

EFFECTS PRODUCED BY PROPOSING NEW TOURIST SERVICES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM FOR SENIORS

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***Abstract.** The tourism sector is facing a redefinition of its products, services and activities to better engage older people, given the emerging opportunities of demographic change, globalization, sustainability, low-cost business models, health and well-being. A key challenge for all countries in the world and, in particular, the European Union, is the aging of the population. It is a major social challenge (in terms of public budgets, labor force, competitiveness and quality of life), but also an opportunity for new jobs. The rapid growth of the senior population is caused by a double reality: the post-World War II generations had fewer children than previous generations and the average life expectancy is higher due to medical advances and a better quality of life. Understanding the motivations and needs of senior travelers is fundamental for tourism businesses. It is also necessary to understand that seniors are interested in tourism in the off-season. Lower prices can attract large groups of seniors, who can support many local businesses. During the peak season there are many customers, but it is also necessary to support businesses in the hospitality industry in the off-season. While currently the 55+ senior group represents 18% of the population, in 2050 it is expected that tourism for the elderly will reach 33%. In the case of a vacation for seniors, where comfort, the right destination, the ideal hotel and the optimal mode of transportation should take precedence, but the way a reservation is made can significantly influence the quality of the experience in that destination. In most cases, a senior needs a little more comfort to properly enjoy their travel experience.*

***Keywords:** tourism sector, opportunities of demographic change, motivations and needs of senior travelers.*

INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to seriously explore the business opportunities generated by the aging of the global population. It is necessary to understand the needs of this age segment, offer friendly tourist packages and adapt tourist infrastructures and services. All these aspects increase competitiveness and, interdependently, increase the degree of employment or retention of employees in the labor market, leading to the feeling of satisfaction and happiness of these customers - the elderly.[7]

We are currently witnessing an unprecedented demographic phenomenon - the aging of the planet's population. This has major economic implications from several points of view, starting with the reduction of the global labor force, greater pressure on health services and, finally, the creation of a new, growing market for tourism. This demographic evolution will continue; in 2050, the United Nations estimates that there will be 2 billion seniors, which means that every fifth person will be over 60 years old and every sixth person will be over 65 years old or older. It will be the first time in human history that the number of elderly people will be greater than the number of children between 0 and 14 years old.[2,5,9]

This rapid growth in the senior population is caused by a dual reality:[1,4]

- the post-World War II generations had fewer children than previous generations and are now reaching the age of 65 or older;
- the average life expectancy is higher due to medical advances and a better quality of life.

This situation will dominate economies, countries and societies over the coming years. As a result, the senior market has been recognized as one of the most important consumer segments in general and, in particular, in tourism.[3,11]

Understanding the motivations and needs of senior travelers is fundamental for tourism businesses. As a person ages, their needs and social roles change, so does their motivation to travel. While teenagers are eager to test their own limits and seek adventure, middle-aged people focus on recreation and family, seniors want to fulfill their dreams. The most common travel motivations for seniors are rest and relaxation, social interaction, exercise, learning, nostalgia, and excitement. Younger seniors (ages 55-64) are more interested in some relaxation and leisure activities, while older seniors (ages 65 and older) are interested in educational attractions or outdoor recreation.[5,6]

There are multiple approaches to the profile of senior travelers, their preferences, needs and requirements. Some of these are:[8,10,11,12]

- Destination safety, tour operator reputation and health and safety concerns are the most important factors for senior tourists. Ensuring protection, security and developing easy and convenient access, supporting accommodation and attractions and improving facilities for senior tourists, all of these aspects should be taken into account;

- Single seniors want to travel in groups; they prefer long-distance destinations; they are generally unfamiliar with the destination and book guided tours, use either a plane or bus, prefer to be accommodated in hotels, or with friends and relatives;

- Seniors traveling as couples prefer domestic destinations and most often organize their trips alone. They use either a charter flight or a car and prefer to stay in holiday residences. The third group prefers unknown destinations for their holidays. They use a wide range of travel options and types of excursions;

- Senior travelers want hotel packages and promotions that are exciting, creative and focused on the value of the experiences and the tourist offer;

- Senior tourists appreciate the attention given to them and personalized services, oriented to their needs, friendliness, kindness and hospitality, but also a beautiful and clean environment, a pleasant atmosphere, socializing with others, healthy food and activities, etc.

Senior stays are becoming increasingly popular, as they are vacations where older people can organize their time as they wish. Unlike classic stays, where itineraries are set from the beginning and optional excursions are sometimes available, in the case of senior stays, things are different. Once they arrive at their destination, seniors have the opportunity to choose the excursions they want to go on or, if they just want to relax, they can explore the surroundings. This way, the stay will be a dream for them and they will be able to visit as much as their physical condition or health allows. This aspect is very important and fortunately, senior stays respect the wishes of each person. In the following, we will present some senior stays that can be to everyone's liking.[4,13,16,18]

A vacation is always welcome and at any age. There are so many places to see, experiences to live and adventures to try! Whether choosing a quiet mountain vacation for the atmosphere of a traditional Romanian area, or a trip abroad, to a familiar place or a new city, or pampering yourself with a spa vacation or simply an adventure on a cruise, travel is currently more accessible than ever.[14,15,17]

The offers for seniors are complete packages and include all the services necessary for a stay: transportation, accommodation, meals and a Romanian-speaking group guide in the case of trips abroad. They also include other benefits in the price:[19]

- a trip to visit a famous area or a famous monument, without charging an additional fee, as is generally practiced;

- soft drinks or alcoholic beverages, regardless of the meal plan offered, which would not usually include drinks, while in the programs for seniors water, juice, wine are included.

Senior offers have reduced rates, thus giving you the opportunity to visit destinations that, usually, have higher-cost offers. In addition, in most tourist destinations, significant price discounts are offered to people over 60 years of age on countless facilities: local train tickets, entrance fees to museums and other tourist attractions, theater or opera. In some countries or cities, seniors can also enjoy price discounts on consumption in restaurants. Such an offer becomes extremely advantageous from a financial point of view, because many extra costs of a regular vacation (access and visit fees, food and local transportation) are no longer a concern.[12,13,15,17]

In senior programs, seniors generally go, forming a homogeneous group, and the participants have a close average age who take part together in a vacation full of pleasant surprises.[5]

Senior programs are generally organized at the end of the peak season, thus avoiding the crowds of the peak season or the extreme temperatures that characterize some destinations, thus offering the possibility of visiting a city in peace or the possibility of a vacation in a resort that offers an atmosphere of intimacy, being able to take full advantage of local off-season offers that come with low prices and benefits.[10,11,18]

Especially in the case of a senior vacation, where care for comfort, the right destination, the ideal hotel and the optimal mode of transportation should take precedence, the way in which a reservation is made can significantly influence the quality of the experience in that destination.[19]

Especially if a senior intends to book a vacation in a certain destination on his own, the safest and most comfortable method by which he can do this is to use a travel agency, obviously with experience in the field and recommendations.

Another important factor when it comes to senior vacations is choosing the right destination. Of course, the vacation owner is the one who decides what exactly he would like to do when he is on vacation: explore the beauty and attractions of a new city, relax, stay at the beach and at the hotel SPA, etc.[5,12,17]

Once the vacation profile has been established, there is still the orientation to the most suitable place, and in this case, the advice of an experienced travel agent can make the difference.

Transportation is also another important element to consider when it comes to booking a vacation for seniors, as it must be as comfortable as possible.

Once these details are established, the ideal vacation for a senior begins to take shape.[10,16]

A successful vacation does not have to be an exception or a luxury. Regardless of age, traveling remains a unique opportunity to discover the world, learn about cultures, visit friends and relatives from other corners of the world, or indulge in a heavenly place.[13,15]

MATERIAL AND METHOD

To understand how the introduction of tourist services in tourism packages for seniors could influence, we used the questionnaire method, a questionnaire intended for people over 50 years of age. The questionnaire was applied within the Timișoara municipality between April and June 2024 to a number of 475 people.

For a more efficient identification of the needs, interests and expectations of people over 50 years of age in relation to the tourist services sector, we resorted to dividing the questionnaire into three parts. In the first part, we aimed to collect information regarding

the status and demographics of those interviewed. In the second part, we tried to identify, as succinctly as possible, the attitude towards travel and tourism in general. The third part is a part that tries to identify people's opinion regarding the introduction of new tourist services and finding a more pleasant and interesting way to spend their holidays.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Females were more willing to answer our questions. We attribute this to the fact that women are more open, communicative, and eager to socialize.

Considering that life expectancy is not very high in Romania compared to other European Union states, we can say, according to the figure above, that we are truly pleased with the relatively high number of people over 70 who answered all our questions.

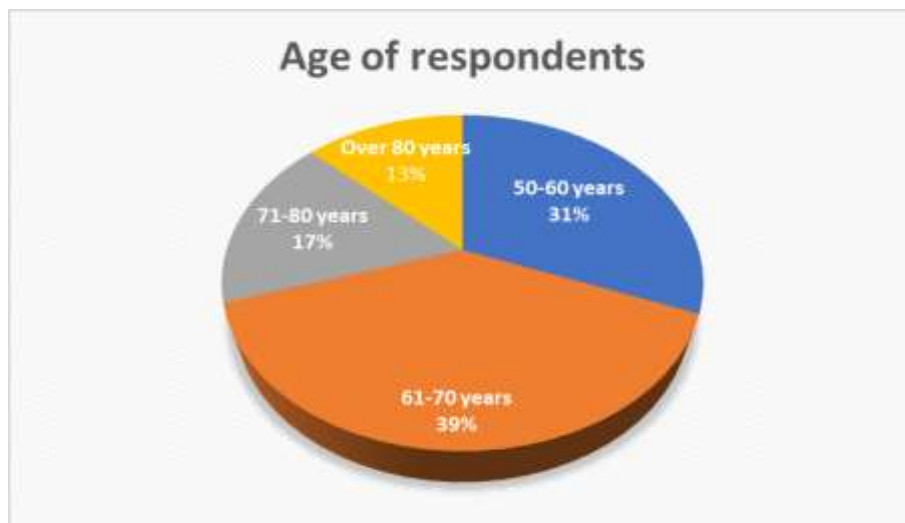


Figure 1 – Age of respondents

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

The level of education of the people who answered our questions is shown in the figure below. We note that people with higher education are predominantly in the age categories 50-60 years and 61-70 years.

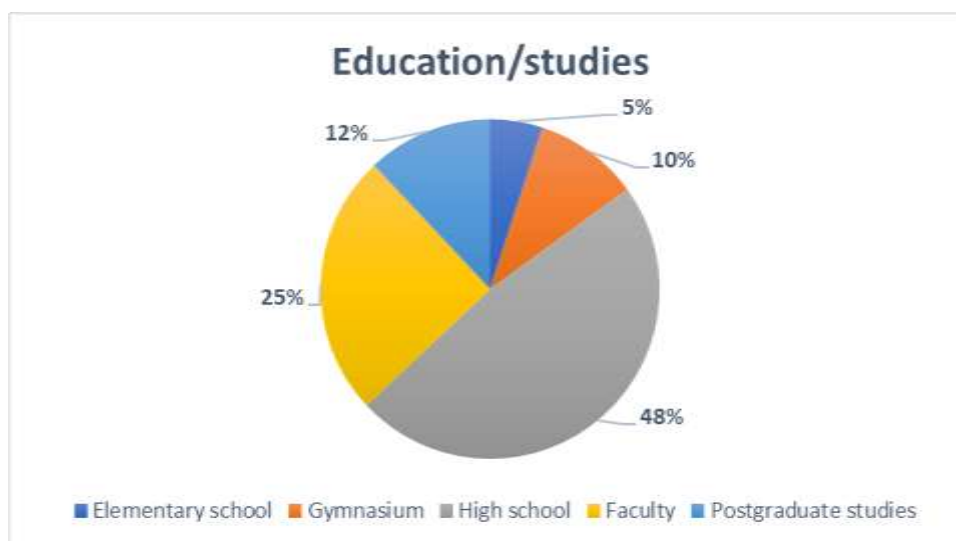


Figure 2 – Education/studies

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

Considering that this questionnaire was applied in the municipality of Timișoara, mainly in the central areas of the city, we believe that this aspect fully justifies the urban origin of the respondents.

The place where people choose to spend their holidays is closely related to the income level of those who answered our questions, a fact highlighted by the large number of those who choose to spend their holidays in the country. Those who choose to spend their holidays abroad in EU countries are those who have children or other relatives established in these countries, which is why they choose this option. There are very few who choose countries other than EU member states abroad, namely more exotic destinations, and these are the ones who have higher incomes and can afford such holidays.

The length of stay is also closely related to the income level of the people interviewed. Therefore, we can see that the largest majority resort to shorter stays, of four days, followed by those who resort to stays of a maximum of 8 days. A relatively small number of those who responded to our questionnaire resort to stays between 8 and 14 days or even more than 14 days.

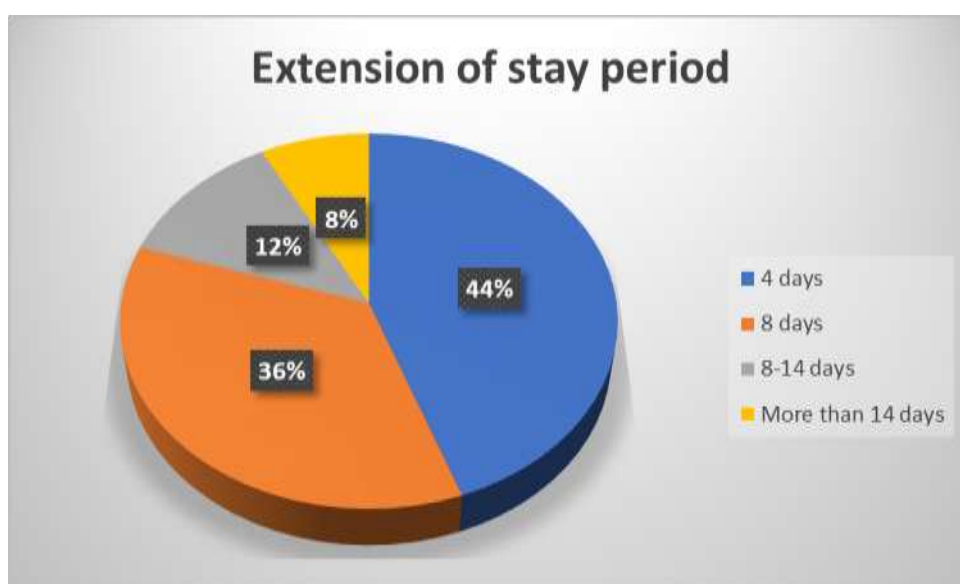


Figure 3 – Extension of stay period

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

Regarding the reasons chosen for spending the holiday, they are diverse, with the top places being visits to family or friends and rest and relaxation.

According to the responses obtained, we found that periods with some thermal comfort are preferred for spending the holidays, regardless of the chosen destination.

The vast majority of those who responded to the questionnaire choose to plan their vacation in advance, namely 390 people, approximately 82% of those interviewed.

As a way of obtaining information regarding the choice of vacation, relatives and friends obviously have the largest share, followed by the media, the internet and travel agencies, the smallest share being occupied by specialized magazines and the preferred means of travel for vacations is, predominantly, the bus, followed by the personal car/caravan, the train, the ship and then the plane.

Perhaps due to age or perhaps distrust in paying by card or bank transfer, or perhaps even the difficulty with which older people adapt to new requirements and trends, we notice that most of those interviewed prefer paying in cash.

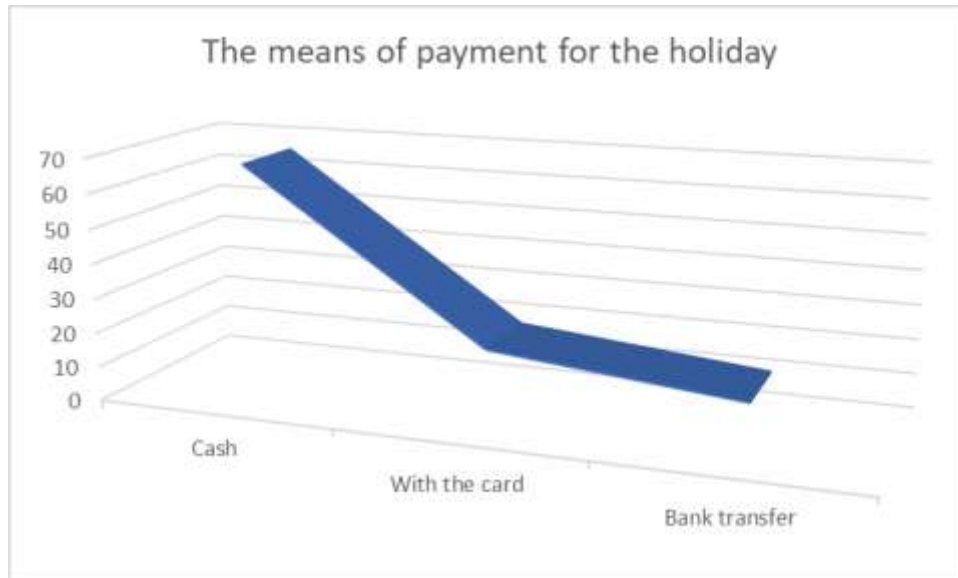


Figure 4 – The means of payment for the holiday

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

Next, we tried to identify the extent to which some new services that we thought of introducing into travel packages intended for people of a certain age would meet their needs, requirements, or desires.

Most people choose health care for their vacation. A second option is represented by the presence of nature in all its grandeur in choosing a vacation, religion or spirituality, the desire of those who travel to connect with the divine and, not least, the local gastronomy, respectively the gastronomic traditions of the destination chosen for spending the vacation.

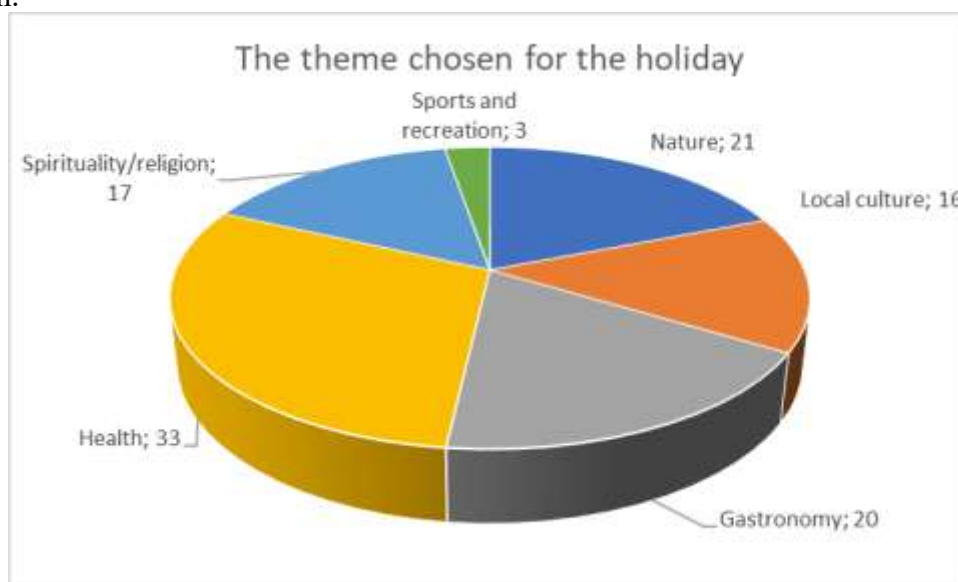


Figure 5 – The theme chosen for the holiday

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

A large number of people (366, approximately 77%) would be interested in combining their vacation time between visits to big cities and spending free time in small, rural towns.

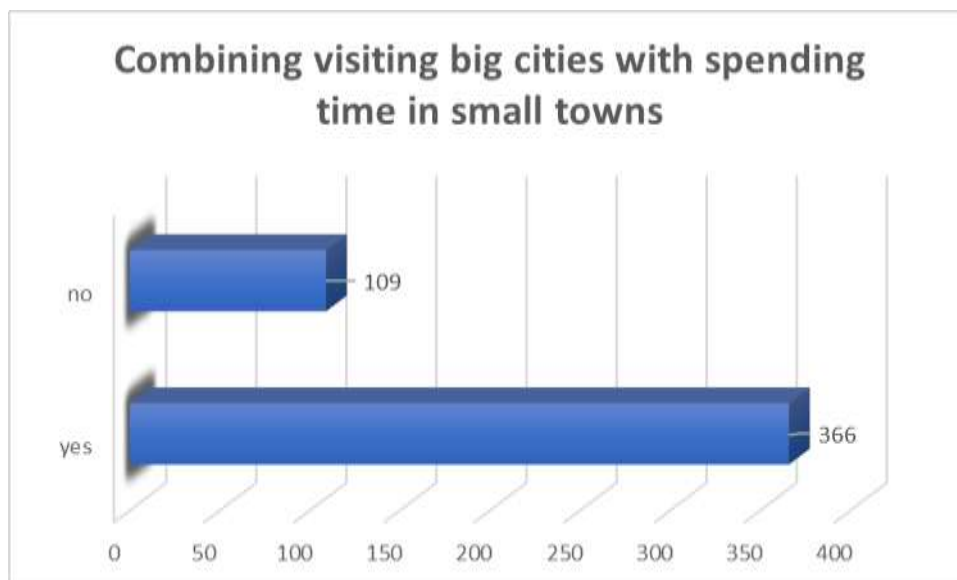


Figure 6 – Combining visiting big cities with spending time in small towns

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

The ways chosen to spend time in small, rural communities are quite varied and interesting, with each of those interviewed choosing according to what they believe would best characterize them and would satisfy their needs to spend time in the most pleasant, efficient and constructive way possible.

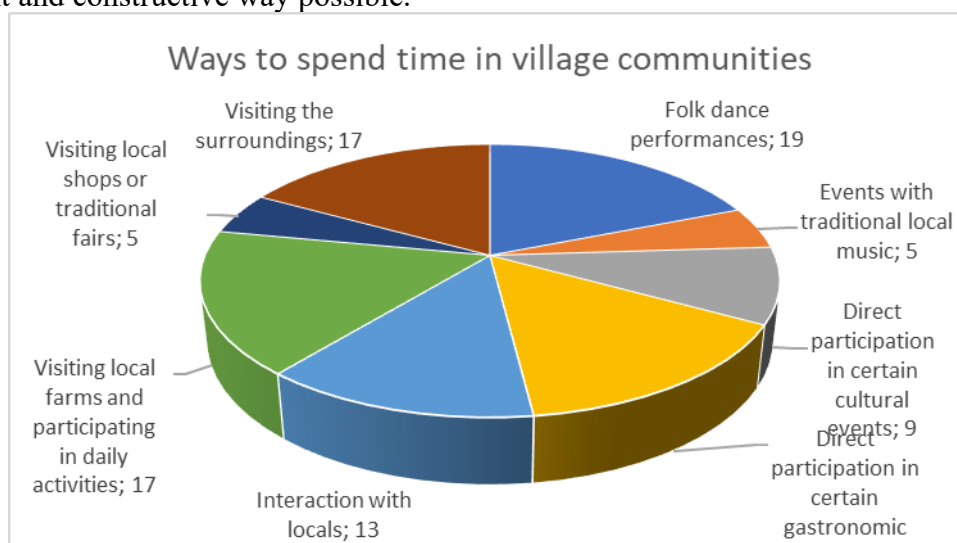


Figure 7 – Ways to spend time in village communities

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

Asked if they would be interested in learning about the local gastronomy of their chosen holiday destinations, the largest percentage of those interviewed answered yes, to a large extent, with a very small percentage, only 2%, stating that they would not be interested in this aspect during their holidays.

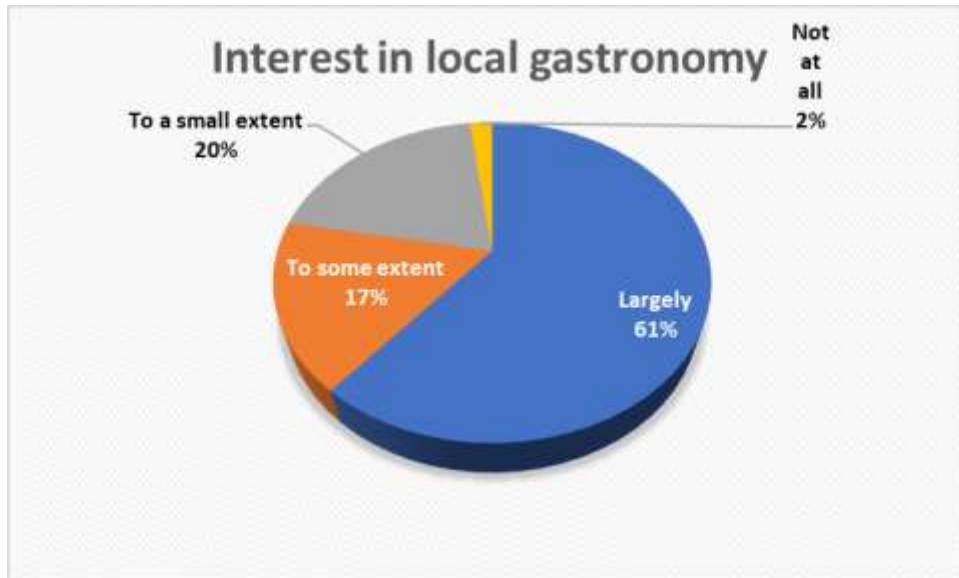


Figure 8 – Interest in local gastronomy

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

Regardless of gender, background, or level of training, most respondents said they would be interested in learning how to prepare traditional recipes when spending their vacations in different areas of the country or the world.



Figure 9 – Showing a desire to learn how to prepare traditional recipes

Source: results obtained after processing survey data

CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of age, vacation is the event that is always welcome. The world offers so many places to see, visit, are experiences that must be lived and many adventures to try. A quiet vacation in the mountains or visiting traditional places in the country, a trip abroad to places you have seen and know before or to new locations that we have long wanted to visit, cruises and the adventures they offer, currently travel is more within everyone's reach than ever.

The aging population has begun to appear and continues to appear in all developed and industrialized countries. This aspect creates new opportunities for the tourism industry.

The number of elderly people has never been greater than now, generating a specific segment that seems to continue to grow in the coming years. For this reason, the senior market constitutes the best opportunity for the growth and development of tourism nationally and globally. Not only the size of these markets is an essential factor in the development of this tourism segment, but also the fact that older people are eager to travel more, to discover new places, new things, to discover more about themselves, about everything that surrounds them. From this point of view, travel offers them the means of fulfillment, through the opportunities it offers for learning and discovery.

The awareness of tourism professionals of the potential that this segment of the population offers must push them to develop new strategies that target this segment of consumers and satisfy their desires and needs. Such strategies require the development of new tourism products, the sale of new, different services that meet expectations. The new marketing strategies that must be applied assume, first of all, knowledge of the consumers of the respective market segment, knowledge of their needs and necessities as well as their expectations.

At present, seniors, respectively retirees, represent about a third of the world's tourism consumption. The percentage is constantly increasing, continuing, mainly due to the phenomenon of population aging, mainly at the level of Europe. Many times, aging is perceived by the population as a decline, but the spiritual dimension of humanity and the human being can change this vision, considering that every human being continues to develop until his death. The spiritual development of seniors is identified by their motivation to travel because these trips fulfill part of their spiritual need, giving new meaning to life.

Taking all this into account, we can say that seniors have the desire to:

- enjoy life, as long as they still can, being aware of their age, of their limited life span;
- relax, given that aging is considered difficult in a context in which aging is perceived as difficult;
- experience nostalgia because they revisit and remember important periods in their lives;
- enrich themselves personally by discovering the world around them;
- feel the need to socialize by spending free time with people who share their interests or loved ones;
- create memories that they will share or remember permanently.

Although older people constitute the main customers in the tourism sector, it is obvious that their needs, wants, desires and expectations are not yet well known and, moreover, are not taken into account, all of which leads to a general tourist offer that is in no way adapted to the needs of this consumer segment.

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