

Preliminary communication

GUIDING RELIGIOUS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH MACEDONIA: STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

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Abstract

Religious tourism in North Macedonia is often mentioned but lacks a concrete strategy and stimulation despite the presence of excellent sanctuaries and legends of saints and educators who spread religion and enlightenment in the region. There is a pressing need for a comprehensive strategy to develop religious tourism, including continuous monitoring and coordination of all related activities. The potential of religious sites can only be realized through their valorization, which involves assessing and researching these sites to encourage the development of new tourist destinations and preserve cultural heritage. This heritage, rich with spiritual history, is primarily showcased through religious sanctuaries that serve as historical witnesses. Religious tourism, as an alternative form of tourism, fosters individual or group travel for religious reasons, although it may not always be the primary motivation. The diverse religious shrines, influenced by the various peoples who have settled in Macedonia, hold significant potential for the development of religious tourism. To fully capitalize on this potential, it is essential to evaluate the conditions, strengths, and weaknesses, and identify opportunities to enhance the spiritual richness of these sites.

Key words: strategy, religious buildings, sanctuaries, cultural and spiritual heritage and history.

JEL classification: L83; Z32; I15; O18

INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism, sometimes called spiritual tourism, has gained a huge role around the world. Because of its initial component, pilgrimage, it is often considered the oldest form of tourism dating back thousands of years. Journeys to ancient holy places did not always have a logically supported explanation, but they had the same human motivation: faith. This faith, sometimes extreme, was the basis for shaping religions. The diversity and complexity of religions can be justified through human typology, the environment in which their followers live, culture and last but not least, the stage of development of

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society. The world is an interesting religious mosaic: it can be interesting for both religious tourists and curious travelers.

In medieval Europe, the church acted as a disincentive to all kinds of population movements, because it wanted to bind people close to it so that it could more easily and strongly influence their lives and keep them under control. That's why the church encouraged only religious movements and helped in the realization of the pilgrimage, and the Catholic church has a particularly rich history of pilgrimages. During the renaissance age, interest in this type of travel significantly decreased, so that in the 20th century, it revived again.

Tourist movements motivated by religious reasons have been taking a more massive form in the last few decades, with the fact that we can easily plan tourist routes, regardless of the time intervals, where our goal is, even if it is on another continent. Today this type of tourism is undoubtedly the most developed type of alternative form, which brings movements to the holy places: Vatican, Santiago de Compostela, Mecca, Medina, Fatima, Athos, Meteora, Golgotha, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Lourdes... including a huge mass of people as well as putting into operation all types of means of transport followed by service activities.

As we have already mentioned according to the World Tourism Organization, about 300 to 330 million believers travel to visit their worshiped religious sites around the world every year, and in addition we would mention a few numbers that would define and explain the meaning of the above holy places. The number of people who come to see the Vatican Museum has exceeded five million annually since 2011, and the same number is around 20,000 visitors per day; In 2010, Santiago de Compostela broke the record of over 1 million tourists in just one night, and in 2017, the figure was 2.6 million tourists; Mecca manages to receive more than three million worshipers annually during the Hajj (pilgrimage) and about two million during Ramadan to perform the Umrah; The Sanctuary of Fatima, in Portugal, is visited annually by about 4 million tourists; while Lourdes in France is visited by about 5 million tourists a year; Athos, due to its distinctive laws, allows a daily visit of only 100 Orthodox and only 10 visitors from other religions; Meteora in 2016 reached a figure of 3 million tourists in the same year; Jerusalem is one of the most visited cities in the world with a visit of 3.5 million tourists per year.

DISCUSSION

Religious tourism in the entire territory of the Republic of North Macedonia is in an underdeveloped phase, and in order to rise to a more visible level in the future, professional bodies such as different agencies, organizations should be formed that will manage and develop the complexes according to a precisely developed strategy and program, such as and application of all new strategies, criteria and measures. The professional body should ensure the inventory, categorization, standardization and valuation of the objects, to note and mark the exact number of the counting capacities in the religious objects.

The management should determine the ownership of the facilities (state or private person) and advocate for the state to take care of them. The management would depend on direct funding and on the revenues that the monastery facilities would achieve through:

- Tickets;
- Concessions for opening various shops for souvenirs, food, etc.;

- Rentals of a large number of locations that can be leased for certain activities that will be related to some tourist needs (accommodation, food, events);

Religious tourism in our country is only talked about in passing, but there is no concrete strategy and it is not stimulated at all, although there are excellent sanctuaries, legends about the creations of saints, educators, dervishes who spread religion and enlightenment in these areas. What our country needs is setting up a strategy for the development of religious tourism and constant monitoring of all activities and actions that are undertaken and their coordination.

Potentials for the development of religious tourism:

- A large number of monasteries, churches and mosques;
- Lodgings that are part of the monasteries;
- Favorable geographical position, that is, almost all of the famous religious buildings in our territory are located next to main highways and regional roads, with easy accessibility even though they are built on the slopes of the high mountains of our country;
- Great interest from our neighbors (Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria (visiting churches), Turkey (visiting Ottoman buildings));
- The reconstruction of Vodoca, Veljusa, Zrze, St. Joakom Osogovski, St. Joakim Bigorski, have already shown positive effects;
- The biggest prerequisite for the development of religious tourism is due to the increase in the world's needs of tourists in the tourist market;
- Great landscape value;
- Use of untouched nature;
- Cultivation of eco products and production of organic food in the monastery complexes themselves;
- Knowledge of several languages of priests, monks and sisters, knowledge of technological development (use of computer and internet);
- The combination of a cave and a church is really unusual and unusual both for speleologists, who study caves, and for archaeologists, who study all the traces left by the human hand. They represent an unusual challenge especially for art historians, but also for all those who respect ancient cultures.

Disadvantages:

- Although a large number of religious buildings are connected by roads, the connection itself is unfavorable, that is, there are at least 2-5 km that are not connected by an asphalt road;
- In spite of certain monastery lodgings in larger monasteries, they are still in insufficient number or are not adapted for tourist needs, that is, they are intended only for the needs of monastic life;
- Lack of an accurate number of accommodation facilities, that is, there is no data on the exact number of monastery lodgings;
- Lack of the number of tourists visiting religious buildings;
- Insufficient explanation to tourists about the artistic significance of fresco painting and iconostasis;
- Insufficient openness of facilities for accepting tourists;
- Lack of experts and material opportunities;
- Non-seriousness from the institutions in terms of hygiene and maintenance of the environment and the natural environment;
- Weak promotion and advertising outside the country's borders;

- Lack of specific organized conversations with travel agencies.

In order to successfully start the functioning and inclusion of religious facilities in tourist purposes, it is necessary to:

- To build or complete the traffic infrastructure first;
- Reconstruction and arrangement of the facilities themselves;
- Introduction of one standard price for a night's stay in the facilities in which it is possible to do so;
 - Promotion of foreign markets (especially countries similar to us: Serbia, Montenegro, Russia, Ukraine);
 - Organization of religious tourism programs;
 - Adaptation of monasteries, churches and oriental buildings to the demands of tourists;
 - Training of persons who will be able to accurately translate to tourists the history of the objects in the stories;
 - Arrangement of the environment and surroundings.
- Extending the stay of tourists, during which various workshops would be organized for fresco painting, making icons, various mats, souvenirs, carvings, etc.
 - Traditional preparation of food and adherence to the custom of keeping silent while eating, where only one monk speaks, going to bed at 8 o'clock and getting up at sunrise, that is to experience at least for a short time the monastic life of asceticism .
 - Formation of separate guest houses and a sufficient number of fraternities and sororities that will engage around the tourists in the preparation of bed, food, etc.
 - Tickets that will be charged only to foreign tourists.

In order to develop religious tourism in our country, it is necessary to work actively, to implement tourism projects for this type of tourism, and during the development and setting up of those projects, the following should be involved: the tourism sector, the Macedonian archdiocese, all experts who have a direct connection with knowledge of the cultural and historical significance of the objects, various architects who will determine the construction of certain objects, various excavators, iconographers, fresco painters who will help in determining the value of the works, joining various workshops for souvenirs, art organizations that in addition, they will organize art colonies, in those facilities where there is no such activity.

The main problem for the small development of this type of tourism is the low cooperation of the institutions in the state with the Macedonian archdiocese, because even though they have cooperation, it is only superficial and never penetrates into the essence of the problems, where according to various statements of experts from in these areas there is disagreement, that is, a large part of the monasteries are not open to cooperation for the creation of tourist projects.

Also, the government itself is not sufficiently engaged in terms of development and promotion of these facilities on foreign markets, in fact a large part of them are unknown even to the domestic population, i.e. only the local population knows about certain facilities and only this can help in showing the certain legends, myths and traditions about their origin. If a solid tourist offer were to be formed that would first cover the entire tourist region, such as in the Skopje region in addition to the religious buildings, to include a visit to all other features and values, a tourist offer would be obtained that would last for about 5 days, and the same could be done with all other regions because each of them has its own specific value.

In addition to the rest, the lack of the correct number of accommodation facilities in religious buildings where this can be possible is also a drawback, there are no accurate statistical data on their use, that is, in the state statistics office they are included in the data with prominent accommodation facilities, while attendance is almost impossible to determine. These objects are visited only during major religious holidays, when each monastery or church celebrates a certain holiday, that is, it dedicates its creation to a certain holiday, saint, etc. When Macedonian believers visit the monasteries en masse, a large part of them use the monastic lodgings for one night.

The facilities themselves could organize and create certain programs where the tourists themselves would be involved in the process of making the signs, producing food, growing different types of flowers in the lodges and beautiful flower landscapes in the monastery courtyards. In addition to the organization of multi-day arrangements, one-day trips, excursions especially for the domestic population in certain cities could be organized, i.e. offering opportunities for weekend vacations where only a motive is needed to visit these localities. Food, refreshments, and the attention of the clergy are provided, which are open to all believers who want to get to know this side of the cultural activity, that is, to experience their peace and tranquility and enjoy the magnificent possibilities of these religious facilities. .

The very process of development of religious tourism should first of all know the specificity and complexity of the objects, all primary and secondary influences and which methods and principles would be used to most correctly realize and realize the development. Several stages should be covered such as:

- Initiation;
- Planning and development;
- Production, i.e. the creation of a tourist product;
- Monitoring and control.

Although there are certain projects that initiate development, religious tourism, despite its potential and long history, develops spontaneously and there is a need for greater promotion. All of this would be achieved through data collection, recording and connection with facilities that offer services and are already engaged in some tourist activities, and further inclusion of all other buildings that have potential.

The development of religious tourism in our country will have an impact on several target groups such as:

- Religious buildings, with an increase in attendance.
- Local people who live and work nearby provide local resources for visitors.
- Visitors or tourists (domestic and foreign) who will be better informed about the potential and possibilities for traveling and staying at the monasteries.
- The public sector that encourages tourism development.
- Tourism economy through the inclusion of monasteries in the basic and additional offer, only tourist management and the like.

Marketing in tourism raises many questions. The sales, i.e. distribution network is largely conditioned by the relations between tour operators, travel agencies and the tourist offer of the receiving country. These are important relationships that drive or limit marketing success. However, the most important issue in marketing policy does not concern the consideration of the distribution network, but the image that the country and its tourism sector want to project.

The country must create an active and realistic image that will differentiate the tourist destination from other destinations. The image of the country as a tourist destination

should be realistic and promote sustainable development. However, the creation of that image should not be left only to the tourism sector, because then we cannot expect that the outcome will be successful. The development of tourism is a long-term process that requires long-term and continuous investments in infrastructure and other facilities. For these reasons, the government often limits itself to the economic effects that tourism can generate.

As an unused advantage and a good example, we can point to the monastery of Saint Ilija Gorni, which is located at the foot of Skopje Montenegro, near the village of Banjani and the valley of the Banjska Reka. It is characteristic that this beautiful place was used in certain scenes of the movie "Before the Rain" - the work of the Macedonian director Milcho Manchevski, but very few people are familiar with that fact because it is not mentioned anywhere or advertised in the country. Many locations like this one have the potential to open a restaurant with parking spaces, or a souvenir shop, where they would sell souvenirs and decorations related to the movie.

10 km from Prilep, in the embrace of the massive rocks below the peak of Zlatov vrh, there is one of the oldest churches "Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary", with beautiful nature and an amazing view of the entire Pelagonia, as well as a long history followed by interesting stories. Today, although investment is being made in the reconstruction of the lodgings, the current abbot fears for the condition of the monastery, which is left to the mercy of the gods and certain parts are already beginning to be lost and it is necessary to take steps for their protection and restoration. The monastery has opened its doors to all visitors who, together with the father, can enjoy peace of mind, traditional food and the opportunity to get acquainted with the enormous wealth of frescoes and paintings.

Every small, underdeveloped place abounds with its own beauties and values that have failed to reach the general public, such an example is Resen, where the 400-year-old Slivnica Monastery is located. There was a school in its premises, and there was also the largest library of the Greek bishop, which was burned because it was in Slavic. The discovery of the identical fresco of Saint Sisoe above the tomb of Alexander the Great is also interesting (there is another such fresco only in Meteori, Greece). Of course, the above facts allude to the fact that the monastery has great potential through a good marketing plan to be restored and to make it easier to visit through organized tours, a space for a break or a multi-day stay where tourists could leave more money.

From a tourist point of view, the monasteries have potential, but they are not yet sufficiently utilized and have not been put to the function of tourism, and on average a certain part of the monasteries were unknown even to the resident population until recently, and in the framework of world development, it is necessary to pay a lot of attention of the manasirs who are beginning to gain international importance. Such monasteries are: St. Panteleimon in Gorno Nerezi and Markov Monastery, Pologsky Monastery, St. Gjorgi, Lešok Monastery, Monastery of St. Jovan Bigorski, St. Gjorgi in Kurbinovo, the Treskavec and Zrze monasteries, the Eljusa and Vodocha monasteries, the Lesnovski monastery as well as the monastery of St. Joakim Osogovski. Our country should generally base the development of religious tourism on the basis of the Orthodox countries that are in our vicinity, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Bulgaria, Russia and Ukraine.

The famous sanctuaries in the country should be animated and the tourism agencies should be connected, the media should be involved and the important religious buildings should be talked about as much as possible.

Tourist infrastructure for the development of tourism in the broadest sense of the word is represented by the total built accommodation facilities (hotels, motels, lodgings, boarding houses, resorts, camps, etc.), catering facilities (restaurants, cafes, bars, kebab shops, etc.), roads and means of transport. All of them need to be built in a tourist destination so that it can function as such. In the narrower sense of the word, the term tourist infrastructure covers the infrastructure facilities that are necessary for the development of tourism in a destination. It has an important place in the tourist offer. The volume of tourist traffic depends on it. At the same time, it is a basic indicator of the degree of tourist development of the specific tourist destination. Because of its enormous importance in the development of tourism, every country pays great attention to its construction.

A large part of the tourist infrastructure has not been built and is not being built exclusively for the needs of tourists. Accommodation and catering facilities, apart from tourists, are also intended for business people, for travelers whose motives for traveling are not touristic, as well as for the resident population. It is particularly characteristic of hotel and catering facilities in larger cities and business centers. In contrast to them, hotel and catering facilities in tourist destinations are intended to meet the needs of domestic and foreign tourists.

Roads and means of transport are also not built exclusively for the needs of tourists, but have a general significance for the development of the economy and society. Exceptions are cable cars and ski lifts in winter sports centers. Traffic is an economic activity that includes the transportation of passengers, goods and news from one place to another and is one of the most important segments for the development of tourism. The Republic of North Macedonia, with its favorable geographical position, has always represented an area that many peoples and civilizations were interested in, passing through and settling there. This is probably why modern roads were built at that time, the most mentioned of which is the Via Egnatia road, which connected Rome with Constantinople, passing through our entire country. However, after the first and second world wars, the roads remained in a very bad condition, and thus to this day, even though they have been renovated, most of the time only the long highways are in a good condition, and not the other roads that, for example, would take us to a tourist significant locality or attraction. Mainly, water and rail traffic have been reduced to minimal use due to poor infrastructure, while air traffic is on the rise even though of the two airports in the country, only 1 is in constant operation.

From the above it can be concluded that the construction of the tourist infrastructure for the needs of tourism is connected with the development of the economy as a whole. At the same time, the fact that tourism and other economic activities must be developed in a complementary manner must be taken into account. The greater the differences in the level of development between the economy and tourism, the smaller the effects of that development.

CONCLUSION

The Republic of North Macedonia is a biblical country with a huge wealth of churches, monasteries, healing waters and miraculous icons. The number and variety of over 155 completely preserved monasteries and 90 that are in various stages of disappearance suggest us about the past of people whose history is filled with creation, art and spirituality. Late Antiquity and the transition to the Middle Ages ended with the

disintegration of the Roman Empire into Eastern and Western. Territorially and temporally, this period left indelible traces on the archaeological and artistic landscape of the Republic of Macedonia, considering the fact that it has always been a crossroads between the cultural West and the mystical Orient. A place where the dualism of suffering and resurrection was always present. Starting from the Paleolithic, through other prehistoric cultures, the period from the time of the ancient Greeks, Romans, the entire Middle Ages and Byzantium, the Ottoman rule and up to today, numerous traces with a rich palette of icons and vivid fresco - painting in churches and monasteries from different periods. Macedonian monasteries are our richest cultural treasure, filled with a wealth of frescoes, icons, carvings, old books and manuscripts. They are representatives of the cultural heritage of all historical events, and they were also spiritual centers, sources and witnesses of Macedonian Orthodoxy.

However, when all the parameters are analyzed, we will finally come to the conclusion that religious tourism in the entire territory of the Republic of Macedonia is in an insufficiently developed phase, and in order to rise to a more visible level in the future, expert bodies should be formed, such as various agencies, organizations that they will manage and develop the complexes according to a precisely developed strategy and program, as well as the application of all new strategies, criteria and measures. The professional body should ensure the inventory, categorization, standardization and valuation of the objects, to note and mark the exact number of the counting capacities in the religious objects. Religious tourism in the Republic of Macedonia is only talked about in passing, but there is no concrete strategy and it is not stimulated at all, although there are excellent sanctuaries, legends about the creations of saints, educators, dervishes who spread religion and enlightenment in these areas. What our country needs is setting up a strategy for the development of religious tourism and constant monitoring of all activities and actions that are undertaken and their coordination.

In order to develop religious tourism in our country, it is necessary to work actively, to implement tourism projects for this type of tourism, and during the development and setting up of those projects, the following should be involved: the tourism sector, the Macedonian archdiocese, all experts who have a direct connection with knowledge of the cultural and historical significance of the objects, various architects who will determine the construction of certain objects, various excavators, iconographers, fresco painters who will help in determining the value of the works, joining various workshops for souvenirs, art organizations that in addition, they will organize art colonies, in those facilities where there is no such activity. From a tourist point of view, the monasteries have potential, but they are not yet sufficiently utilized and have not been put to the function of tourism, and on average a certain part of the monasteries were unknown even to the resident population until recently, and in the framework of world development, it is necessary to pay a lot of attention of the manasirs who are beginning to gain international importance.

For the development of tourism in the broadest sense of the word, a developed tourist infrastructure is needed, which is represented by the total built accommodation facilities (hotels, motels, overnight stays, boarding houses, resorts, camps, etc.), catering facilities (restaurants, cafes, bars, kebab shops, etc.), traffic roads and means of transport. All of them need to be built in a tourist destination so that it can function as such. In the narrower sense of the word, the term tourist infrastructure covers the infrastructure facilities that are necessary for the development of tourism in a destination. It has an important place in the tourist offer. The volume of tourist traffic depends on it. At the

same time, it is a basic indicator of the degree of tourist development of the specific tourist destination. Because of its enormous importance in the development of tourism, every country pays great attention to its construction. A large part of the tourist infrastructure has not been built and is not being built exclusively for the needs of tourists. Accommodation and catering facilities, apart from tourists, are also intended for business people, for travelers whose motives for traveling are not touristic, as well as for the resident population. It is particularly characteristic of hotel and catering facilities in larger cities and business centers. In contrast to them, hotel and catering facilities in tourist destinations are intended to meet the needs of domestic and foreign tourists.

Traffic is an economic activity that includes the transportation of passengers, goods and news from one place to another and is one of the most important segments for the development of tourism. The Republic of North Macedonia, with its favorable geographical position, has always represented an area that many peoples and civilizations were interested in, passing through and settling there. This is probably why modern roads were built at that time, the most mentioned of which is the Via Egnatia road, which connected Rome with Constantinople, passing through our entire country. However, after the first and second world wars, the roads remained in a very bad condition, and thus to this day, even though they have been renovated, most of the time only the long highways are in a good condition, and not the other roads that, for example, would take us to a tourist significant locality or attraction. Mainly, water and rail traffic have been reduced to minimal use due to poor infrastructure, while air traffic is on the rise even though of the two airports in the country, only one is in constant operation.

At the end of all that has been stated as a final conclusion, it can be stated that the Republic of North Macedonia, in addition to having an extraordinary potential from religious heritage, religious tourism is still at a low level of development and lags far behind neighboring countries that have similar or approximately the same religious inheritance. All of this points to a lack of strategy and real promotion of religious tourism, which, if properly managed, can grow into a supporting pillar of tourism in our country.

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