

IMPROVING LEISURE SERVICES FOR GENERATION Z TOURISTS IN RURAL DESTINATIONS

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***Abstract.** The rural tourism has as a fundament a chain of traditional activities connected to hospitality, rest and recreation. Tourists, in general, aim to spend their free time in an area with tourist potential, rich in ancestral traditions and customs, which will offer them memorable experiences. It is important to understand the expectations of tourists regarding recreational and leisure activities in rural areas, in order that their experience becomes a pleasant one. This study aims to identify ways to improve the leisure services for Generation Z tourists in rural destinations. A quantitative research was carried out in Bran, one of the most popular rural tourist destinations in Romania. The data obtained and the results of this analysis provided a perspective on the current preferences for leisure services in the rural tourism, taking into consideration the views of Generation Z tourists.*

***Key words:** leisure services, rural destination, quantitative research, Generation Z tourists' preferences*

INTRODUCTION

The rural tourism has a significant role in the economic development of areas or regions that have tourist attractions. Recent approaches in the literature have renewed interest in the rural tourism as a factor of socio-economic development [11,14,19]. In the recent decades, there has been a growing trend for the urban population to choose rural areas for holiday purposes, possibly stimulated by a trend of dividing holiday periods throughout the year and an increase in short distance travel [25]. This demand has led to the emergence of new business opportunities, so there is a need to develop new and diversified products and experiences of rural tourism [13]. Rural tourism started from the idea of bringing together traditional activities related to hospitality, rest, recreation and leisure. Tourists aim to spend their free time in an area with tourist potential, rich in ancestral traditions and customs, which will allow them to live memorable experiences. The rural experience is the subjective and emotional mental state experienced by the rural tourists in their interaction with people (including service providers), with rural places, with rural resources, facilities and activities carried out in rural areas [2]. Tourism is often considered to be segmented and personalized according to the needs and desires of the tourist [9]. There is a link between competitiveness and the ability of a business to improve products and services and to innovate constantly, the correlation between tourism growth and innovation being obvious [20]. It becomes important not only for the tourist, but also for entrepreneurs to understand everything about rural tourism [22]. A favorable experience and a positive evaluation of services can lead to a positive overview of the rural tourism, reflected by the associations retained in the tourist's memory after living the experience [2].

The Romanian tourism industry, especially the rural tourism industry is largely dominated by small and medium enterprises [24]. The rural tourism is one of the fast developing fields in The Eastern European countries [18]. The villages and the rural settlements located on the Romanian territory still keep alive many of the elements of

authenticity and ancient traditions, an aspect that is of interest for the entire European community. Many studies treat aspects regarding rural tourism in Romania [26,10,6,5,1,16,12,15,4,7,17,8]. The consumer of rural tourism is different from all other consumers, and entrepreneurs need to know everything about their needs and expectations [22]. The study on rural tourism in Romania, conducted by Cosma revealed that there are several services that all the analyzed pensions offer: traditional food, breakfast, parking space, special place for children, television, entertainment and local products; Leasing services include sauna, fitness room, sports fields and treatment facilities. Prioritizing services based on customer preferences indicates a combination of relaxation, comfort, food and cleanliness [3]. Studies which address issues of leisure activities in rural tourism are few, and most of these studies analyze the services offered by accommodation service providers. In this sense, these services are addressed especially to the preferences of adults of generations X and Y, who travel alone, with family (including children) or with friends. Regarding the services and agreement facilities, it is noted that most pensions have a place for children, but these facilities are generally addressed to young children. Studies addressing the expectations and requirements of Z generation tourists (people born between 1990-2010) are few. Generation Z tourists seek out hospitality and tourism products, services, and experiences that enhance their overall well-being, on the following areas: physical, mental/health, social, technological/digital, and environmental [21]. The Tavares, Cobanoglu and Ivanov study reveals significant differences between people in generation Z and non-generation Z and a potential demand for sea cruises [23]. Studies which analyze the leisure activities of tourists staying in tourist boarding houses that offer accommodation in camp in rural tourism destinations have not been identified.

In this context, this study aims to identify ways to improve leisure services in rural tourist destinations. The objectives of the research: 1) identification of the types of leisure activities preferred by young tourists and children (Generation Z tourists) staying in tourist and agro-tourist boarding houses that offer accommodation services in camp regime in rural tourist destinations; 2) identifying ways to improve leisure services in rural destinations for Generation Z tourists.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The rural tourist destination where the research was conducted is Bran region in Brasov County, Romania. Bran is a mountain tourist resort, representing the starting point of rural tourism in Romania. Bran benefits from a special natural site, the proximity of the Piatra Craiului Mountains and a traditional specific of great value. A strong point of the destination is The Bran Castle, one of the most visited tourist attractions in Romania due to The Dracula legend. The basic occupations of the people are herding, agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry, which are the premises for the development of rural tourism in the area. In Bran, the tradition is preserved: handcraft activities are practiced (wood processing, milk processing at the sheepfold, wool washing in the pile, weaving), transhumance is still practiced and the traditional holidays are kept (in spring - Milk sharing; in summer - Fair; in autumn - The tumult of the sheep, when the sheep come down from the mountain, in winter - Christmas). Hiking can be done in this area - there are 7 approved mountain tourist routes departing from Bran, but also winter sports - there are two ski slopes here. Moreover, on the territory of this tourist destination we will find protected areas: Piatra Craiului National Park, Bucegi Natural Park, Bucegi Reserve. The tourist reception infrastructure is extremely developed, most of the accommodation units

are units specific to the rural tourism, respectively tourist boarding houses and agro-tourist boarding houses.

The research method used was the survey among tourists who stayed in Bran, in tourist and agro-tourist boarding houses which offer accommodation in a camp. The data collection was done through an electronic questionnaire using The Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) method, which involves collecting data by uploading the online questionnaire on the Internet and completing it by the respondent directly in the browser, without using other applications. The sample, formed by 106 people, has the following structure according to age and gender: men (47.2%), women (52.8%), people under 14 years (86.8%), people between 14 and 28 years (7.5%), people aged between 29 and 41 years (4.7%), people aged between 42 and 60 years (0.9%). Most of the respondents are of Romanian nationality (96.2%), and of other nationalities: Italian (1.9%), Turkish (0.9%), Hungarian (0.9%). Data analysis was accomplished using SPSS.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Regarding the age of the respondents, most of them are under 14 years old (86.8%), they belong to generation Z. In second place is the generation between 14 and 28 years old (7.5%), ie generation Y. Most the respondents (98.1%) choose the destination Bran for relaxation and leisure. Therefore, due to the fact that Generation Z tourists choose this rural tourist destination for relaxation and leisure, it is important to understand what are their preferences regarding the types of leisure activities.

Regarding the length of the stay (figure 1), the majority of the respondents (87.3%) choose to spend a 7-day stay in this rural destination, and 53.8% come during the weekend. Therefore, the length of stay of Generation Z tourists in the camp is significant for this rural tourist destination, both in terms of the number of days, which exceeds the average length of stay of Non-Generation Z tourists, but also by the fact that 46.2% come during the week, in the context in which most times of the year, Non-Generation Z tourists come to Bran on weekends.

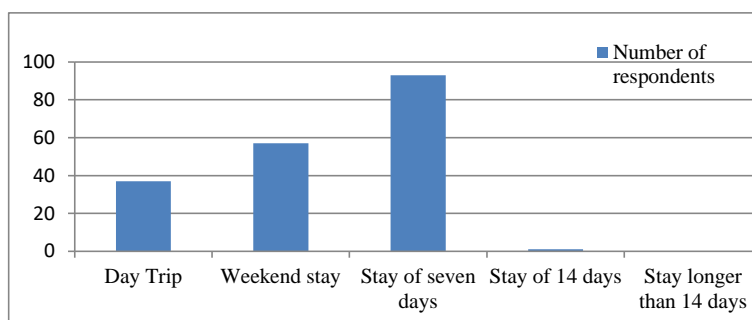


Figure 1. The period of time allocated to the stay

Depending on the way they travel (figure 2), respondents tend to come to this destination more frequently in the camp (62 tourists), with colleagues or family, sometimes with friends. Tourists who choose tourist and agro-tourist boarding houses that offer accommodation services in a camp regime do not travel alone or as a couple. Therefore,

Generation Z tourists who come to Bran come most often to the camp. For these situations, the owners of boarding houses must offer tourist services that are in correlation with the expectations and requirements of this generation, that occupy their time in a pleasant way and that constitute memorable experiences.

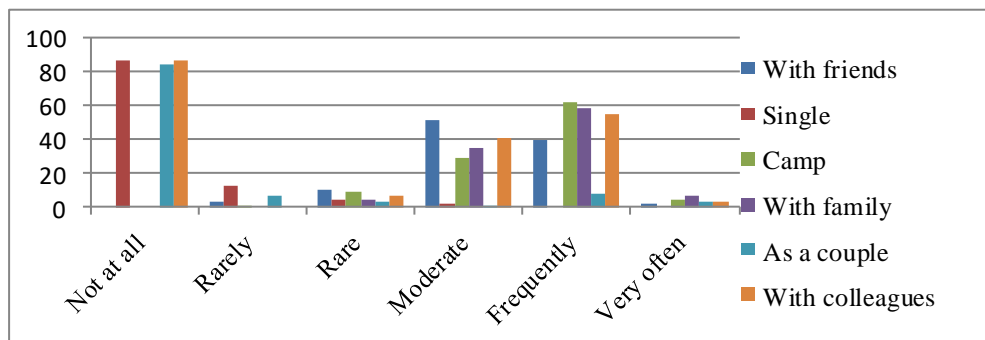


Figure 2. The way to travel

The answers to the question regarding the preferred leisure activities and which the respondents want to practice in the rural tourist destination Bran, are presented in figure3.

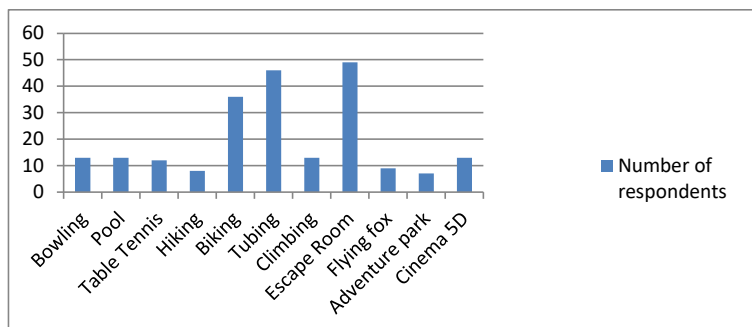


Figure 3. Leisure activities preferred by tourists

It is important to understand what leisure activities are preferred by Generation Z tourists, in the context in which previous studies reveal significant differences between Generation Z and non-Generation Z people and a potential demand for tourist activities [23]. Regarding the leisure activities, 46.2% of respondents prefer Escape Room leisure activities, 43.4% of respondents prefer tubing, 43.4% of respondents prefer biking, these being the activities that obtained the highest scores. A good score (12.3%) was obtained by leisure activities such as: bowling, swimming pool, climbing and 5D cinema. Average scores were activities such as table tennis (11.3%) and zip line (8.5%). The lowest scores were for hiking activities (7.5%) and adventure park (6.6%). Respondents also suggested other leisure activities they would like to practice in Bran: skiing, archery, treasure hunting and carriage rides. Therefore, Generation Z tourists are looking for tourism products, services and experiences in rural destinations that increase their physical, mental, social, technological/digital and environmental well-being. The results confirm those of Olson and Ro [21].

Analyzing the respondents' preferences and the possibility to benefit from the leisure activities they want to practice in Bran, we discovered that there are facilities and

infrastructure for biking, bowling, swimming, climbing, 5D cinema, tennis table, zip line and hiking. Many of the guesthouses have bicycles that are being offered for rent to tourists, who can go biking in the area. However, it should be noted that in Bran there are no bike lanes or mountain bike trails. In this regard, the local administration of Bran will have to take measures to remedy this problem. Indoor leisure activities such as bowling, climbing, 5D cinema, table tennis are offered to tourists by entrepreneurs who have developed such businesses in leisure centers. Some accommodation units have a swimming pool and zip lines, services that can be used both by tourists staying with them and also by visitors as well. Hiking is possible, there are seven approved mountain tourist routes from Bran. Leisure activities suggested by the respondents (skiing, archery, treasure hunting and carriage rides) can also be practiced in Bran.

The destination Bran does not have the endowments and the infrastructure for practicing Escape Room and tubing agreement activities. A solution to improve the leisure services for the Bran tourist destination is represented by the development of Escape Room and tubing agreement activities. Such activities can be developed as stand-alone businesses or as services for the tourist boarding houses, especially those that offer camping accommodation services. In this sense, we will further present this type of agreement activities, as well as the technical and the financial implications of such an investment.

The Escape Room is a physical adventure game in which players solve a series of puzzles and riddles using clues, hints and strategies to complete the objectives with what they have at hand. Players are given a time limit to reveal the secret password that is hidden in the room [27]. Considering that most Generation Z members have used digital technology from an early age and are familiar with the internet and social media, we recommend the use of new augmented reality technologies in The Escape Room, which will help to solve a puzzle or game with the help of a mobile application, and after the player solves the requirement, he will be able to escape the room and win the game. Before using the application in augmented reality, the player will first use the physical clues from the escape room. The arrangement of an Escape Room implies the existence of a generous room, of at least 50 sq m, its endowment with physical articles and the implementation of augmented reality technology. The investment regarding the arrangement of an Escape Room implies a cost of 13,000 Eur, of which 8,300 Eur represents the costs with the introduction of augmented reality technology in the escape room system.

Tubing is an improved version of the standard sleigh. The fun is ensured by descending with the help of an inflatable tire on a snow surface or other surfaces specially prepared to be used in summer. Most tubing tracks are equipped with a special lift to easily reach the top of the track (<https://www.sunkidworld.com/en/tubing-uebersicht>). There are three types of tubing slopes: those with curves, similar to bobsled tracks, those with straight waves without curves or slopes that combine both types, respectively with waves and curves. The slope maintenance and preparation of the slope must be between 12% and 25% (incline) and the sliding surface must be designed according to the type of slope [28]. The arrangement of a tubing track in order to be used during all seasons implies the existence of a sloping ground and specific equipment. Thus, for the arrangement of a tubing track with curves with a length of 60 meters and a variable width, between 1.5 - 2 m, a land area of approximately 2000 sqm is required and a slope of 30%. The elevator will have a shorter length than the track, measuring 50 meters and will be able to transport both people and inflatable tires. The investment regarding the arrangement of such a tubing

track implies a cost of arrangement and endowment of the space of 3,500 Eur, of which 1,900 Eur represents the costs for the tubing part - materials, labor and accessories, 1,100 Eur represents the costs for the acquisition and installation of the elevator (type Sunkid Wondercarpet, electrically operated) and 500 Eur represent the costs of land preparation. Such investments can be covered in a relatively short time.

CONCLUSIONS

At the level of the rural tourist destination, it is important to have a diversified range of leisure services, in correlation with the requirements and expectations of the tourists. The solutions for improving the leisure services at the level of Bran as tourist destination are represented by the development of specific leisure activities for Generation Z tourists, for young people and children. The implementation of such solutions has effects both in the short term - being an important step in increasing the quality of leisure services at the destination level and increasing tourist satisfaction, and in the medium and long term - leading to loyal tourists.

The research results show that the majority of the clientele of tourist and agro-tourist boarding houses that offer accommodation services in camp type resorts in Bran rural destination is represented by children who participate in camps organized for a period of 7 days (they are under 14 years old, belonging to generation Z).

The types of leisure activities preferred by Generation Z tourists staying in tourist and agro-tourist boarding houses that offer camp accommodation services in the rural tourist destination Bran, mentioned in order of preference are: Escape Room, tubing, biking, bowling, swimming pool, climbing, 5D cinema, table tennis, zip line, hiking and adventure park. It should be noted that Generation Z tourists want to practice leisure activities such as Escape Room using a state-of-the-art technology - augmented reality, tubing track, which is practicable in both summer and winter, and, not least, biking. The results regarding that Generation Z tourists look for products, services and tourist experiences in rural destinations that increase their physical, mental, social, technological / digital and environmental well-being confirm those of Olson and Ro [21].

The research results are useful both to the managers of rural tourist destinations, but also to the owners of tourist accommodation units in the rural areas, and the entrepreneurs who want to develop new types of businesses in the field of leisure in the rural areas. This study has some limitations. The main limitation of this research is generated by the fact that the sample consisted mostly of Generation Z tourists staying in tourist boarding houses that offer accommodation in camp. Another limitation is that the research was conducted for a single rural tourist destination, namely Bran, in Romania, and most tourists are Romanian - culturally different from guests from other countries. Future research could be extended to complete this study. The authors aim to continue research on this topic, including qualitative and quantitative studies, and to investigate the presence of other variables in these studies, such as Generation Z tourists' preferences regarding the leisure activities of tourists staying in other types of rural accommodation, in other tourist destinations, as well as in other states, and expand research for tourists of other nationalities.

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