

ANALYSIS OF THE RESOURCE PROVISION AND TOURIST ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE NATURAL SITES IN THE VARBITSA REGION

Emanuil Georgiev¹, Svetla Stankova², Ivalena Valcheva³

¹Student, Konstantin Preslavski University of Shumen, 2520160025@shu.bg

²prof., Konstantin Preslavski University of Shumen, s.stankova@shu.bg

³Assist. prof. PhD, Konstantin Preslavski University of Shumen, i.valcheva@shu.bg

Abstract

The Varbitsa Balkan is part of the Eastern Stara Planina and offers beautiful nature, ancient forests, and water features. Its landscape is characterized by steep slopes, broad saddles, and deeply incised gorges. Varbitsa is a town located in northeastern Bulgaria, north of the Varbitsa Pass in the Stara Planina Mountains. Varbitsa is a small town blessed with magnificent natural resources that are ideal for the development of tourism. The Varbitsa Balkan Mountains boast rich biodiversity, protected within a Natura 2000 site, along with numerous beautiful river rapids, waterfalls, and the historic Varbitsa Pass, all of which are ideal for ecotourism, hiking, and recreation.

Keywords: Varbitsa Balkan, natural sites, tourism

East of the Vratnik Pass, the Stara Planina fan-shapedly branches into two orographic branches – northern (represented by the Kotlen and Varbishka Mountains) and southern (represented by the Sliven and Karnobat Mountains), which in turn split into separate fold structures and mountain segments towards the Black Sea. The Luda Kamchia River, which flows between the two orographic branches of the Eastern Stara Planina, cuts through its northern branch – the Varbishka Mountain [1].

Varbishka Mountain is known for its alternating ridge curves, inaccessible forested slopes and unique nature, which distinguishes it from other nearby mountain ranges. Varbishka Mountain occupies a small territory between the Varbishka Pass in the west and the Luda Kamchiya Gorge in the east, forming an intermediate section in the Eastern Stara Planina system. To the north, it gradually descends towards the Shumen Plateau and the Kamchia River Valley. To the south, its slopes descend towards the more dissected relief of the Kotlenski Balkans. The transitional nature of the mountain gives it a special geographical value, because it is located on the border between the lower northeastern plains and the higher Balkan massifs. This creates a wealth of natural landscapes, and its location between the three administrative regions – Burgas, Shumen and Varna makes the region a crossroad of cultural and natural influences in terms of tourist activity [2].

The Varbishka Mountain is a protected area NATURA 2000, part of the European ecological network protecting rare species and habitats. The area is rich in deciduous forests (oak, beech), suitable for hiking and mountain biking. These places are extremely suitable for visiting by lovers of tranquility, mountaineering and wildlife [2].

Access to the Varbishka Mountain is mainly through the Varbitsa Pass, connecting the northern and southern regions of the Eastern Stara Planina. The local road network connects nearby settlements with the various starting points for tourist routes. The transport network is not large, but it is sufficient for normal tourist access to the area. The Varbitsa Pass and the territories around it have historical significance. In 811, one of the important battles in Bulgarian history took place here - the Battle of the Varbitsa Pass, in which Khan Krum defeated the troops of the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus I [2, 3].

At the highest part of the Varbitsa Pass, designated as the Elevation, there is an air traffic monitoring station, where entry is strictly prohibited. Near it, on both sides of the road, there are wide and beautiful meadows providing an opportunity for picnics during the warm half of the year and their use as ice rinks in the winter. The journey through the Varbitsa Pass provides beautiful natural views, and at one of the bends a small pond has formed, where wild inhabitants can be seen drinking water.

Varbitsa was declared a city in 1974, located in Northeastern Bulgaria, north of the Varbitsa Pass in the Stara Planina Mountains. It is inhabited by about 2,363 people according to NSI data [4]. The city is located in a valley, at the foot of the eastern slopes of the Stara Planina Mountains, along the Gerila River, which is a left tributary of the Kamchiya River. It is located at an altitude of 430 meters above sea level. The climate is temperate-continental with a pronounced influence of mountain massifs. The historical development of the city of Varbitsa begins in the Ottoman period, developing as an agricultural and logging center. The Municipality of Varbitsa develops ecotourism initiatives, building tourist routes and eco-trails that present the wealth of the local flora and fauna. The city is surrounded by beautiful nature, which offers exceptional opportunities for recreation and tourism. Guests of the city and tourists can enjoy the clean air, crystal water, mineral springs, beautiful panoramas and the silence of nature. Some of the sights of the city and its surroundings are the "St. Dimitar Solunski" Church, the Boarded Barn, the School, the Revival houses of Hadji Valchan and of the Gruevi brothers, a resort complex, etc. The "Varbishki Prohod" hut is a main starting point for many of the mountain routes in the region, which can be reached by an asphalt road. Of the natural landmarks, the Luda Kamchiya River passes through the region, offering picturesque places for recreation, fishing and closeness to nature. The Varbitsa Pass, which, in addition to historical significance, offers beautiful forest massifs and panoramic views, suitable for tourism [2]. The "Zlosten" area is located about 10 km from the town of Varbitsa and is known for its interesting rock formations and karst forms. Ali Baba Peak is a popular panoramic point with an altitude of about 1000 m, offering extensive views of Gerlovo and the Ticha Dam. The Ticha Dam provides opportunities for fishing and picnicking at the foot of the mountain.

The Varbitsa Waterfall is located near the Varbitsa Resort Complex along the Gerila River. The place is easily accessible and suitable for a picnic and a walk in the forest along the Gerila River, which has many beautiful rapids.



In general, the mineral springs in the territory of the Stara Planina tourist region (Varshets, Barziya, Shipkovo, Voneshta Voda and Varbitsa, etc.) are an important natural resource with recreational and balneological significance. The waters are weakly mineralized, with a temperature of 30 – 40°C [5].

The Varbitsa resort complex is famous for its two types of healing mineral water. One mineral spring helps with gastrointestinal and kidney diseases, and the other is salty and helps with eye diseases. The temperature of the mineral water is about 13° and is used only for drinking. There are information signs next to each of the springs with the characteristics of the water. The springs are enclosed with fences and gates, but access to them is free.

The complex has a swimming pool and gazebos for picnics and relaxation with a stove and barbecue, along the river there has a beautiful waterfall and rapids, revealing beautiful natural views.

Ecopark Varbitsa is a newly built area for recreation in nature with designated walking areas. It is located at the beginning of the city in a pine forest, with gazebos, benches for relaxation and a playground.

The town square is not large, but there are alleys, benches for resting, beautiful arches, decorative bridges, and more for the pleasant stay of tourists, residents, and guests of the city. There is a small fast food restaurant there where the customer can choose the ingredients for his pizza.

The Varbishki Balkan offers the following relatively easy hiking routes:

A hiking route to Ali Baba peak with a starting point at the Varbitsa Pass hut takes about 2.5 km - 3 hours in one direction. There is a separate marking, and from the top a panoramic view of the Ticha dam and the Gerlov region opens.

The route to the Kuza Skoka waterfall is mainly on a dirt road with a starting point in the village of Polyatsite, located about 20 km from Varbitsa. The hike is about 3.5 km from the village. The waterfall is very beautiful, but the best season to visit is spring, as it can dry up in the summer.

"Vezenkovo Kale" is located about 1 km from the Varbitsa Pass hut, the route is easy and short, offering access to the remains of a fortress and a view of Chumerna peak and the Blue Rocks.

Conclusion

Varbita Mountain offers wide opportunities for tourism despite its less popular nature. The network of hiking trails passes through the most interesting parts of the mountain, providing access to high viewpoints, dense forests and deep gorges, which make the hikes unforgettable.

The silence and relative isolation of the area make it a preferred place for tourists who seek peace and contact with nature, away from the mass routes. The peaks are not very high, but provide panoramic views of the Eastern Stara Planina, the Shumen Plateau and the Kamchia Valley.

The well-marked trails and the presence of natural landmarks, such as gorges and mountain ridges, make Varbitsa Mountain a suitable destination for one-day and multi-day hikes.

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