

## SLOVAK REPUBLIC POTENTIAL AND SUITABILITY FOR TOURISM WITH EMPHASIS ON AGRITOURISM

### KRAJINNÝ POTENCIÁL SLOVENSKEJ REPUBLIKY A JEHO VHODNOSŤ PRE CESTOVNÝ RUCH S DÔRAZOM NA AGROTURISTIKU

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**Abstract:** *The whole tourism industry, including agritourism, is growing rapidly worldwide. Slovakia, regarding its geographic location in the centre of Europe, has extremely favourable conditions for rural tourism, especially for agritourism. Beside the natural richness, such as mountains, caves, water areas, mineral waters, springs with healing effects, rich fauna and flora, also historical buildings, held in relatively good state, and many live traditional crafts can attract the modern tourists. Regarding all this, Slovakia is able to satisfy the needs of the most demanding our or foreign tourists. The main objective of this work is to briefly present the natural beauties and cultural attractions in Slovakia, its favourable conditions and development possibilities in the agritourism sector. Furthermore there are described the tasks and activities of organizations responsible for agritourism and rural tourism (EUROGITES in Europe, SARTA in Slovakia).*

**Abstrakt:** *Priemyselné odvetvie cestovného ruchu, vrátane agroturistiky narastá celosvetovo veľmi rýchlym tempom. Slovensko z pohľadu svojej geografickej polohy v strede Európy má veľmi vhodné podmienky pre realizáciu vidieckej turistiky a agroturistiky. Popri prírodnom bohatstve, ako sú hory, jaskyne, vodné plochy, minerálne vody, pramene s liečivými účinkami, bohatá fauna a flóra, ako aj historické pamiatky udržiavané v relatívne dobrom stave a mnoho dodnes živých tradícií majú čo povedať súčasným turistom. Slovensko ako turistická destinácia je schopné uspokojiť potreby aj tých najnáročnejších domácich a zahraničných turistov. Hlavným cieľom tejto práce je stručne prezentovať prírodné krásy a kultúrne atrakcie Slovenska, jeho výnimočné podmienky a možnosti rozvoja v sektore agroturistiky. V neposlednom rade sú v príspevku popísané úlohy a aktivity organizácií zodpovedných za oblasť vidieckeho cestovného ruchu a agroturistiky (EUROGITES v Európe a SZVTA na Slovensku).*

**Key words:** *agri-tourism, agritourism, farmtourism, countryside, farmers, rural development, SWOT analysis, village*

**Kľúčové slová:** *agroturistika, vidiek, farmár, rozvoj vidieka, SWOT analýza, dedina*

#### INTRODUCTION

The model of agricultural diversification represented in Western Europe has occurred and this is currently being transported to the countries of Central Europe. While some of the EU member countries (Austria, Italy, France) have put a lot of effort into the realization of rural and regional development plans with significant results, Slovakia has just short experience with the structural diversification from a traditional agricultural production towards a completely different field of entrepreneurship (Babinsky, 2003).

#### MATERIAL AND METHODS

This presented paper has been developed according to methodology of scientific projects VEGA No. 1/4441/07 and 1/3300/06, supported by Ministry of Education, Slovak Republic. According to available data, published in literature, emphasis was put to evaluation

of tourist possibilities in Slovakia using method of decomposition. Chosen components of decomposition as a parts or activities of tourism were as follows:

- components connected with natural environment,
- components connected to surroundings originated in human activities,
- components bounded to organizational expectations and activities.

There was used an adapted method of SWOT analysis according to criteria suitable for rural tourism and agritourism (Habán – Otepka, 2004). It is possible to evaluate Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (e.g. SWOT analysis) on the basis of monitoring and decomposition of initial components in the area of interest.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Tourist attractiveness of Slovakia***

Vacancies in nature provide for satisfying demands of visitors in world – known spas, hunting areas, fishing places, needs for tourism, alpinism and some other sports. Natural beauties and landscape of Slovakia as a complex unit predispose this country, especially regions of High and Low Tatras, together with some other regions, to become known in the world. Highlands in Slovakia represent about 2 million ha, including 800 thousand ha (Babinsky, 2003), almost one third, of agricultural land.

Slovakia is rich in thermal springs, which are very attractive for tourists. Exploitation of this wealth is useful for both: production of early grown vegetables in hot water heated greenhouses and for using warm water for thermal swimming pools. The thermal springs are located mainly in southern Slovakia regions.

The list of world cultural heritage of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) nowadays contains five the best known Slovak localities: Spišský Hrad and its Associated Cultural Monuments (1993), Banská Štiavnica (1993), Vikolinec (1993), Caves of Aggtelek Karst and Slovak Karst (1995, 2000), Bardejov Town Conservation Reserve (2000), which are the most valuable Slovakian tourism attractiveness (UNESCO, 2007). There are nine national parks in Slovakia: Tatra National Park (TANAP, 74,111 ha, 1948), Low Tatra NP (NAPANT, 110,162 ha, 1978), Slovak Paradise NP (19,763 ha, 1988), Pieninsky NP (PIENAP, 22,444 ha, 1967), Small Fatra NP (23,262 ha), Poloniny NP (29,805 ha, 1997), Muranska Plateau NP (21,698 ha, 1997), Great Fatra NP (40,371 ha, 2002), Slovak Karst NP (34,611 ha, 2002), where tourists can enjoy different activities while they are in virgin nature (TravelGuide.sk, 2007). In Slovakia, there are more than 4100 caves known up to the present time. Now 12 caves are opened to the public visitors. Four of them: Ochtinská aragonite cave, Domica cave, Jasovská cave and Gombasek cave were entered to the World Natural Heritage of UNESCO in 1995. Slovak cycling routes, used mainly by active tourist, are 5,400 km long at the present time. The routes are signed by standard system of sights.

Grape growing areas of Small Carpathy belong also to the attractive regions of Slovakia, as well as “Tokaj” region and some other grape growing areas in southern and central Slovakia. “Wine routes” are gradually being introduced, enriching thus agritourism in the selected regions. This is one of the efficient ways to connect the interest of tourists in regional history, culture and folklore with the opportunity to taste local gastronomic specialties and typical wines.

Slovakia can become an important place for economists, cultural and scientific contacts of East and West in coming years. Slovak rural areas have to prepare for this important task deliberately, using the assistance of all respective sectors of state administration. In 1992 “Program of agritourism development” for support of agritourism was founded. The goal is to build up a network of pensions, restaurants, shops and snacks, supplied by

agricultural enterprises with their own final products. The official statistics about tourism as a whole industry is not measured separately for rural tourism and agritourism. Our visitors usually are coming from: national guests (80%) and international ones (20%), mainly from Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Russia, USA, Ukraine, Italy, Holland, Great Britain, France, others.

#### ***Cultural routes***

There are already some Thematic routes joining the ideas of European cultural routes in Slovakia: CIO – Human Route, The Amber Trail, The King Matthew Kingdom, The Gothic Route, and Imperial – Royal Route “Magna Via”, Iron Route, Czech Route and Russian Route. There are at least five Wine routes projected in Slovakia: Small Carpathian Vine Route, Nitra - Royal Vine Route, Hont Vine Route, Tokaj Vine Route and Vine Route of Zahorie. These projects are knotting on “European Vine Magistral”. Each of them has different items from viticulture and viniculture, which are oriented to renew of a typical traditions in these regions for the benefit to the agritourism (Habán – Otepka, 2004).

#### ***Agritourism***

The origin of agritourism in Europe dates back to the nineteenth century when the only form of accommodation in rural areas was offered mainly by farm holders. In the second half of the twentieth century, with a more widespread availability of private transport and generally greater amounts of leisure time, tourism grew to be one of the biggest and most significant global industries (Húska, 2003). Agritourism and recreation have matched and even exceeded tourism growth generally. Agritourism is successful because it shows the lifestyle of the people in the past, when they had strong contact with the nature and the environment, as they were working on the fields, harvesting crops and caring for animals. It represents a style of vacation in which the accommodation is offered on farms. It started with the aim to improve the life of farmers, especially in mountainous regions and in areas with a developing economy. Opportunities of introducing agritourism have been successful in keeping the residents of such regions at home, therefore preventing depopulation of the countryside and on the other hand the architectural heritage is preserved through the renovation of buildings, the regional cultural heritage is promoted and furthermore the income of farmers is improved.

Holiday on a farm can be very interesting especially for children, where they can feed and stroke the animals and monitor their behaviour. Children visiting the farms often have never seen a live swine, sheep, cow or a goat. It is a nice experience for them, when they can try to drive a tractor or a combine (controlled by an adult). Kids can climb on, in and over hay, or play hide-and-peek game in the barn area. Other children activities are for example, making potato stamps, leaf prints, bird refuges, hair wreaths from flowers, playing vegetable or animal bingo with cards, corn mazes and many other games.

Agritourism attractions and activities can take many forms:

- 1) direct sales, what includes selling the farm’s products, agriculture-related, handmade gifts, souvenirs;
- 2) educational experience such as school tours, agricultural heritage exhibits, wine and food tasting, cooking and making preserves;
- 3) outdoor activities, for example cattle drive activities, horse riding, fishing, patch tours, sleigh or wagon rides, picnicking, wildlife viewing, hunting, sitting by the camp-fire, animal feeding, visiting or working in the milking house, cropping forest fruits, mushrooms and medical herbs, farming in the field, in vineyard, in orchard;
- 4) entertainment - concerts or special events, harvest festivals, fairs, promotional events;

- 5) handicrafts - tannery, lace-making, pottery, tile making, blacksmith, tinkery, basketry, wood carving, wooden single production and joinery.

#### ***Agritourism in Slovakia***

Slovakia has a relatively underdeveloped tourism industry, especially when we compare it with its neighbouring countries and competitors: Hungary, the Czech Republic, Austria and Poland. Total number of farms involved in rural tourism in Slovakia is about 62 (from that 42 in agritourism), while this proportion in Hungary is cca. 6800 and in the Czech Republic about 355-400. The Ministry of Economy for the Slovak Republic has elaborated the development plan - 'Tourism Development Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2013', what seeks to address these problems. The country has both very large agricultural enterprises and numerous small ones, which are family owned. The number of the tourist farms has been increasing particularly, when the non-governmental associations were established to promote agri and rural tourism. Experiences and system of teaching and education in agritourism at Slovak University of Agriculture are described in Otepka et al. (2005) and an example of project in agritourism is published in Otepka – Habán (2006).

#### ***SWOT analysis***

SWOT analysis with the aim to determine the opportunities for agritourism and other related conditions to be created is designed as follows:

##### *1. Strong points*

- geographical location
- attractive environment
- favourable infrastructure
- easily access by means of the nearby international roads
- relative closeness to Vienna and Budapest
- places of interest, both cultural and natural
- agricultural and sheep breeding tradition
- premises suitable for agritourism
- hardworking, friendly, hospitable people
- wide range of sport facilities

##### *2. Weak points*

- low awareness of the opportunities for agritourism
- insufficient infrastructure for the purposes of tourism (accommodation facilities)
- shortage of finances and low accessibility of external resources necessary for building renovation for agritourism purposes
- insufficient promotion of the protected landscape
- low level of co-operation of inhabitants
- non-functioning public transport, except during working days
- indebtedness of companies dealing with agriculture

##### *3. Opportunities*

- large and unique agricultural settlements well suited for agritourism
- large number of farmers with private property
- possibility of getting subsidies from funds
- possibility of staff training
- chance to get information and experience from Austrian and Hungarian farms and mutual cooperation
- exploitation of expertise and experience from abroad

- possibility of utilization of the natural environment
- development of activities for the well-off clientele (e.g. horse riding, golf, etc.)

#### 4. Threats

- lack of interest on the side of governmental institutions
- low support of local authorities
- competition (other tourist places)
- impact of unemployment in some of the regions, lower standard of living

#### ***European Federation of Farm and Village Tourism (EUROGITES)***

The European Federation of Farm and Village Tourism represents professional and trade organizations responsible for rural tourism from 24 countries of Europe. The product goes from the rural bed-and-breakfast, self-catering in farms or private homes, up to small rural hotels and guesthouses. EUROGITES has been contributing to special satellite studies and statistics about this sector since 2004 within the WTO. This federation takes part in the European Congress on Rural Tourism, which next year will take place in Hungary. It organizes also in Spain next year a symposium on new trends and challenges for rural tourism with intention to bring together public authorities related with rural development and tourism and interested individual professionals to discuss these trends and challenges. The EUROGITES Catalogue, what presents the offers for rural tourism is issued yearly. In this catalogue are included the most representative agritourism farms in the European rural tourism network. EUROGITES announces every year a week, under the name of the European Action Eco Agro Tourism Week. In this week various events and programmes are organized in the member countries and the objective of this event is to make the rural tourism more visible and to fully establish it among other forms of tourism ([www.eurogites.org](http://www.eurogites.org)).

The main tasks and activities of the EUROGITES are:

- to increase the market share of the rural tourism on the tourism market
- to support a better informs in the sphere of rural tourism
- to promote the rural tourism and gain new customers
- to create information and communication network amongst the member organizations
- to organize professional and vocational trainings
- to access to the member web pages through the site [www.eurogites.org](http://www.eurogites.org) what will be extended into a full-scale professional portal.

#### ***Slovak Association for Rural Tourism and Agritourism (SARTA)***

The Slovak Association for Rural Tourism and Agritourism (SARTA), which exists from 1993, has recently about 200 members from all over the Slovakia. The members are private persons, agricultural enterprises, farmers, and legal organizations. Executive committee has 13 members. Main activities are consult and advisory services, presentation of members, catalogues, etc. SARTA has already prepared a “quality grading accommodation services”, which can be used in agritourism pensions. It is a guarantee for maintaining high quality pensions and all offered services included. According to Žák et al. (2003) the grading system in Slovakian agritourism is based on the Regulation of the Ministry of Economy No. 419/2001, where are a minimal standards for quality of accommodation services marked from minimum one (\*) up to maximum five stars (\*\*\*\*\*) ([www.agroturist.sk](http://www.agroturist.sk)).

The main activities of the association are:

- consult and advisory services
- to identify and promote the rural tourist potential

- to issue newsletters and catalogues, presentation of the members
- to organize excursions, professional trainings, short and long term courses, seminars, visits to fairs, international conferences
- to participate in fairs and exhibitions
- to represent interests of companies in relation to the governmental agencies
- to maintain the website
- to cooperate with foreign agencies
- to cooperate to create proposals in the sphere of agritourism and rural tourism

## CONCLUSIONS

Agritourism is a style of vacation in which hospitality is offered on farms. This may include the opportunity to assist with farming tasks during the visit. Agritourism is often practiced in wine growing regions. It has often been proposed as a means to prop up a local agricultural economy when local producers are no longer economically competitive otherwise, therefore this business will be very important part of farm income in our country as well as in many other agriculture productive countries.

Agritourism stimulates the economic growth, increases the viability of underdeveloped regions and improves the living standards of local population. It seems to be an appropriate tool to revitalize the declining rural areas and to ensure their sustainable future by job creation, farm support, landscape and nature conservation or the maintenance of rural arts and crafts as tourist attractions.

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