

Impact of the COVID 19 Pandemic on the Development of Rural and Ecological Tourism in Bulgaria

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Abstract

The last two years (2020 and 2021) have changed the world and people's attitudes towards nature. Healthcare and protection against the insidious virus have become paramount tasks for the whole of human society. Against the background of this global pandemic and the huge damage suffered on a number of economic and social sectors, including tourism, the development of two of the main alternative forms of tourism during a pandemic is of interest to us from a research point of view. The article aims to analyze the direct and indirect impact of the pandemic on the development of rural and ecological tourism in Bulgaria. To achieve this, in-depth, pre-structured interviews with entrepreneurs working in the sector, in different regions of the country, are conducted helping us to identify the main problems and opportunities for the development of this specific type of entrepreneurship. The study is based on a representative sample, as we cannot cover all rural and ecological accommodations offered in the country, but the results are more than interesting and useful, both for future development and for comparison with conventional tourism in the studied areas.

Keywords: rural tourism, ecological tourism, pandemic, Covid 19, opportunities, threats

JEL Code: O13, Q51, Q 56, Z32

Introduction

In the last two years, people of the world, which includes all of us, have become the witnesses of a pandemic, both highly undesirable, and having a material impact on human life. The COVID-19 epidemic started at the end of 2019 in China, and got to Europe at the start of 2020, with it being pronounced as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, the year 2020 (Briefing on COVID-19). This is the first global corona virus pandemic. In the opinion of some prominent economists, it has been unprecedented and devastating for the tourism industry. (Hall, et al. 2020; Sheresheva 2020; Gossling et al. 2021). The virus is transmitted by way of droplets in sneezing, coughing, or an interaction with other individuals in the direct vicinity (European vaccination portal, 2020). Due to its rapid spread, many businesses, including the tourism sector, have suffered rising unemployment. (Baum, et al., 2020). The main goal of this article is to find out if the pandemic has also proven detrimental for the alternative forms of tourism, particularly on rural and ecotourism, which have been developed in Bulgaria, or we are seeing lower levels of outflow of tourists and lower levels of losses in the sector.

1. Thesis statement and literature review

At the current stage (2021), a few different types of vaccines, have already been developed. These vaccines help alleviate the COVID-19 illness related symptoms, or even having no symptoms in certain cases, but as the result of the pandemic, a lot of economic and social sectors have suffered major changes and damage, classic tourism being among them (Berezka, et al., 2020). The main reason for it is and will continue to be the COVID-19 pandemic, which has profoundly changed the way of life and the quality of life of all people (Laato et al.2020; Sheth 2020). The World Tourism Organization with the UN has reported that tourism is the strongest affected economic sector in 2020 (Vaishar, et al. , 2020). However, were all types of tourism affected equally? In our opinion, and in the opinion of other prominent economists (Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020), the classic form of tourism has suffered much more, compared to the alternative forms of tourism (Hall et al. 2020; Sheresheva 2020; Gossling et al. 2021). To verify our hypothesis and the hypotheses of those prominent economists, we have conducted a study, directed towards two of the most prominent alternative forms of tourism in Bulgaria - rural and ecotourism.

2. Methodology and experimental methods

Our research has included guest houses and their owners in various areas in the country, as a representative sample. A total of 38 house owners in five main areas of Bulgaria have been interviewed, and a total of 387 tourists from different regions in the country have been polled, based on a random statistical sample. The research included areas that differ in terms of altitude and flat relief, which have many different natural and anthropogenic resources.

The following areas have been studied North central region, particularly Central Balkans, and the guest houses in Troyanski Balkans (Apriltsi, Troyan, Shipkovo), Trevnenski Balkans (Bozhentsi), Tetevenski Balkans (Ribaritsa and Teteven), also in Northeast Region (Eastern Balkans - Kotel, Medven, Zheravna, Banya, Ichera), and Northeast region, particularly Shumen district - the villages of Osmar, Madara, Kyulevcha, Veliki Preslav, Sveshtari and Pliska. In the Rodopite region (the villages of Momchilovtsi, Shiroka Laka, Gela, Leshten and Kovachevtsi), and in the Rila region (Govedartsi) and Strandzha (Brashlyan and Balgari). At the same time, the opinion of the current owner of mountain huts has been studied, along with the occupancy rates of the mountain huts in the same areas by tourists preferring mostly ecotourism. The mountain huts, taking part in this research, are mostly situated in the Central Balkans, the Eastern Balkans, Rodopi and Rila. The selected micro areas are areas in proximity to the *units included in the global cultural heritage of UNESCO* (Madara Horseman, Sveshtar Tomb, Rila Monastery), Osmarski Region, and the Veliki Preslav region, as *wine areas in the center of northeastern Bulgaria*. Kotel, Medven, Zheravna, Tryavna, Bezhantsi, Madara, Ichera, the old part of Teteven and Troyan, Shiroka Laka – *settlements with natural and historic heritage*, the areas of Zheravna, Leshten, Kovachevtsi, Bozhentsi - *open-air architectural preserves*, the areas of Shipkovo, Banya, etc. - the existence of natural heritage, *SPA conditions and mineral water*. All of the selected areas successfully develop ecotourism alongside rural tourism.

Our intent on conducting this research was provoked by a statistical opinion that the World Tourism Organization of the UN (UNWTO) has announced in 2021. It stated that the number of tourists has dropped by 70% for 2020. Due to that fact, as part of the European Union recovery tools, the European Commission has defined the need of investments in the tourism sector, to the amount of 161 billion Euro (Next Generation EU; UNWTO).

From a research point of view, in our opinion it is interesting to see if the decrease of the number of these tourists is proportionate at all locations in each of the types of tourism, or if it is focused on the classic sort of tourism, due to certain causes.

3. Results and discussion

According to the study, which covers only tourists who have chosen alternative forms of tourism, the highest shares and the greatest preferences of tourists have to rural tourism and to a lesser extent to eco-tourism, this can be seen in Fig. 1.

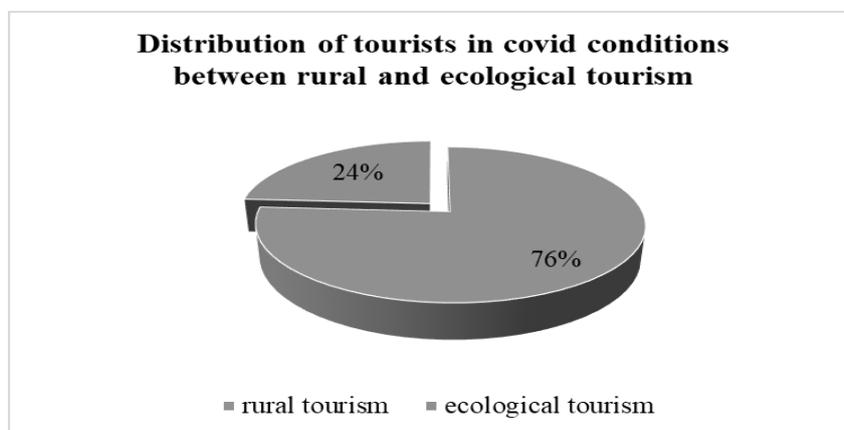


Figure.1 Development of various alternative forms of tourism in Bulgaria compared to the study

From fig. 1 we can summarize that the most preferred form is rural tourism. It accounts for 76% of respondents and interviewees in the survey, compared to 24% for eco-tourism.

The real causes for higher and steeper losses from the COVID-19 pandemic, suffered by the classic tourism, compared to the alternative forms of tourism (ecotourism and rural tourism) can be explained as follows:

- A larger gathering of tourists, typical for the classic type of tourism within the same tourist site, due to the larger number of rooms (more often exceeding 30) and the accommodation facilities.

- In the opinion of prominent economists and scientists, studying tourism, damages have mostly been suffered by the international type of tourism and the large hotel chains (Vaishar, Stastna, 2020)

- According to the same source, the direct limitations as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic are having a very small effect on ecotourism and rural tourism, because the accommodation sites for those two alternative forms of tourism are mostly limited, and they are offered to separate families, or very small groups of people, who are already known to one another

- The classic type of tourism uses common rooms and areas, such as conference rooms, SPA areas, sports halls, swimming pools, children's playgrounds, and other areas, offering tourist entertainment

- Classic tourism stipulates for common catering premises, which once again provides for a danger caused by the lack of opportunity to keep distance, and more difficult conditions of hygiene and sanitary control

- The large hotels, used as accommodation in the classic sort of tourism, the existence of common halls, elevators and staircases is a prerequisite for an easier dissemination of the virus, while guest houses and mountain huts avoid gathering of people in hallways, and they lack elevators

- General transportation vehicles and all cable lines and lifts, typically used in classic tourism, are once again a prerequisite for a much easier infection of tourists, while rural and ecotourism use mostly personal transportation, and moving through the eco areas and mountains happens mostly on foot, or through biking tours, which provides a safe environment for the tourists to enjoy and imparts them with the feeling of freedom and expanse

- Attractions being offered in the classical form of tourism predominantly come from groups and are related to the visit of specific sites, while rural and ecotourism offer mostly individual attractions and occur outside in a natural environment

- The income of households due to the COVID-19 pandemic has decreased sharply, while at the same time a high rate of inflation is observed, which has a direct effect on the demand on tourist services, mostly looking for alternative forms of tourism, such as rural, ecotourism, agrarian tourism, and any other type of tourism. In turn, this can be explained by the lower prices for accommodation in a guest house, compared to a classic hotel. The ratio for Bulgaria varies from 15 to 30 BGN per bed per night for a guest house or a small family hotel, used in rural tourism, such as base of accommodation, while classic tourism could cost as much as BGN 45 to 80 per bed per night. The price differentiation is rather high, while the quality offered in both types of accommodation is rather similar. We exclude the luxury VIP apartments, which may be offered in some of the classic style hotels.

Based on the in-depth, pre-structured interviews, conducted in our research, the following patterns have been found in organizing rural tourism in guest houses and the small family hotels in the regions of the country that we analyzed:

- Figure 2 shows that 79% of polled tourists in Bulgaria prefer not to miss their annual leave or short family vacation and holiday, and because of fear of the pandemic, they tend to stay in accommodations with a low number of beds, such as guest houses and small family hotels, bungalows, and villas. Only 21% of polled tourists are so worried about the pandemic and they do not go anywhere, instead spending their holidays in their own homes and villas.

Out of the tourists who do take their holidays during the pandemic and stay in guest houses, approximately 26% prefer mountain, alpine, or ecotourism, and use the villas in the five areas of the country that are subject to analysis as a base of accommodation.

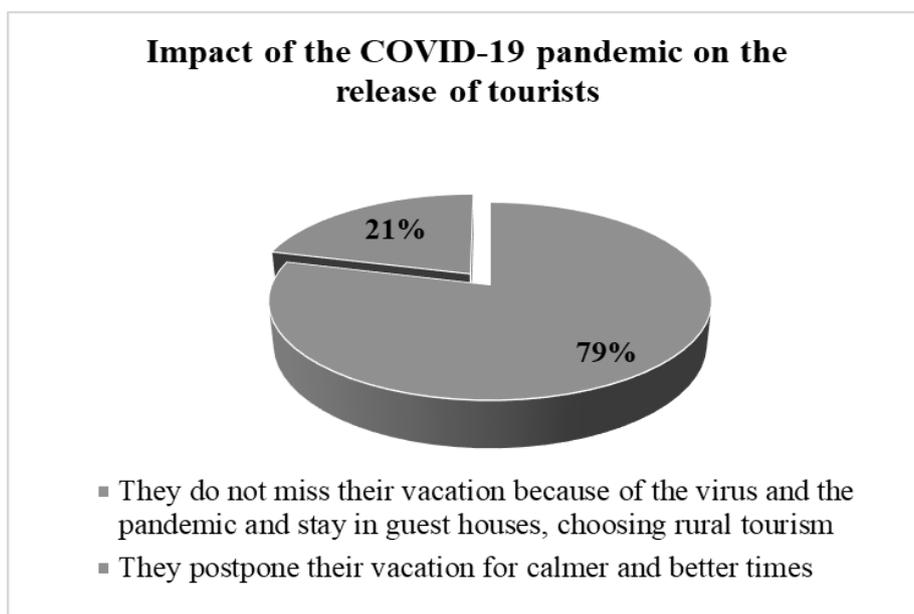


Figure. 2 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the release of tourists

Figure 3 shows that 96% of the tourists polled from all over Bulgaria prefer to travel and find accommodation either in very small groups of friends, up to a maximum of 4 or 6 persons, under the conditions of a pandemic. Only 4% prefer organized travel with larger groups of tourists. Things are similar for people who prefer environmental tourism or mountain hiking tourism. Mostly family or small groups of friends, consisting of 3, 4, or at maximum up to 5 people, who mostly use the mountain huts as a base of accommodation in the reviewed areas.

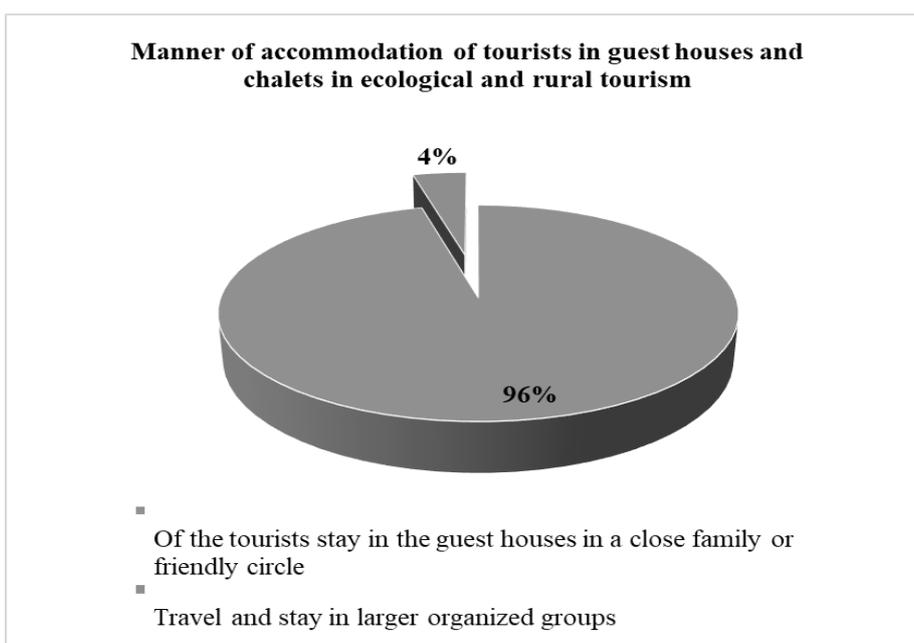


Figure. 3. Manner of accommodation of tourists in guest houses and chalets in ecological and rural tourism

From the interviews taken by the mountain hut owners in the five areas that have been analyzed, one very interesting and a legitimate fact. The flow of tourists during the pandemic not only increased, but during holidays and weekends, mountain hut owners must turn down accommodation for their guests due to the following two reasons. The mountain huts capacity could be used at 50% due to the pandemic, and on the other hand the number of tourists has greatly increased due to the opportunity of being outside in nature during the day.

• During the period of analysis (2020 - 2021) each interviewed guest house owner in Bulgaria has confirmed that the number of active accommodations has not only not decreased compared to the previous two years (2018 and 2019), but has, indeed, greatly increased, and in the opinion of the owners of the accommodation bases, this is due to three main facts:

- Fear of viral infection due to the pandemic in the major tourist resorts with a lot of people and larger hotels, which offer the classic form of tourism, and therefore giving preference to alternative forms of tourism. This includes mostly rural tourism.

- The lower income of the average tourist due to the forced unemployment and price increase of a series of goods, including goods of first necessity, have resulted in inflation, and inflation was having a direct effect on reducing the income of households and making it impossible for households to allocate funds for their holidays, therefore most people preferring to have their holidays in rural areas, where the price level of the rural tourism products are many times lower than the price levels of the classic form of tourism.

- The portion of tourists with larger income levels and solvent is not oriented toward alternative forms of tourism in their own country anyway, and due to the limitations of flights and the travel-related quarantines has quickly and easily substituted its foreign flights with accommodation in more remote and more luxurious guest houses in the country.

It is interesting to make a comparison for the five areas of analysis and the relative share of the increased accommodation in them. The fact that the mountain areas of the Central Balkans in the Balkans range have seen increase of prices for house guests by almost 45% compared to previous (non-pandemic) years is very prominent. This is explained by closer locations of larger cities, which are the origination points of tourists, who would like to remain farther away from larger groups of people. The Rila and the Rodopi regions, which are more remote, have the same level of growth compared to previous non-pandemic years, but the rate of increase is lower, respectively 34% and 42%, whereas in the Eastern Balkans and in the Northeast region, the increase is just 15 and 12% respectively, but it still does exist. You can see this in figure 4. The situation is very similar for the mountain houses in the same areas of analysis. So, for example, in the Central Balkans area in the Balkans range, accommodation in mountain huts can only happen with a reservation, because there are no vacant spots. Increase compared to previous years is 50%, 5% larger than the increase for guest houses and small family hotels. It is important to note that this is only a trend for the summer period, when anti-pandemic measures in Europe and Bulgaria are not as strict, and that it all happens over the course of the weekends, and not all-year round and in all calendar days. For the Rila, Rodopi and Eastern Balkans regions, there is also an increase in the number of accommodations in mountain huts, but it is much smaller than the increase for the smaller mountain huts, which are not so well-recognized, compared to the bigger mountain huts, which are better equipped. This is a normal and logical trend, because tourists, worried about the virus, are looking for a hygienic and clean environment to get accommodation, a break, and to spend the night. It is important to note that mountain huts which offer warm meals has had an increase in the number of accommodations of 25% compared to previous non-pandemic periods. Another interesting fact is that some of the mountain huts offer self-service, and the tourists are content, because they take care of their food on their own and access points to other people and contact groups is minimized. Figure three shows the increase share of use of the accommodation base during the pandemic in guest houses and family hotels in the five regions of analysis in this study, as a relative share.

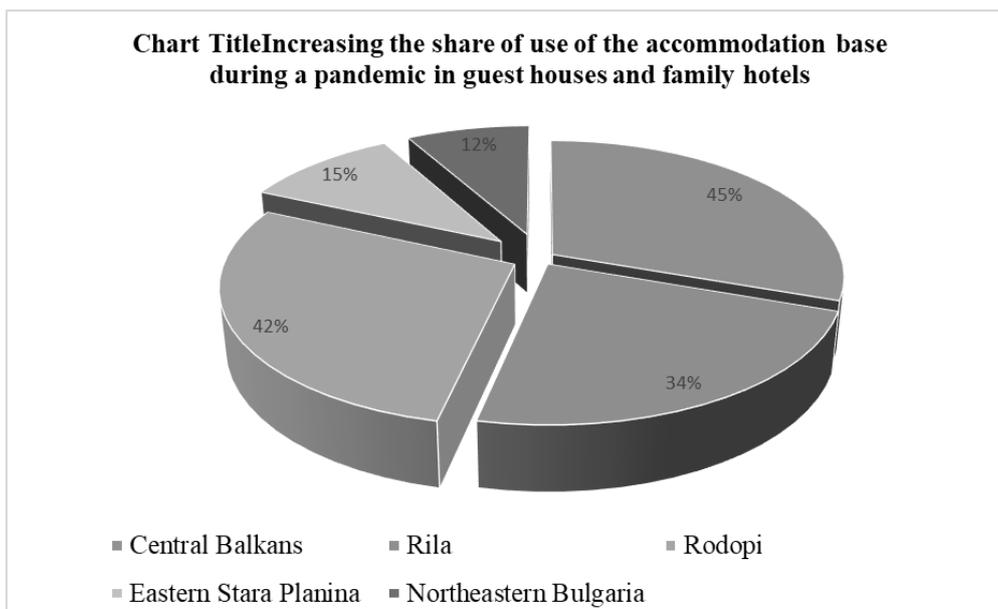


Figure. 4 Chart Title Increasing the share of use of the accommodation base during a pandemic in guest houses and family hotels

All of this gives us the reason to report that there is an upward trend in the development of rural tourism and ecotourism in the country, but also to create prerequisites for development of additional activities, which offer activities alternative to the rural tourism product. For example, 56% of the interviewed, mostly in the mountain areas, are offering their tourists, as part of their activities, organized excursions following eco-routes. 25% offer their bicycles for cycling tourism and hikes in the areas near villages. Just 2% offer horse-riding, but almost 36% offer outdoor sports. Some of these games are table tennis, badminton, tennis, soccer, volleyball, basketball, etc. Almost 85% of the interviewed guest house owners and in the five regions of analyzes offer board games, such as: chess, backgammon, pachisi, backgammon, cards, and other education and competitive games. Almost 25% of the interviewed owners offer the possibility for their tourists to become familiar with a traditional type of craft, or with the original life and culture of the specific region, by offering them to take part in handicrafts or a participation in a pottery workshop.

Rural tourism is a preferred type of tourism in the conditions of a pandemic and due to the possibility of having a much easier and more accessible way for tourists to be in proximity to natural landmarks and sites, which do not attract crowds of people, because they are more remote from the larger urban and commercial centers. Each of the interviewed guest house owners has indicated similar landmarks in their region. So, for example, the Teteven Balkans are, the most preferred landmarks are the nearby eco-routes from Ribaritsa and Teteven to nearby peaks, hills, waterfalls, and other natural landmarks, including paths to other nearby shelters and mountain huts. Example: Georgi Benkovski hut, Eho hut, shelters in the Tsaritschina reservation, Vezhen hut at the foot of Vezhen peak, for the Troyanski Balkans area, those types of prominent landmarks, according to the interviewed owners, are Troyanski monastery, Kozyata stena, Beklimeto, Oreshak village, with its wonderful exhibitions of handicrafts indigenous for this area, Shipkova village, with the mineral water and all of the mineral baths and pools in the area, Kozyata Stena hut, Vasil Levski hut, Haydushka Pesen hut. For the area of Shumen, the polled guest house owners in the areas of the villages Osmar, Madara, Kyulevcha, Veliki Preslav and Pliska have clearly indicated as the main landmarks and attractions, which attract the tourists in the region, the monument “One thousand and three hundred years of Bulgaria”, the Madara Horseman, which is part of the UNESCO cultural heritage, the Shumen fortress, the Madara plateau, the Madara eco path, the old town of Pliska and Veliki Preslav, natural preserve “Patleyna”, the waterfalls near Veselinovo village, the Shumen plateau, the eco trails and the green school above the town of Shumen, etc.

Among the guest house owners interviewed from the region of the Eastern Balkans, from the town of Kotel and the villages of Medven, Zheravnya, Banya, Ichera, the most prominent tourist landmarks have proven to be all of the antropogenic cultural monuments, such as the museum of the Kotel revivalists, the Panteon of Georgi Sava Rakovski, the museum of natural sciences and history in Kotel, the Yordan Yovkov museum house, the Zahari Stoyanov museum house in Medven, the Kyorpeevata House, which represents the urban life of the past centuries in the town of Kotel. Much less prominence has been given to the natural factors, such as some small waterfalls, weirs, rivers and low hills and peaks, but despite all that, the following natural landmarks provoke high level of interest in tourists - the “Zlosten” karst complex, the Chataalkaya rock phenomenon and many of the caves, among the more prominent of which are: The Ledenika caves, Maglivata cave, Sv. 40 machenitsi cave in the territory of Kipilovo village, Prikazana cave, Dryanovska cave, the Black izvori cave, one of the most beautiful caves in the region, with rich natural formations “Bilyarnika” and the “Maarata” cave near Medven village.

For the other two areas, the interviewed house owners once again determined the most preferred natural and antropogenic resources in the Rodopite area and in proximity to the Gela and Shiroka Laka villages, they are: The Kapitan Petko Voevoda house and the house and monument of Exarch Stefan 1, church school in the Shiroka Laka village, the monument of the victims of war and Gaidaryat fountain, the national school of folklore arts “Shiroka Laka”, community center Exarch Stefan 1, and as a natural phenomenon - the rock formation “Glavata”, the rock formation “Momata” Yagodinska cave and the Devil’s Throat, approximately 35 km away from the Shiroka Laka village. Uhlovitsa cave near Mogilitsa village, Golyam Perelik peak, Chudnite Mostove, Trigradsko and Buynovsko gorge. An early Byzantine Basilica, Solishte village, Kazana weir and Orpheus peak can be seen near Gela village.

In the area of Kovachevtsi, which, like Shiroka Laka and Bozhentsi, is an architectural preserve, there is also an abundance of natural and antropogenic factors and landmarks. By way of example: The Bukov Dol waterfall, Valchanova cave, the centennial sycamore tree in Garmen village, the late Antiquity and Roman city Nicopolis ad Nestum, the Architectural and Historical Preserve Kovachevitsa, Kaninska eco-trail Garmen, the architectural reservation in Dolen village, the Manuilova Dupka cave, the sanctuary in the Skribina area near Kribul village, Gotse Delchev area, Orelyak peak, Uden peak. Near Lestehn, the clay house in the Leshten village, the Siniya Vir waterfall, rock formation “Svatbata”, etc.

According to the interviewed, the main landmarks attracting tourists in the area of Rila (Govedartsi, Shumnatitsa) are: Rila Monastery, national park Rila with all its peaks, most of all the Musala and Malyovitsa, the Goritsa and Rilska Skakavitsa waterfalls. The path of fairy tales near Panichishte, Stari Mali Grad, the Tsarska Bistritsa palace, Malyovitsa hut, Skakavitsa hut, Rilski Ezera hut and Shumnatitsa hut, and many others.

While in the Strandzha area (the villages of Brashlyan and Balgari), the natural and antropogenic factors that attract tourists are the villages themselves are open-air architectural preserves, they host numerous ancient houses, preserved since last century, but other major and interesting landmarks in the region are: the church school, the church and the temple in the Brashlyan village, Balyuvata kashta, the protected area “Krivinizovo”, reservation “Vitanovo”, Dokuzak waterfall, the churches “Sv. Atanas” in Zvezdets village, the Assumption of Mary church in Malko Tarnovo and Sveti Iliya in Stoilovo village, reservation “Sredoka”, Museum of History and Ethnographic house in Malko Tarnovo, etc.

Conclusion

From the research completed, we can combine the obtained results as follows:

In both cases, normal conditions or the conditions of a global pandemic, the decisive factor for tourists choosing their specific leisure tourist destination, are the natural resources available, such as: waterfalls, peaks, gorges, caves, bodies of water, sources of mineral water, reservations, and the antropogenic resources (created by people), including: cultural monuments, which are part of the UNESCO cultural heritage, church schools, all sorts of museums, churches, monasteries,

chapels, fountains, monuments, pantheons, tombs, sanctuaries, etc. The more there are of the available natural and anthropogenic resources, the higher the level of tourist preference for that specific region.

The pandemic has necessitated a preference to alternative forms of tourism, including mainly rural and ecotourism, due to the lower capacity for accommodation and the lower number of arriving tourists, which allows the distance that is vital to prevent the spread of the virus and compliance with the regulations of the Minister of Health

Last, but not least, the lower income under the conditions of the pandemic, and at the same time the rising inflation, provide much limited opportunities for tourism and alternative forms of tourism are the adequate solution in this situation. The questioned tourists prefer this type of tourism to others, because they feel more protected and secure that they will avoid unnecessary contacts, and due to the feeling of being closer to nature and breathing clearer air.

In conclusion, we can summarize those alternative forms of tourism, particularly ecotourism and rural tourism in Bulgaria have developed successfully even in the conditions of the pandemic. There are specific reasons for this, which have been clarified in this article, and this once again has proven that people cannot live away from nature for a long period of time. Ecotourism and rural tourism provide people the opportunity of not gathering in large groups, keeping their distance, and at the same time remain close to nature, and this is the winning strategy for tourism to successfully continue to exist, even in the conditions of a pandemic.

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