Lunch or dinner in a restaurant – 70%
 - b/ hotel accommodation – 36%
 - c/ purchase of souvenirs or gifts – 23%
 - d/ visiting paid museums – 19%
 - e/ use of spa – 2%
 - f/ rent a car – 16 %
 - g/ other – 14 %
 - h/ did not use any paid tourist service – 7 %
9. *Would you recommend Plovdiv to your friends?*
 - a/ definitely yes– 68 %
 - b/ rather yes – 15 %
 - c/ may be /not sure/ - 0 %
 - d/ rather no – 0 %
 - e/ definitely no – 0 %
 - f/ non-responders – 17 %
10. *Type of travel:*
 - a/ organized – 20 %
 - b/ individual – 78 %
 - c/ non-responders – 2 %
11. *Who are you traveling with?*
 - a/ my family/partner – 37 %
 - b/ friends – 39 %
 - c/ colleagues – 6 %
 - d/ alone – 17 %
 - f/ non-responders – 1 %
12. *Where do you come from?*
 - a/ Italy – 14 %
 - b/ Israel – 14 %
 - c/ Germany – 13 %
 - d/ Ukraine – 8 %
 - e/ Poland – 7 %
 - f/ France – 7 %
 - g/ Bulgaria – 5 %
 - h/ USA – 5 %
 - i/ Belgium – 4 %
 - g/ Turkey – 3 %
 - k/ Slovenia – 2 %
 - l/ Ireland – 2 %
 - m/ other – 1 %
13. *Age:*
 - a/ up to 20 years olds– 5 %
 - b/ 21 – 35 – 60 %
 - c/ 36 – 50 – 15 %
 - d/ 51 – 65 – 14 %
 - e/ above 65 years olds – 5 %
 - f/ non-responders – 1 %
14. *Have you used low-cost airlines for your trip?*
 - a/ yes – 60 %
 - b/ no – 38 %
 - c/ non-responders – 2 %
15. *Via airbnb or a similar platform?*
 - a/ yes – 50 %
 - b/ no – 47 %
 - c/ non-responders – 3 %

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