Natural Tourism Resources in Gabrovo District (Bulgaria)

Vanya Vasileva¹
Dora Kabakchieva²

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Abstract: Stara planina tourist area covers the central part of the country, along the mountain with the same name. It includes 32 municipalities from 10 districts. Gabrovo district is the only one that falls entirely within Stara planina tourist region. Stara Planina tourist region is one of the most attractive regions for tourism in Bulgaria and one of the few that have almost year-round tourist activities. The outline of the area includes the mountain of the same name, but also the Pre-Balkan. This fact predetermines the exceptional richness and diversity of natural tourist resources. The region specializes mainly in mountain tourism, including recreation, mountain trekking, rural and ecotourism. There is an urgent need to identify and evaluate the prospects for sustainable development of tourism in the region. The purpose of the present study is to valorize the natural tourist resources of Gabrovo district and to provide guidelines for their sustainable use.

1. INTRODUCTION, PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

Stara Planina tourist region is in central Bulgaria, along the mountain of the same name. It includes 32 municipalities from 10 districts. Only the Gabrovo district falls entirely within the considered tourist area, and four other districts are represented by only one municipality. The primary objective of this study is to leverage the natural tourist assets in the Gabrovo district and offer guidance for their sustainable use.

A combination of research methods was used to achieve the set objective. Field research is a basic approach for geographical (including tourist-geographical) research of territorial units diverse in scope and rank, including tourist areas. In this case, it was conducted in a long-term period, which makes it possible to note the changes that have occurred in the studied territory from a touristic perspective. A combination of general methods such as analysis, comparison, induction, deduction, etc. was used to present the obtained results.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Stara planina is the longest mountain range in Bulgaria, part of the Alpo-Himalayan mountain system. It is a typical mountain range that stretches across the central part of the country, starting at its easternmost point near the Black Sea and continuing almost in a straight line west to the border with Serbia. The mountain is 530 km long and about 15 km wide (in its middle part). The area it occupies is 11,596 km². It is referred to as the “backbone of Bulgaria” because it naturally bisects the territory of the country into north and south.

This gives the high parts an alpine look, which makes them attractive for hiking and mountain-eering. The longest tourist hiking route in Bulgaria, Kom–Emine (almost 600 km), runs along the main Stara Planina ridge. The road from Mount Kom (the westernmost point of the mountain)

¹ Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, 115 Universitetska str., Bulgaria
² Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, 115 Universitetska str., Bulgaria
to Cape Emine (its easternmost point) is the Bulgarian part of the international trans-European tourist route E-3, which crosses the Pyrenees, Ardennes, Eifel, Erzgebirge, Decinski Snezhnik, Mala Fatra, the Tatras, the Carpathians and Stara Planina and connects the Atlantic Ocean and the Black Sea. On the territory of Bulgaria, the E-3 route is well organized despite the neglect of a large part of the tourist infrastructure in the 90s years. Recently, there has been a growing interest in this transition and restoration of sites’ marking along it.

Stara planina is the windiest and foggiest mountain in Bulgaria. The average annual wind speed on its peaks reaches 10 m/s. The meteorological station at the highest of them - Mount Botev (2,375.9 m) - claims it is the windiest place in the country.

Each of the separate areas of Stara Planina tourist region has its distinctive natural resources. On the one hand, they mark the main accents in the relevant tourist offers and, on the other hand, mark the directions for sustainable development of the territory.

Gabrovo district is located in the central part of the Stara Planina tourist region. To the north and east, it borders the Veliko Tarnovo district. To the south is Stara Zagora district, and to the west - Lovech district.

3. VALORIZATION OF NATURAL TOURIST RESOURCES

Gabrovo district is the only one that falls entirely within the Stara planina tourist area with all 4 municipalities (Gabrovo, Dryanovo, Sevlievo, Tryavna). It is characterized by a diverse semi-mountainous and mountainous relief. It falls within the scope of both Pre-Balkan and Stara planina.

Tourism in the district is not one of the leading branches of the local economy, but it is of particular importance given the sustainable management of tourism resources in terms of environmental impact and potential contribution of social benefits to the local community. There is a clear trend towards the positioning of the branch in areas with places suitable for ecological and rural tourism.

An important place as a resource and component of the tourist offer of the region is occupied by the area of Uzana, which is located 22 km southwest of Gabrovo at the foot of Mount Ispolin (1524 m), amidst a beautiful natural environment and characteristic relief. It is located at the transition between the Central Balkans and the Eastern Stara Planina, in a strategic location in the geographical center of Bulgaria, measured in 1991. Since 2009, the Uzana area has the status of a resort complex. A detailed development plan was also adopted. As of 2021, 10 accommodation places with a total capacity of 444 beds are registered here.

The resort offers excellent opportunities for relaxation throughout the year and interesting activities during the day and evening. Hotels and villa complexes provide the most diverse and interesting opportunities for rest. For those who practice winter sports, there is a well-built infrastructure and facilities - 8 towpaths and 8 ski tracks of varying difficulty with a total length of about 3 km. Access to the ski area is easy. The average altitude of most ski slopes is 1,300 m - 1,400 m, and the maximum elevation difference is 256 m.

The resort complex is part of the territory of “Bulgarka” Nature Park. The forest fund is over 80% of its total area. An additional advantage for the tourist attractiveness of the protected area
is that only about 20 km away, on its western border, is located one of the three Bulgarian national parks - “Central Balkan”. The part of the European tourist route E3 (Kom - Emine) passes along the southern border of the nature park (Uzana area - Shipka peak – the huts Buzludzha, Bulgarka, Krastets, Gramadliva and Predela - Prohoda na Republikata). In the area of the Park, there are many and varied pedestrian, educational and exploring routes, reaching various natural and cultural-historical attractions. Information, visitor and interpretive infrastructure has been built, but in recent years, due to a lack of maintenance (especially of the information facilities - signs, maps), its condition is unsatisfactory. The main reason is the low funding for the park (Bulgarian Swiss Cooperation Programme, n.d.).

Ecotourism activities are among the few that have the potential to achieve economic benefits without damaging the protected areas included in the territory of the district. Uzana Polyana Fest is one of the first ecological festivals in Bulgaria. It is held annually in July, and its duration is 2-3 days. The first edition of the festival was in 2011. The diverse program, the various ecological challenges, the many eco-exhibitors and the bazaar of organic products provoke increased interest from different audiences - people dedicated to the “green” way of life, mountaineers, environmentalists, representatives of institutions, people looking for emotion in nature, fans of the musicians, participating in the concerts, shopping, etc. Over the years, the festival had good attendance, both from the country and from abroad. In 2021, the statistics indicate that over 150 individuals were participating as attendees, exhibitors, and speakers, while the number of visitors reached approximately 10,000 people.

The list of the Regional Inspectorate for the Protection of the Environment and Forests of Gabrovo region comprises 15 protected areas (Bozhentsi - Tryavna municipality, Studeniyat Kladnents and Lgut - Sevlievo municipality, the lands around Dryanovsky Monastery, Sokol Monastery, Batoshesvsky Monastery, etc.) and 4 natural sights (Bacho Kiro cave - Dryanovo municipality, Vikanata skala and Skalniy Venets - Tryavna municipality, Bilyakovets lake - Gabrovo municipality) (Oblast Gabrovo, n.d.; Vasileva & Sabrieva, 2023).

Bacho Kiro cave is located near Dryanovsky Monastery. It is a complex four-story labyrinth of cave galleries and branches with a total length of about 3,600 m. A well-laid-out part of 700 m has been made for visitors. It is formed in three main directions - east, northeast and southeast - by underground rivers flowing in strong orgone limestones. Geomorphological studies give reasons to assume that its formation lasted 1.8 million years. There are 6 cave halls. This is the first refined cave in Bulgaria (1937). Spectacular lighting offers visitors the opportunity to see the whimsical formations of nature, named after what they resemble: Rain Hall, Stone Flower, Poplars, Lake of Happiness, Jellyfish, Bear Slide, Bear Meadow, Elephant, Cave Ear, Purgatory, Throne, Cave Eagle and others. The tourist site “Destination Dryanovo” calls the cave “home of the first intelligent people in Europe” because some of the oldest traces of Homo sapiens on the old continent have been found here, dating to the transition years between the Middle and Late Paleolithic. In 1962 it was appointed as a natural landmark, and in 2002 the paths and lighting were renewed (Destination Dryanovo, n.d.; Zhalov, 2006).

Gabrovo district is also widely known for its climate-healing mountain resorts - Dryanovo, Tryavna, Plachkovtsi, Tsareva livada and Lyuljatsi, which have a beneficial effect on diseases of the respiratory and cardiovascular systems, on the musculoskeletal system, etc.
4. CURRENT STATE OF TOURISM AND GUIDELINES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The highlights and guidelines for the sustainable development of tourism in the Stara Planina region reflect and require additional strategic priorities and support the work of local authorities and interested communities in the development of a set of measures, means and actions for their achievement. The area offers a variety of opportunities for active recreation, attractive activities and outdoor experiences for people with a wide range of interests and needs.

Tourism in Gabrovo district is an important complementary sector in the local economy. Effective utilization of available opportunities contributes to job creation and the development of local supply chains. The geographical location of the areas with tourist potential, as well as the cultural and historical landmarks, create conditions for the beneficial influence of the development of tourism on the depopulation of the territories (Strategy for sustainable development of tourism in Gabrovo municipality 2021-2027).

The main problems and limitations stem from insufficient and unsatisfactory baseline information and a lack of data on:

- tourist resources and sights on the territory of many municipalities;
- service providers and the quality of the tourist offer;
- the number of visitors who are tourists.

Such deficits hinder research studies and the preparation of in-depth analyses. A serious limiting factor is the absence of traditions in the field of tourism and the purposeful development of the sector in many municipalities.

Both at the national and the European level, it is planned to promote the creation of the so-called biodistricts where tourists will be able to learn more about organic farming. Organic farming and other local activities can make some areas that are not traditional tourist destinations attractive for tourists. Such type of tourism is particularly applicable to the larger protected areas, including meadows and pastures, forest areas, arable lands, rivers, etc., where tourist activities can be developed in compliance with the regimes of the protected areas, at the same time offering access to the natural features of these sites, as well as to the local bioproducts.

In the Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria until 2030, a special place is allocated for all forms of alternative tourism - eco, rural, balneo, ethnic, bio, spa, gourmet, wine, etc., which can successfully bring to the fore the rich natural resources of Stara Planina tourist area to turn them into a competitive product, even on international markets (Ministry of Economy and Energy, 2014; Ministry of Tourism, n.d.).

Alternative tourism is gaining more and more popularity and attracts significant tourist flows due to its diversity, personal attitude towards tourists, and rich opportunities for diverse experiences. Gabrovo district has the potential for the development of quite a few types of alternative tourism: adventure, rural and ecotourism, caving, hunting, photo safaris, etc. The creation and offering of diverse and specialized tourist products aimed at these types of tourism requires activating the resources of the municipalities and building an adequate infrastructure for the needs of the attractions - defining, shaping and marking tourist (eco-) paths and health paths, paths for climbing, riding and cycling, off-road routes, picnic areas, signposts, information centers, etc.
For their promotion, there is a need for creative marketing and advertising activities, as well as for the integration of the tourism offer, to be able to cover specific market niches and contribute to the improvement of income in the local economy. At the same time, an increased care is necessary for:

- sustainable use and protection of natural resources and environment and improvement of their effective management;
- increasing tourist culture and awareness;
- improving connectivity, mobility and access;
- creation of common tourist products and marketing activities;
- digitization of tourist services, etc.

The state of the general infrastructure is among the most serious obstacles to the utilization of the existing opportunities for tourism development. Its regional and municipal part is most often poorly built and unmaintained, the water supply network is outdated, the sewage network in small settlements is insufficient, there are no purification facilities, garbage collection and processing of household waste is inefficient, transport is inaccessible to some of the places for tourism.

In the time of the global COVID-19 crisis, Stara Planina tourist area reveals its potential. COVID-19 is having an extraordinary effect on domestic tourism – on the interest and growing popularity of the area. According to NSI data, the total number of overnight stays for 2021 in the Gabrovo region (the only one of the 10 regions that falls entirely within its scope) is more than 147,000 (8,000 of them by foreigners). Revenues are over BGN 5 million (including foreigners - nearly BGN 440,000). The growth of overnight stays compared to the previous year was 24.6% and revenues were 30.7% (NSI, n.d.).

Maintaining this trend requires serious and intense activities not only to promote the area, but also to ensure the possibility of a longer stay - offering additional attractions and creating new routes, information and communication and last but not least - ensuring access to the tourist sites, on the one hand, and their preservation, on the other. These are the key elements that can guarantee the development of local entrepreneurship in the field of tourism and employment in small towns and villages (Sabrieva, 2019).

5. CONCLUSION

The tourist area of Stara Planina has great potential, as it combines natural sights and diversity with a rich cultural-historical and architectural heritage, unique Bulgarian traditions, customs, crafts, folk holidays, and national and international festivals. The rich potential of natural and anthropogenic tourism resources of high quality suggests that these resources should be “composed and packaged” into unique and attractive tourism products. However, their creation, growth and imposition on the market require professional and competent communication and marketing activities.

The development of tourism is a prerequisite to preserve, keep, and further develop the existing potential of natural tourist resources, as well as to ensure the development of the economy, increase employment and income, to create conditions for recreation and recovery, not only for tourists but also for residents. Considering the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very likely that there will be a change in tourist flow - from mass tourism to individual tourism.
Based on the assumption that individual tourists are interested in less urbanized and unpopular destinations offering clean and preserved nature, local cuisine, adventures, etc. opportunities should be created for tourism to become a livelihood for the local population and to develop alternative tourist offers aimed at developing specialized types of tourism, following the characteristic features and tourist capacity of the area.

In order to achieve better economic results, it is necessary to direct efforts towards full and year-round use of accommodation, to improve the variety and quality of services, to increase the qualification of the staff, and to do targeted marketing.

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