

POPOVO – “THE WHITE TOWN”: TOURISM POTENTIAL AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Emirhan Halmiev¹, Ivalena Valcheva²

¹Student, Konstantin Preslavski University of Shumen, 2520160022@shu.bg

²Assist. prof. PhD, Konstantin Preslavski University of Shumen, i.valcheva@shu.bg

Abstract

This study analyzes the tourism potential of the town of Popovo in the context of regional development and sustainable tourism. The cultural-historical, natural and socio-economic resources of the destination are studied. Through SWOT analysis, key advantages and limitations, as well as development opportunities, are identified. The main conclusion is that through strategic branding and integrated tourism products, Popovo can be positioned as an attractive niche destination.

Keywords: tourism, cultural heritage, sustainable development

Popovo Municipality falls within Targovishte District, which is in Northeastern Bulgaria. Within the administrative-territorial borders of the municipality include 35 populated areas (34 villages and only administrative center Popovo is the only city)

An old legend states, that today's Popovo was founded by a priest, who settled down with his family near a river, on a meadow, surrounded everywhere with centuries old forests. By uprooting the forest, he created arable land. One fall, the snow rained early and a small Turkish army got caught by it, which forced them to spend the winter in the priest's properties. During the spring the army made it to Tzarigrad, the Sultan wanted to see the priest. He went together with his sons on a bullock cart, which was loaded with agricultural implements. The Sultan asked him how he was able to keep both his family well-fed and his troops, the priest just pointed towards his loaded bullock cart and his sons.

The Sultan sent him with gifts and a promise to live freely, wherever he has established himself. The priest became well known and many people went to visit him, some even built houses next his. That's how Popköy came to be (The Priest Village).

The village name is mentioned for the first time in an Ottoman tax register from 1524 by the name Evrenos village, Culfal Faqeh or Pop Alagyozy and these names are used for a long period of time. It later becomes known as Popköy (Popovo Village), also being known as Kara Lom (Black Lom).

Currently in Popovo the main sectors developed are sewing enterprises, agriculture and processing of agricultural products, the service sector, state and municipal services and companies, as well as several industrial enterprises operating to varying degrees. In recent years, work has been done to develop tourism, using the favorable location of the city compared to other larger settlements, the natural features of the region and its cultural wealth [1].

The more famous and interesting for visiting tourist attractions in Popovo and nearby surroundings are:

- The Orthodox church "St. Archangel Michael" in Popovo was built in 1863 with the assistance of Midhat Pasha and the Ruse Governor and consecrated in 1880. The church is restored into its current

state in 1975. During communist regime it was converted into a Russian-Turkish war museum. In the year 2000 its once again converted back into a functioning church. An almost revivalist complex, consisting of a neat white church with beautiful frescoes, a bell tower, a stone fence and a quiet, pleasant courtyard with vines, a fountain, flowers and memorial plaques and graves of priests and fallen Russian soldiers.

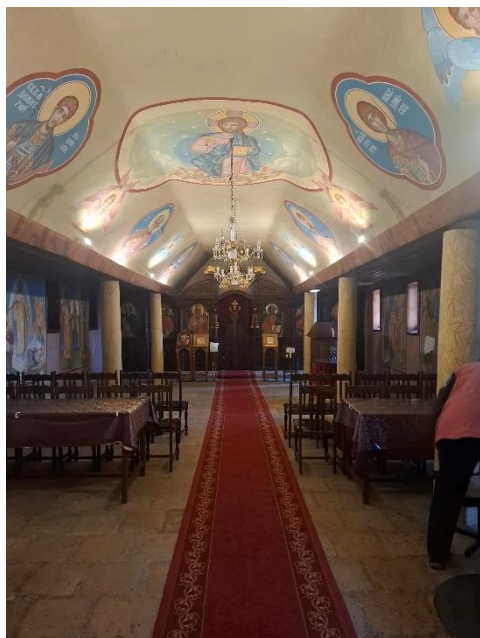


Fig. 1 and 2 Orthodox church "St. Archangel Michael"

- Kovachevsko Kale is located about 7 km west of the center of Popovo. The fortress is located in a small valley formed by the confluence of its northwestern tributary - Chepez Dere - into the Kovachevska River. The city, together with the powerful fortress wall, was built between 308 and 324 AD during the reign of the emperors Licinius I and Constantine I the Great, and the walls of the fortress wall are 3.20 m thick. The inner territory of the city is about 40 acres. The fortification system has 17 towers protruding in front of the wall, located almost symmetrically along the entire length. Based on a winning project, the Municipality of Popovo has built the entire infrastructure of the site, including parking lots, water supply, electrification, a visitor center, partial restoration and conservation of the excavations and numerous tourist attractions. There is an advertising booklet dedicated to the history of the city and archaeological research by the publishing house "Slavena " [2].



Fig. 3, 4, 5 and 6 Kovachevsko Kale



- In the Popovo region in 1937, large-scale military exercises were held (the so-called Great Royal Military Maneuvers). Because of this event, in the Popovo region in 1943 a monument to Tsar Boris III was erected as a sign of gratitude for the development of the city at that time. In 1945 during socialism it was dismantled, but in 2017 restored and a new one was opened [3].

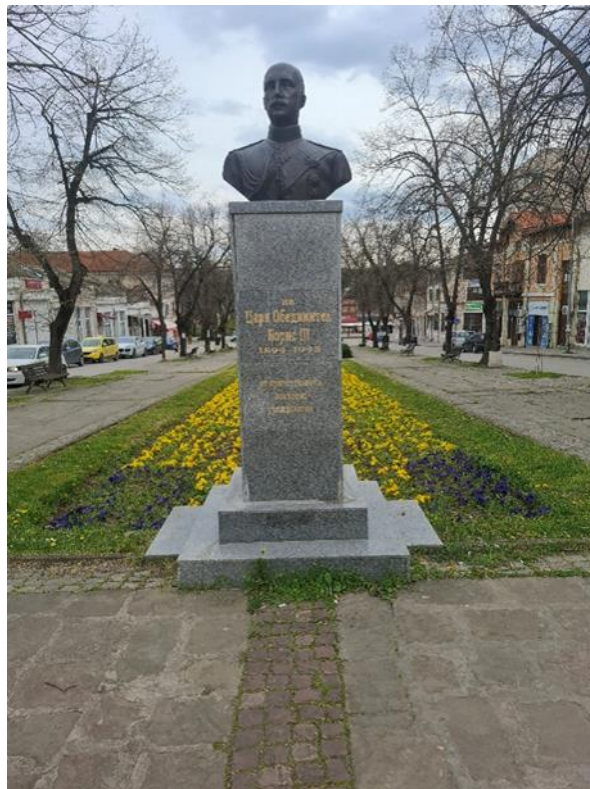


Fig. 7 monument to Tsar Boris III

The City Garden – Popovo was established by the cycling association, which received 4 decares of municipal land in the area of Dyolluk in the southeastern part of the city from the Municipal Council in 1907. The idea was to build a cycling track, and with it the beginning of the City Garden was laid.

In 1908, in the Krushatsite area, bordering the land designated for the City Garden, spring water was discovered from excavations. The place, proclaimed a "Holy Spring" with medicines and holy water, became pleasant for sick and healthy people from all over Bulgaria [4].



Fig. 8 and 9 "Holy Spring"

The City Garden houses the Stamo Kostov Stadium of the Chernolomets 1919 football team, the "Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary" Chapel, the Todor Yanev Volleyball Hall, as well as numerous benches and gazebos, sports facilities and fountains. The City Garden is a wonderful place for sports, recreation and walks for the residents, guests and tourists of Popovo.



Fig. 10, 11, 12 and 13 The City Garden





Fig. 14 and 15 Stamo Kostov Stadium of the Chernolomets 1919 football team



Fig. 16 the “Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary” Chapel



Fig. 17 Historical museum Popovo

Historical museum Popovo

On the ground floor of the local community center "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" on September 8, 1957, a museum exhibition was opened, tracing the history of the Popovo region from antiquity to the middle of the 20th century. In 1978, a new exhibition was arranged, but in the building in which the museum is still located today. It was built in 1883 for the district administration, and since 1920 the newly opened Popovo High School "Hristo Botev" has been established in it. Since 1991, the community center museum collection has had the status of a Municipal History Museum. Its current exhibition was opened on March 2, 1995. It is located on an area of 350 square meters. The museum includes nearly 30,000 items, from [5].

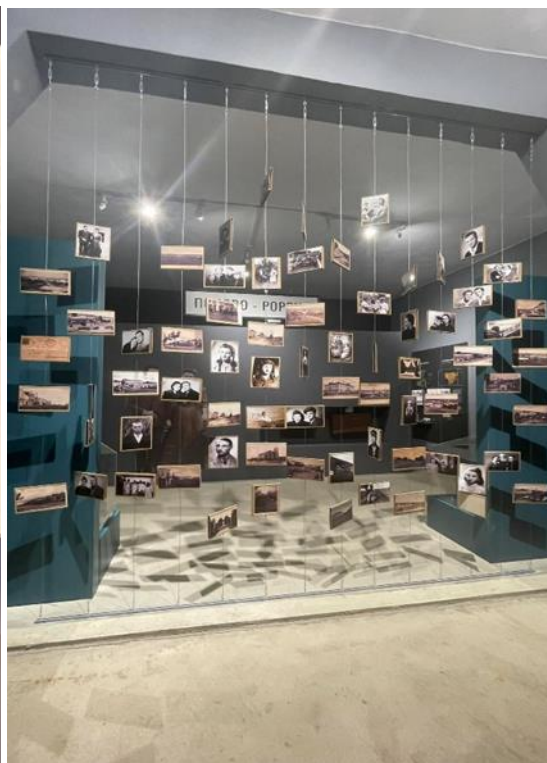


Fig. 18, 19 and 20 Historical museum Popovo



The Mermaid Fair is held annually in Popovo and is one of the most famous fairs in Northeastern Bulgaria. According to an old local tradition, it is held during the so-called "Mermaid Week", starting with the church holiday of the Holy Spirit - the first Monday of Pentecost (50 days after Easter). The fair lasts exactly one week (in 2026 it will be held from June 1 to 7). The beginning of the Mermaid Fair was laid in 1908, when the holy spring was consecrated in the City Garden. Later, the chapel "Nativity of the Virgin Mary" was built next to the spring, which is still in operation today. People from all over the area and from the neighboring village gathered for the consecration of the spring. They did not miss the opportunity to offer their goods and merchants. Thus, the fair gradually arose. It has been held for more than a century without interruption. According to a very old tradition, which is almost never an exception in its consistency, there is at least one very rainy day at the Popovo fair - so that the water brings good luck to the merchants [6].

Guests and tourists who visit Popovo this week will have the pleasant opportunity to enjoy the cheerful spirit and mood that the fair brings to the town.

Conclusion

In summary, the town of Popovo has significant tourism potential, based on the combination of rich cultural and historical heritage, natural features and established local traditions. Despite the existing challenges, through a targeted policy for sustainable development, effective branding and creation of integrated tourism products, the destination can establish itself as an attractive place for niche tourism. The realization of this potential requires coordinated efforts between local authorities, businesses and the community, which would contribute not only to increasing tourist interest, but also to the overall socio-economic development of the region.

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