

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

Religious tourism is a specialized type of tourism in which people travel individually or in groups to religious destinations, outside their usual environment, in order to consume religious values in one form or another. Religiously motivated travel is as old as religion itself, and thus religious tourism is the oldest type of tourism dating back to ancient times. Bulgaria has significant religious tourism resources and can specialize in this type of tourism.

Key words: Tourism, religious tourism, monasteries, pilgrimage.

JEL Classification: L83

INTRODUCTION

Modern tourism is a complex socio-economic and cultural phenomenon of our time. In addition to traditional types of tourism, modern (alternative, specialized) types of tourism are gaining more and more importance (Patarchanov, 2012). Religious tourism is among them.

Religiously motivated travel is as old as religion itself, and therefore religious tourism is the oldest type of tourism, dating back to ancient times. As the earliest form of religious tourism, we can point to pilgrimage - trips to certain cult or holy places for the purpose of worship. Gradually, pilgrimage became the most widespread form of religious tourism.

Religious tourism is often intertwined, more or less, with other types of tourism. Its combination with cultural tourism is strongest (due to the nature of the objects visited), therefore it is often defined as part of it. Due to the significant information that is obtained in religious tourism, it also includes elements of cognitive tourism.

Based on the definition of cultural tourism, the definition of religious tourism acquires the following definition: “a specialized type of tourism - a tourist trip motivated by the satisfaction of religious needs through the consumption of religious values” (Kostov 2001).

The object of research is religious tourism in Bulgaria, and *the subject* of research are the possibilities for practicing religious tourism in Bulgaria.

The purpose of the present study is to examine all the possibilities and prospects for the development of religious tourism, based on the existing tourist resources in the country. *The methods* used are theoretical analysis and synthesis, historiographical method, etc.

Exhibition

After nearly half a century of atheism and limitation of religious tourism, it is gradually finding its place in Bulgaria as well. There are 160 monasteries in the country, the most visited of which are Rila, Bachkovski, Troyanski, Klisurski, Dryanovski (fig. 1).



Figure 1 Monasteries in Bulgaria

There are also numerous monasteries in the vicinity of Veliko Tarnovo - Preobrazhenski, St. Troitsa, Petropavlovski, Kilifarevski, Kapinovski, etc. There are 1245 churches of cultural importance, which are also of tourist interest. Three of the Bulgarian sites included in the UNESCO World Natural and Cultural Heritage List are Orthodox churches - the Boyan Church, since 1979, the Ivanovo rock monasteries along the Rusenski Lom river valley, since 1979 and the Rila Monastery, since 1983. This is also a recognition of the world cultural and historical importance of these objects (Kolev 2015).

Pilgrimage in Bulgaria has been developed since ancient times. It is connected with traveling to holy places (mainly Jerusalem) and monasteries at home and abroad (Kostov 2001).

Even today, religious tourism in our country continues to be associated with visiting monasteries. Regardless of the alarming state of the significant part of them, more than 40 monasteries are involved in economic turnover through tourism. They can be grouped by location as follows:

1. Monasteries in North-West Bulgaria: Chiprovski, Lopushanski, Bistrishki, Karlukovski;
2. Monasteries in Northern Bulgaria: Cherepishki, Etropolski, Glozhenski, Tetevenski, Troyanski, Batoshevsky, Dryanovski, Kilifareski, Plachkovski, Kapinovski, Lyaskovski, Arbanashki, Preobrazhenski, Ivanovski rock monasteries, Aladzha monastery, etc.;

3. Monasteries in the Sofia area: Seven thrones, Kurilovsky, Seslavsky, Lozensky, Dolnopasarelsky, Alinsky, Dragalevsky;

4. Monasteries in Southwestern Bulgaria: Trunski, Zemenski, Boboshevsky, Rila, Rozhenski;

5. Monasteries in Southern Bulgaria - Sopotski, Shipchenski, Muglzhki, Kuklenski, Bachkovski, Arapovski, etc. (Kostov 2001).

A. Kazakov groups the monasteries according to their accessibility as follows:

➤ Excellent accessibility – availability of an airport within no more than 20 km, or a train station no more than 20 km away, an asphalted road to the monastery and reliably placed signs;

➤ Very good accessibility – availability of an airport or train station no more than 50 km away, availability of a road with a macadam surface and reliably placed signs;

➤ Moderately good accessibility – presence of an airport or train station no more than 50 km away, presence of a road with a macadam surface, but lack of signs, or extremely insufficient signs;

➤ Poor accessibility – availability of an airport or train station no more than 50 km away, dirt road (Kazakov 2013).

According to the time of establishment, we divide the monasteries into early Christian (IV - IX centuries), medieval (X - XV centuries) and young (XVI - XX centuries).

Kazakov also offers other criteria such as: geographical location (about 60% of them are located in the mountains); distance from existing settlements (there is only one monastery more than 10 km from one, 12 are located between 5 and 10 km and all the rest are within 5 km or within the settlement itself); availability of an accommodation facility; attitude of monastic brotherhoods towards visitors and tourists, etc. (Kazakov 2013).

Based on the capacity of the monastery (number of monks), the following main types of monasteries are classified:

- Monomonastery - with one monk;
- Small monastery - with two to five monks;
- Medium monastery - with five to twenty monks;
- Large monastery - with twenty to forty monks;
- Lavra - with over forty monks.

Small and medium-sized monasteries predominate in our country. Depending on their location, tourist companies include them in their programs (general and specialized). The most frequently offered monasteries are Rila, Bachkovski, Aladzha, Rozhenski, Troyanski, Preobrazhenski, Dryanovski, etc. Undoubtedly, the Rila Monastery (Kostov 2001) is of greatest interest to tourists, especially foreigners.

The boom in short-term religious trips in Bulgaria also contributes to this, the number of which increased from 25,000 participants in 1979 to over 1.7 million today. Of these, 93,746 were by foreigners or 5% of the visits. Visits to the three stauropygial monasteries in Bulgaria - Rila, Bachovski and Troyanski - amount to 3,779,572 people, 285,490 of whom are foreigners - 7.5% of the visitors. With 700,000 visits per year, the Rila Monastery is the most visited tourist site in Bulgaria (Dimitrov 2018).

There are large Catholic cathedrals in the cities of Plovdiv, Sofia, Ruse Rakovski.

Over 1,300 Muslim religious temples (mosques) were built in the country, and two of them have been converted into a museum. These are the mosques in the city of Shumen and the city of Samokov.

The synagogue in the city of Sofia is the most visited Jewish temple in Bulgaria and is part of the European cultural tourist route "The Way of the Jews".

As leading factors for the development of religious tourism in Bulgaria, we can point out:

- Religious tolerance, characteristic of Bulgarian society (table 1);
- Temples of various religions located on the territory of the country;
- Strong cultural and artistic value of a large part of the religious temples;
- Pilgrimage characteristic both of past eras and of today;
- Specifically manifested syncretism of some religious practices, traditions and centers - common objects of worship of different religions;
- Relatively good infrastructure of the most visited sites.

Table 1. Religious structure of the population in Bulgaria, 2021

Religion	Number	%
Eastern Orthodox	4 091 780	71,5
Catholics	38 709	0,6
Protestants	69 852	1,1
Muslims	638 708	10,8
A Jew	1 736	0,02
Other	6 451	0,1
They have no religion	305 102	5,2
I can't tell	259 235	4,4
I don't want to answer	472 606	8,0

Source: NSI, 2022.

Religious tourism in Bulgaria has far from exhausted its development potential. Unlike cultural tourism, of which it is actually a variety, religious tourism in our country is not so modern as a topic of conversation for historians, archaeologists, museum curators, statesmen, municipal officials and tourism experts. The probable reason is the respect of the secular tourist figures for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and for the institutions of the other official religions, managing the sites and events of interest for religious tourism in the country. If a country nevertheless wants to take a worthy place on the map of international religious tourism, its stakeholders should have a serious discussion to evaluate and improve the conditions for religious tourism travel in the destination.

An important prerequisite for attracting and serving religious tourists is knowing them as a target clientele. In the most general terms, religious tourists are known to travel to explore and experience places, objects and activities that represent authentic religious beliefs, events, personalities and temples both in the area of historical heritage and contemporary religious life of the local population. Modern religious tourism is practiced by intelligent people. The motivation of religious tourists corresponds mainly to the last, fifth level in the hierarchy of needs according to E. Maslow. These are people who travel to gain new knowledge, experiences, emotions, self-knowledge, self-respect and self-affirmation. In concrete terms, the group of religious tourists has its own marketing structure, expressed in certain sub-segments, which should be thoroughly studied and known. In our country, mainly foreign and Bulgarian tour operators collect information about religious tourists in a targeted manner. They care and know their motives, nationality, age, family and social status (Marinov 2008).

They use this information to create better and more diverse products according to tourists' expectations. Unlike tour operators, hoteliers, restaurateurs and religious officials in Bulgaria have little interest and know little about tourists participating in religious trips. They only give them to Bulgarians and foreigners. According to most of them, what pleases the Japanese cannot disappoint the Italians or the Spanish. The conclusion is that segment-oriented thinking and action is needed among all Bulgarian subjects with regard to the reception and service of religious tourists in the country (Marinov 2008).

An important condition for the development of religious tourism is the presence of religious attractions and the ability of the subjective factor to transform them into tourist products. Aleksieva and Stamov consider monasteries and churches as resources and destinations of religious tourism in Bulgaria (Aleksieva & Stamov 2006).

Bulgaria has over 160 monasteries, hundreds of churches and chapels, numerous religious holidays and customs. The listed resources represent diverse product cores, of which few are able to be present in salable tourism products of the destination. Examples of interesting but

neglected religious sites abound in Bulgaria. An eloquent example is the Plakovski Monastery "St. Iliia", which has an extremely rich history, but is abandoned and forgotten by Bulgarians, let alone offered to foreign tourists. Another example is the Preobrazhensky Monastery, abandoned to God's mercy, etc. The conclusion is that many of the attractive product cores of religious tourism in Bulgaria are combined with a repulsive physical environment and difficult accessibility, which excludes them from the possible product lines of the destination.

Successful religious tourism is conditioned by the implementation of a reasonable price and financial policy. From the point of view of religious tourists in Bulgaria, hotel prices are decent, and visits to religious sites are either free (most churches) or for reasonable fees (St. St. Constantine and Elena Church in Plovdiv). However, it is unacceptable in the modern electronic world not to be able to pay by bank for visiting organized groups of religious tourists, as well as by credit card in Bulgarian monasteries (Marinov 2011).

An important condition for the successful implementation of the Bulgarian religious tourism product abroad is the presence of an effective distribution system. Religious tourism in Bulgaria is realized mainly through the channels of several ambitious tour operators such as "Iskoni" Ltd., "Silky Holidays" Ltd., "Atlantic Travel" and others. The distributive merits of the State Overseas Trade and Economic Relations Service, of local municipal tourist information centers, and of the Internet in the hands of religious institutions are symbolic (Marinov 2011). Spiritual institutions as the owner and manager of religious objects and attractions must play an increasingly tangible role in creating and supporting the consumption of these products. This will reflect in chances and opportunities - for the providers of tourist services (transporters, hoteliers, business centers, cultural and educational institutions, etc.), for travel agencies and the millions of tourists from all over the world for a better, humane and sustainably developing tourism (Neshkov 2007).

Not least in terms of importance for the development of religious travel in the country is the communication policy of Bulgaria as a destination for religious tourism. Printed publications such as the map "Monasteries in Bulgaria" and "Religious tourism in Bulgaria: map" contribute to the implementation of this policy, as well as electronic portals such as "Bulgarian Monastery ®" - www.bulgarianmonastery.com (an informative guide for monastery tourism in Bulgaria) and the Bulgarian Orthodox catalog on the Internet - www.pravoslaviето.com. It is necessary to enrich the communication of religious tourism in our country. It would be significantly more effective to communicate not only individual religious sites and events, and specific product lines and routes arranged by these objects and events (Ivanova 2008).

The disunity of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the underestimation of tourism as its main economic activity is a major problem for the development of religious tourism. Religious

tourism in Bulgaria must become a link in the world chain of sacred tourism, which drives huge flows of tourists. It is necessary to develop programs for precisely defined monasteries. Only in this way can the monastic stream be oriented towards our holy places (Ivanova 2008).

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, religious tourism in Bulgaria has potential for development. It has a future and can become a profitable business in Bulgaria only with a correct policy, in which the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, tour operators, non-governmental organizations, and public figures are involved. However, it is very important that it does not become a self-serving business that brings only profit. This policy must become national because a nation that does not revere, protect and properly use its sacred places will depersonalize itself spiritually and will not be able to achieve stability and prosperity.

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