Thematic routes in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county according to the visitors' opinion

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Abstract

Nowadays the role and importance of culture in tourism is increasing. One of the main manifestations of this process is the spreading of thematic routes. Since the routes are new "products" it is important to monitor their development. The paper analyses three thematic routes in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County (Hungary), using the results of an online survey and the content analysis of tourism web pages. According to the results the potential visitors do not have the sufficient information about the routes. The accessibility and available services were evaluated slightly better than average by those tourists who visited at least one of the routes. At the same time they were content with the attitude of service providers. Based on their experiences they would offer the routes to their friends – which can be a useful promotion tool. The surveyed visitors think that establishing these thematic routes was a good and important initiative. This shows the potential and importance of the routes but their further development and promotion is a must.

Keywords: *cultural tourism, internet, thematic tourism routes, cross-border cooperation, visitors' satisfaction survey*

Rezumat. Rute tematice în județul Szalbocs-Szatmár-Bereg conform opiniei vizitatorilor

În prezent, rolul și importanța culturii pentru turism este tot mai mare. Una din principalele manifestări ale acestui proces o reprezintă înmulțirea rutelor tematice. Întrucât aceste rute sunt „produse" noi, monitorizarea lor este foarte importantă. Lucrarea de față analizează trei rute tematice din județul Szalbocs-Szatmár-Bereg (Ungaria), folosind rezultatele unui studiu on-line și analiza conținutului paginilor web. Conform rezultatelor prezentei cercetări, vizitatorii potențiali nu au suficiente informații despre aceste rute. Accesibilitatea și serviciile disponibile au fost evaluate ca fiind puțin peste medie de către turiștii care parcurseseră cel puțin una din rute. În același timp erau satisfăcuți de atitudinea personalului. Pe baza experienței lor, ar recomanda aceste rute prietenilor, ceea ce poate fi un mijloc eficient de promovare. Turiștii chestionați apreciază pozitiv inițiativa pentru stabilirea acestor rute tematice, ceea ce indică potențialul și importanța rutelor, însă acestea trebuie dezvoltate mai mult și promovate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *turism cultural, internet, rute turistice tematice, cooperare transfrontalieră, chestionar pentru evaluarea satisfacției vizitatorilor*

Introduction

Nowadays the importance of cultural tourism is increasing. The appreciation of the role of culture in tourism is due to the simultaneous appearance of several factors (Michalkó – Rátz 2005; Michalkó 2007). Among them, we must mention the increase of the general education level, which broadens people's – as potential travelers – view and interest for the elements of culture (Michalkó 2007). In addition, the motivational role of '4S' (i.e. sun, sea, sand and sex) is relatively decreasing for the benefit of cultural tourism (Csapó – Matesz 2007). One of the most spreading tools used for the development of cultural tourism is the creation of the thematic routes, which organize the tourist attractions in a spatial structure, moreover guide and inform the visitors. Because of its increased role it is essential to gather information about the function and notoriety of thematic routes, or rather about the visitors' satisfaction. The aim of this article is to present what kind of thematic routes are functioning in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county – which is one of the most underdeveloped counties in Hungary –, and what are the visitors' opinions about these. The paper is based on online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis of tourism websites.

Culture and tourism

Cultural tourism is based on culture, which has various kinds therefore it is interpreted differently by different authors. Despite the variety of definitions it can be established that culture is not a static term, but it is changing continuously. The culture basically created embodied by the society which determines our everyday lives and influences our actions (Nagy – Boros 2010). Different cultures can have quite a large attraction. The European culture is a good example for this, its popularity proved by the globally prominent number of tourist arrivals (Rátz 2004; Boros – Pál 2010).

Just as the concept of culture, the relationship between culture and tourism has different approaches, too. Some authors argue that tourism can play a significant role in the wider spreading of culture (Hajdu 1999; Lengyel 2001), while according to others the holiday is what connects the two concepts the most (Lengyel 2001). The cultural tourism also has been associated with the Maslow pyramid by others. According to the pyramid the cultural tourism is able to satisfy the human needs

for knowledge and aesthetics or the search for identity (Michalkó 2007; Mundruczó 1996).

If cultural tourism is interpreted as a system, it is important to consider its elements. The cultural tourism is based on the cultural heritage, which can be determined in the tourism context as the totality of human creations and activities, and these can be involved in tourism. Its concrete elements are granted by people's intellectual and material heritage (Horváth 1999; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Dávid – Jancsik – Rátz 2007). The material remains include the built heritage (residence), works of art (sculptures, paintings, costumes), while the customs, traditions and lifestyles of a people or nation are recognized as intellectual heritage. These elements are not static, but vary or may differ from country to country, which is favorable to tourism (Ashworth – Larkham 1994).

Apart from the existence of cultural heritage, for the sustainable development of tourism, it is essential to protect this heritage (Michalkó – Rátz 2005). To protect the cultural elements in tourism is not only the interest of tourism, but both economically and culturally very important. The above-mentioned elements appear in tourism as attractions and in economy as revenues from the visitors. In cultural context, the heritage largely contributes to the preservation of identity, which is closely related to the life of a nation or a smaller community (Pap 2010).

As in the tourism sector in general, in cultural tourism is also important to emphasize the concept of complexity (Bodnár 2000). Beyond the existence of attractions, a number of conditions must be met in the interest of maintaining/improving competitiveness. It is needed basically in all tourism products, but especially in thematic routes.

The concept and characteristics of thematic routes

The thematic products in the United States, Australia and in Western Europe already appeared in the early 1980s, while in Central-Eastern Europe evolved only in the second half of the decade (Csapó – Berki 2008). As a result, several thematic tourist routes have been created in which a particular natural or cultural topic interlace the attractions, which can be approached in different ways (Puczkó – Rátz 2002b). The thematic routes – although in the definition the term of natural also exists – are mostly related to culture. According to the diversity of cultural heritage several types of routes can be formed, for example routes related to industrial heritage (e.g. The Ruhr Tour), to religious memories (mainly as pilgrimages) or even related to a well-known artist's career (Goethe-route).

The creation of thematic routes can have several different aims. For example, these routes can draw attention to the region and its values. In this case, not only the traditional attractions can play a role, but also the lesser-known ones. Furthermore, the aim can be to make the area more recognizable by specific route-offers. This might be an advantage especially for those who arrive as strangers/guests at the site. Otherwise, the thematic routes deepen the relationship between the participants because without cooperation the product itself is not (or hardly) operable, as well as the collaboration results in a more integrated representation of interests. In addition, cooperation is also important in tourism marketing, because in this way it is easier to create a unified tourist image, and the visitors can more easily identify with it (Puczkó – Rátz 2002b).

A great advantage of thematic routes – of course depending on theme – is the cost-effectiveness. Since most of the routes are not tied closely to the established roads, but rather appear in an abstract sense, hence it is not necessary to build linear road system (which has been already given), but mainly the attractions have to be maintained. Moreover, this might be seen as essential marketing expenditure to attract visitors.

The thematic routes outside Hungary

Globally, and especially in Europe, thematic routes have a quite long tradition. Germany has one of the most colorful supplies, even if creating a route has a very strict set of criteria there (Juray 2002). These criteria include, among others, the following things (which are also typical in Hungary or might be in the future requirements) (Demhardt 2004):
- using symbols and slogans,
- establish a central information point,
- list of the attractions and services of the route,
- precise and individualized determination of responsibilities,
- existence of multilingual information package, etc.

In compliance with the strict regulation, these routes are very popular for domestic and also for foreign tourists. The most traditional German thematic routes are the 'Romantische Strasse' (http://www.goethe.de/ges/mol/del/tro/de2525157.htm) and the 'Alpen Strasse' (http://www.deutsche-alpenstrasse.de/), which have a history of several decades. The thematic diversity is supported by the fact that we can find even wine routes (which appear also in the Hungarian supply), roads connected with castles and routes presenting the memories of the Roman Limes in Germany (Limesstraße).

The thematic routes in Hungary

Regarding the tourist offer in Hungary, the number of thematic routes is increasing, most of

them lying within the border (for example, the 'Palóc-route'; the 'Stone-route' in Bükkalja or the historical routes in Veszprém County) (http://www.utikonyv.hu/_utikonyv/documentum.php?id=2471; http://www.nordtour.hu/info/temak/tematikus-utak/). However, an increasing proportion of younger routes have been carried out by cross-border cooperation. This trend, of course, affected mainly the border areas and counties. These areas are usually economically less developed than the national average, so this product of tourism or generally tourism appears as a potential development option.

The areas separated by border can choose between several options: may compete with each other; may cooperate with each other; may specialize in something, so the market is divided between them; or by broadening the existing supply they can obtain a competitive advantage (Boros 2002; Boros – Garamhegyi 2009; Bujdosó 2010). Considering that the number of thematic routes based on international cooperation is increasing, we can conclude that the participants chose to cooperate, even though in many cases this co-operation implies only the creation of routes.

In Hungary the best known routes are the wine roads, which are located at the most famous Hungarian wine regions, for example the Tokaj Wine Route and the Villány-Siklós Wine Route; but the castle tourism is relatively remarkable and more mature.

This shows that – although a relatively new product in the Hungarian tourism – researching and monitoring our thematic routes is important to maintain the long-term viability and demand.

Study area

The sample area of the research is Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, which is located in north-eastern Hungary. Among the reasons for the selection of this area, we must mention that the county is one of the most economically underdeveloped counties in Hungary (low economic activity, few workplaces, high rate of unemployment – in 2010 it was 18,4%, which means the last place in the ranking of counties) (based on the data from The Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2010).

The choice of the area is also reasoned by own and other researches that the county is rich in natural and cultural attractions, which provides a sound basis for developing tourism (Hanusz 1998; Csordás 2002; Kovács – Martyin 2012). In addition, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County is bordered by three countries, which are favorable for the international cooperation and the development of cross-border thematic routes.

The analyzed thematic routes

The three analyzed thematic routes (Fig. 1) show the rich cultural heritage of the county, based on three types of themes. First, the 'Szatmár-Szatmár Plum Route' is the oldest route, where already in the mid-2000s there existed a kind of relationship between the Hungarian and Romanian participants. This was followed by the Hungary-Romania Cross-border Co-operation Program 2007-2013, which established the 'Plum Route'. Now 17 Hungarian and 10 Romanian towns belong to the route, but further expansions are planned. The 'Plum Route' primarily based on one of the traditional gastronomic value of the region, is the local plum. Along the way, the different towns with centuries-old traditions present what can be made out of plums, from the plum jam, and the prune to the typical plum brandy. Especially in the case of the 'Plum Route' the previously mentioned complexity can be observed, as Hanusz (2009 p. 157) argued: "(...) it provides a framework for a complex tourism presentation of a small region and connects the tourism products in the region which just alone do not represent a special tourist attraction".

The 'Plum Route' combines tourism, culture, traditions, and agriculture, thus creating an overall tourist product, which has been created by the Plum Road Association (Hanusz 2002; Hanusz 2009).

Another route is that of medieval churches ('Medieval churches route in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County and in Satu Mare County'). The 'Church Route' also developed following the Hungarian-Romanian cooperation, where the tourist product is based on the medieval churches, which all can be interpreted as heritage tourism attractions or religious historical attractions (the Reformation get a foothold in the region earlier, than around the Calvinistic Debrecen).

The main period of the tourism development program lasted from 2009 until 2011, and the present period aims to expand the route towards Ukraine. This is expected to end in 2012, so the 'Church Route' will be expanding with 30 new elements. Since its establishment, now it is in the fourth phase of development, which is certainly remarkable. Analyzing the strategy of the route, it can be stated that this is a deliberately structured thematic way, starting from the evaluation of tourism in the county, through identifying problems, drawing up an inventory of attractions, involving partners, up to external communication.

Unlike the other two routes, the 'Castle Route' was created by the Hungary-Slovakia Cross-Border Development Program 2009-2010, which combines the castles and mansions in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Kosice counties. Some of the buildings had already been renovated (for example Vay-castle in

Vaja), but in some places the works are still ongoing (for example Andrássy-castle in Tiszadob).
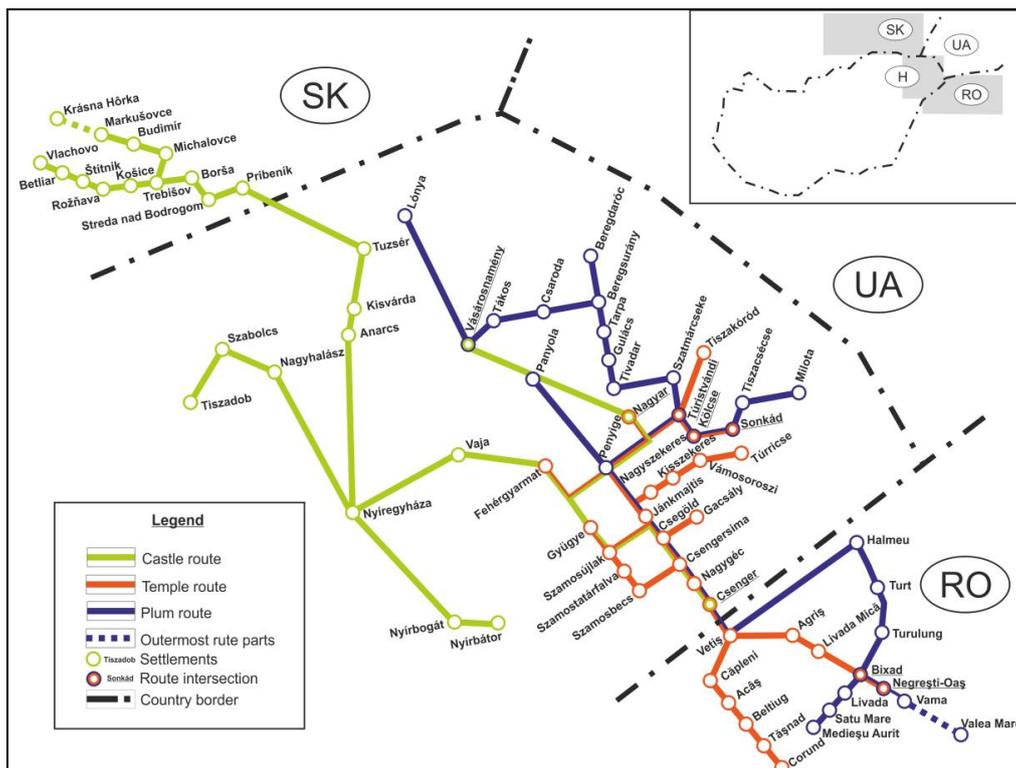

Figure 1: The three analyzed thematic routes

Source: edited by Gyula Nagy

The use of castles in the thematic route is different: sometimes they function as museums (the Beregi Museum located in Tomcsányi-castle in Vásárosnamény); sometimes as hotels (Szuhányi mansion in Csenger or Bogáthy-mansion in Nyírbogát); sometimes as conference site (Csuha-Kállay mansion in Nagyhalász) and sometimes as places for outdoor events (castle of Kisvárda). (http://www.castletour-husk.eu/index.php?option= com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=35&I temid=67&lang=hu)

Methodology

During the research, primary and secondary data collection methods were used. In the course of a research it is important to know the literature connected with the topic, how other researchers, experts deal with the subject matter, what results were achieved and what data are available. Since these data are derived from others – these are others' statements and results –, hence these are only secondary sources of information. During the primary data collection, the research is much more controlled and has an important advantage: new data and information can be gained from it.

In this research, as primary method, we made an online survey. Firstly the questionnaires were sent to our friends who were asked to forward also their own friends. As a result, we received back 150 fully completed questionnaires. The disadvantage of the online survey was that mainly we could send the questionnaires to our friends, therefore the age division of the respondents was somewhat distorted (55% of the respondents were in the 19-25 age range). In the second period of the survey we tried to correct this, so we sent the questionnaires rather to the middle-ages, but considering that in this way they were available with more difficulty, we only partially achieved our target.

The second pillar of the primary data collection was the preparation of structured interviews. The interviews were made with experts who participated in the creation of the routes. In the interviews the goal was to speak – in accordance with the international character of the routes – with the Hungarian, Romanian and Slovak participants, but it failed because the foreign partners did not respond even if we tried to contact them more times by email and also by telephone. Finally two interviews were made: one with an expert of the 'Plum Route' and one with a competent person from the Association which maintains the 'Castle Route' and the 'Church Route', too. So in the end we were able to talk to experts about all the three routes.

As secondary data we overviewed the scientific literature and online data were processed. The

content analysis of the web pages of the routes gave the most important information, which we later also analyzed with own indicators. We considered this as an important element of the study because – as it will be seen later –, the Internet is the main source of information in connection with the routes, which is considered to be a general trend these days.

The recognition of the routes and the visitors' opinion about it

It was quite difficult to measure the recognition and assessment of the analyzed routes in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County. On one hand, because of the problems described in the methodology and on the other hand because of these routes are relatively young.

The survey, as the title also suggests, built around two main topics: the recognition of the roads, and the opinions of the visitors. In terms of the recognition of the routes according to the responses it can be concluded that relatively few people know these roads: more than half of the respondents had not heard about any of the routes, yet. Another fact is that all three routes were rarely mentioned by the respondents; more typical was that only one of them was mentioned. According to the answers, the most familiar route is the 'Castle Route', followed by the 'Plum Route' and then the 'Church Route'.

The fact that the thematic routes of the county are not well known is not pleasing news, but a reason for optimism that those who have not heard about either one or more of the routes, most of them wish to be informed about it in the future. This certainly reflects that they have good imagination about the thematic routes, they are interested in.

To raise the recognition – beyond the fact that it has to pass some time until the thematic routes are better integrated into the public awareness – conscious communication is needed. As in case of any other product wanted to be sold, tourism products must be promoted after the creation. In this context, we examined how the respondents get information about the thematic paths. The Internet is the most dominant source, however, relatives and acquaintances play also an important role. The Internet proved role in this study well adapt to the general trend, however, the recommendation of close friends still plays an important role. This may be explained by the fact that an attraction is elusive in reality – compared to an average store product – only at a given time, in a given place it can become marketable (Mundruczó 1996).

Having seen the importance of the Internet, we checked the routes' web pages out and we made a content analysis of them (the aspects of the analysis: the availability of websites, the number of

hits, the quality of hits, the wealth of information on websites, the cartographical representation, the existence of photo gallery, aesthetics of the website, how many languages are available on the website, contact possibilities, and information about foreign partners). According to the indicators the 'Church Route' has the best values, then the 'Plum Route' and finally the 'Castle Route'. It is an important deficiency that apart from the attractions there is no information about the cross-border partners on the websites which query the real partnership.

The 'Castle Route' website is available in four – languages (not counting the Hungarian), wich is the highest number. This is definitely a positive fact which significantly contributes to the attraction of foreign tourists. However, a negative fact that the 'Castle Route' website is not easily available, and it is the most incomplete in some parameter (e.g. contact possibilities, photo gallery). The research also showed that most of the visitors only visited one attraction, visiting the full route was not typical. Furthermore, based on the research it can be stated also, that primarily the already well-known towns and villages were visited (Table 1). These is also a negative aspect since one of the main targets of the thematic routes is to attract tourists to the smaller, less known/visited attractions; apparently, this has not succeeded yet.

Table 1: The most visited settlements of the analyzed thematic routes

'Plum Route'	'Church Route'	'Castle Route'
1. Panyola	1. Túristvándi	1. Tiszadob
2. Tarpa	2. Csenger Csengersima	2. Tuzsér Nyírbátor
3. Vásárosnamény Szatmárcseke	3. Kölcse, Gacsály, Csaroda, Gyügye, Nagyszekeres, Máriapócs, Nagyar, Nagygéc, Túrricse	3. Betlér (SK), Kassa (SK), Tiszadada, Vásárosn., Vaja

Source: own construction, based on the survey

The visitors' assessment of the roads were little better than average. To facilitate the assessment we identified 6 indicators: accessibility, the quantity and quality of services related to the route as well as other services, and the attitude of the population. We asked the respondents to grade all of the routes on a scale from one to five. On the average, the visitors were the most satisfied with the 'Plum Route', but even its average is below 4. Out of the indicators, population's attitude was mostly

appreciated, which was especially true in the case of 'Church Route'. According to Hanusz (2006), the hospitality is very important and it is a feature of the county. The local population attitude towards tourists/tourism is particularly important since, in most cases, a personal relationship is established between the two parties, and the negative attitude of either party in the future may cause serious problems (Puczkó – Rátz 2002a).

In addition to the average we also have examined the standard deviation of the values which reflects concurrent the visitors' opinion in certain indicators. The deviation between the values is relatively large (from 0 to 1.16, where: 0 – when the responses are fully consistent; 1.16 – the answers are very different in the sample), so the guest's opinion is not homogeneous. In the research, it means that the respondents' opinions were quite divided by the various indicators, which is unfavorable for the attractions.

According to the research, most of the respondents became aware of the existence of the thematic route just after their returning home, so they used the route/visited the settlements without aware of the wider tourism environment. The operator should be responsible for reversing this phenomenon in the future, and the tourists visiting the settlements be aware of these thematic routes.

Conclusion

The three analyzed thematic routes in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County are quite young. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the routes are less known. A logical consequence is that these roads attract a small range of visitors. However, it is promising, that those who visited one of the thematic roads or at settlements included in the routes, would recommend it to their acquaintances. But here it is also important to note that most of the visitors became aware of the existence of the thematic route just after return home, which certainly testifies for the significant lack of information.

The increasing role of the Internet is supported by the fact that most of the respondents got information about the routes via internet. However, the analyzed websites were incomplete, particularly for reaching international tourists, since the sites are available in relatively few languages (excepting the website of 'Castle Route'). Apart from Internet, the relatives' and friends' recommendations had an important role, too, so this information might determine the future marketing directions.

The visitors were not fully satisfied with the availability and quality of the routes, but at least the results clearly show what needs to be improved. The assessment of the routes divided the visitors' opinions, because the answers were not consistent in the case of certain indicators. This may be an important fact, because getting information about the routes from friends plays an important role. If their opinions are divided in relation to the routes, it might happen that the visitors will recommend it differently to their acquaintances later.

The results show that the respondents keep the thematic routes basically a good initiative, and they are interested in it. We believe that this research could also help some awareness about the routes, because those who have not heard about the roads yet, but they heard about it in relation to the questionnaire, could become potential visitors.

If the problems could be solved in due time, the routes may actually contribute to improve the economic situation in the county due the tourism. In addition, conscious planning and continuous monitoring is needed.

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