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BICYCLE TOURISM IN HUNGARY

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Abstract: Side by side with the revaluation of a health-oriented lifestyle various kinds of active leisure activities and active tourism in particular have been gaining ground. Cycling, which is popular not only as a leisure time tourism activity but mainly within settlements, also as an environmentally-friendly and up to a certain extent, a highly practicable means of transport mainly in towns and cities in Western-Europe, has a privileged position within active tourism (SALAMIN, 2010). This article wishes to present the situation of bicycle tourism, the factors influencing the demand for it and the opportunities for and possibilities of improving it within Hungary by providing an evaluative analysis of the relevant sources of the technical literature. The most important finding of this secondary research-based study is that there is an increasing contention both internationally and within certain regions of tourist interest within Hungary although there is no detailed information available as regards the latter. Success on the market can only be achieved by following the good practices of internationally developed tourist destinations and by a concerted development and improvement of the infrastructure, services and target-group oriented marketing activities as well as attractions.

Key words: spending leisure time actively, bicycle tourism, development of tourism product

Introduction

By a survey of the terminological definitions of the technical literature dealing with bicycle tourism (e.g. FARKAS - BALOGH, 2001; PEETERS ET AL. 2007; EP, 2009; ÖM, 2010; EIJGELAAR ET AL., 2011) it can be claimed that there does not exist a uniform system of terminology and in a number of cases specialists define the scope of activities that belong within bicycle tourism in relation to the objectives of the assessment and on the basis of recommendations, specific market conditions, national conventions. All this means that there are few data available that would also qualify for the purposes of comparisons (EP, 2009) and we would rather have sporadic estimations, which makes a complex comparison of the area, which would also make an objective international evaluation possible, difficult.

The current market position of bicycle tourism in Hungary is difficult to understand both internationally and domestically. In the case of the latter it is mostly the market performance of the individual bicycle destinations that is difficult to compare.

Materials and methods

This paper provides market information on European and Hungarian cycling tourism demand and supply evaluating available and up to date statistics, reference literature. The timeliness of this topic is supported by the fact that the demand for active tourism is on the increase both in world and within it, also in European tourism (EIJGELAAR ET AL., 2011; ÖM,

2010). By an analysis of trends in the international demand it can be concluded that bicycle tourism is of a relatively high importance even on continents where constructed general and background infrastructure does not exist or only of limited availability (ÖM, 2010). In these countries it is rather the adventure aspect of cycling that dominates bicycle trips. Destinations that have a more developed infrastructure will highlight a healthy lifestyle (pl. LUOTO ET AL., 2000; GORDON-LARSEN ET AL., 2009; MENSCHIK ET AL., 2008) and tourism in their promotion.

In North-America, both in Canada (RTO8, 2011) and on the domestic tourism market of the United States there are higher and higher numbers of thematic routes, specific destinations, based on cycling experiences, being communicated to potential visitors. The data of the OUTDOOR FOUNDATION (USA), published in 2011 say that the bicycle tourism market in the USA has undergone a considerable improvement over the past 10-15 years. Earlier this market was characterised by experts as “dormant” and with a rather limited demand (BHSI, 2011). The technical literature surveyed stressed the fact that it had clearly been the general revaluation of a healthy lifestyle that serve as the background to this market development (GORDON-LARSEN ET AL., 2009; MENSCHIK ET AL., 2008). The primary target groups of bicycle tourism can be defined on the basis of age and income position (RTO8, 2011).

As regards statistics, bicycle tourism in Europe is way ahead of the bicycle trip market provided by American citizens. On our continent there are approximately 2.8 million bicycle trips and excursions made every year, which contributes to the economy by an estimated amount of about €54 billion

(PEETERS ET AL., 2007). The number of bicycle tourists spending at least one night in commercial accommodation is up to 26.5 million, which makes up 3% of all trips made with the purpose of tourism by citizens of the EU (PEETERS ET AL., 2007).

How can Hungary be evaluated among the bicycle destinations in Europe? Who can become the primary target group of bicycle tourism in Hungary? What kind of market opportunities are offered to Hungary in the field of bicycle tourism? This essay aims to answer these queries on the basis of technical literature, current and available market information.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is characteristic that European bicycle tourists look for opportunities for bicycle travel within Europe (BASSETT ET AL, 2008) and are open to bicycle destinations primarily in their own countries and next those in neighbouring countries (EP, 2009). Given this fact, in the case of Hungary it is from the neighbouring countries and prominent sending areas in Europe from where we can calculate with bicycle tourists arriving. How can these tourists be characterized? What are their general motivations for travel are like? In the case of a complex product development that will also generate international incoming tourism it is answering these questions that constitute the primary task for areas receiving bicycle tourists in Hungary.

Trends in Sources of Demand in Bicycle Tourism in Europe

Primary motivations for European bicycle tourists are preserving their health (physical load), recreation (relaxing) and becoming familiar with new destinations (EP, 2009). At the same time these tourists set the basic requirements during their bicycle trips according to the following: safety, unambiguous road signs and easy orientation come first. Inexpensive yet versatile services, environmental considerations are not listed among the primary aspects of their choices of destinations (ÖM, 2010).

The largest market in Europe is Germany. According to research results 41% of Germans cycle several times every week and 15% of them do so every day. This also has its effect on the tourism revenue of Germany since bicycle tourism generates € 9.2 revenue for the country (ADFC, 2011). Surveys claim that in 2009 49 per cent of the population, i.e., over 40 million people took part in one-day bicycle trips and 6%, i.e., went on bicycle holiday of over five days (ECF, 2010). The most favoured destinations were the bicycle routes along the great rivers, and the Rhine and the Elbe, in particular. The daily spending of German tourists ranges between € 62–70 (HUF 17–19 000), which means a considerable demand. The largest tourism exhibition in Europe, CMT in Stuttgart recognised the ever increasing importance of tourism in Germany (ÖM,

2010) and so organises a special cyclists' trade fair, exhibition so as to inform bicycle tourists. As regards the number of tourists visiting Germany, however, there are no precise data and there is no knowing what share of the market they have, although as a result of regional surveys their ratio can be put at 5–8% of the total German bicycle tourism market (ETI, 2007; ÖHLSCHLÄGER, 2007).

86.3 of Germans choose their own country as the destination of their holidays in 2011 but the importance of German bicycle tourists going abroad is also increasing. An example is Veloland bicycle route in Switzerland where about 3% of the total number of visitors come from Germany and the ratio of those spending at least two nights is 16% (ICKERT ET AL., 2005). 12% of bicycle tourists in South-Austria are Germans and their ratio of all bicycle tourists visiting the bicycle route along the Danube in Lower-Austria is about 30% (MANOVA, 2007).

Side by side with Germany and the Dutch, Austria can also be characterised with excellent demand figures. 70% of the population of the Netherlands cycle and currently, the ratio of bicycle holidays is at least of the same magnitude. The number of bicycle trips reaches 427 million, which generates an income of about € 350 million (MANOVA, 2007). The most popular sporting activity for Austrians is cycling, which is not the primary means of daily transport, however. For example, only 7% of the population use the bicycle for this purpose. The bicycle is mainly part of leisure activities. As a result the distance covered yearly on the bicycle is 187 km/person (FRANZ, 2012). Currently there are about 800 thousand cyclists recorded in Austria, about 600 thousand of whom use mountain bikes. So far there have been 60 000 trips on roads and in the vicinity of Vienna there are 70–100 persons/hour who ride the bicycle along different roads. Most of them belong to the 25–50 year age group (HUDSON, 2009).

Important cyclist destinations in Europe

The largest and fastest-growing target area is Germany, where bicycle infrastructure is growing at an ever increasing speed. In Germany, host and restaurants specialising in bicycle tourists have been coordinated by the franchise network Bett+Bike. In 2011 there were already 22 qualified bicycle routes and 5350 accommodation (BETT+BIKE, 2012) awaiting lovers of cycling all over Germany. 56.2% of bicycle tourists surveyed by ADFC always call at service providers that are members of the Bett+Bike network.

According to the German Cyclists Club (ADFC, 2011), however, the interest in qualified bicycle trips across countries, e.g. in Eurovelo routes as well, has been increasing for years. The Stretch of Eurovelo along the Danube in Austria is one of the most popular cyclists' destinations. In 2006 there were about 350 000 cyclists visiting this region and they spent about € 3.5 million in Austria (EP, 2009).

Destinations characterised with complex developments on offer in Europe are in the greatest demand (ADFC, 2011). France, the leader in recent years (e.g. Loire) and the runner-up Italy (e.g. Po) both have very well-constructed thematic

routes, which offer complex services. With their well-conceived, highly co-ordinated developments Switzerland and Austria managed to joined the ranks of the above two countries in the past few years. This closing up has b proved to be so successful that on the German market Austria has become the number one destination for bicycle tourists going abroad (ÖM, 2010).

Tourism offices in the German provinces are conducting exemplary work in the field of currently so popular bicycle tourism. In addition to printed materials they are addressing tourist demands by using more and more modern methods and internet-based route plans and GPS data are also available on their homepages (MTZRT, 2012b). In addition to marketing activities a lot of specialists also emphasise ta complex development of items on offer. For example 87% of Germans associate Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania with a place suitable for cycling holidays; the number of bicycle-tourism related bookings in Kirchzarten has gone up by 5-6%. In Totnau (Black Wood) in addition to new jobs incomes from tourism have risen by € 150,000, and St. Wendel (Saar region), which is famous for its races, made an increase of € 1.5 million in its turnover from tourism (ECF, 2010; ADFC, 2011). As regards these destinations the concerted development of tourism attractions, infrastructure, services and marketing is to be mentioned.

Cycling, as a Leisure Time Activity in Hungary

The demand for cycling as a leisure time activity has been dynamically increasing in Hungary since the early 1990s. One of the primary reasons is the fact that a health-conscious style of living has been gaining ground (ÖM, 2010). *Figure 1* demonstrates the figure for bicycle sales in individual yearly bicycle sales per thousand heads of population on the basis of the data from the European Cyclists' Federation. These data clearly show that Hungary is in the middle range with 30 bicycles sold per 1000 heads of population. The list is topped by member states whose citizens use the bicycle not only on their trips but also make use of this vehicle as a regular means of transport. Owing to city-transport related cycling experienced over the past few years a significant increase in bicycle purchases is expected.

Data for demand as regards bicycle trips are rather defective. In the basis of statistical data it seems that the primary motivation behind one-day trips, i.e., 2/3s of breaks is related to sports. Moreover, out of sport-related trips it is the ones with the aim of biking that are increasing most dynamically. On the basis of this the demand generated by bicycle tourism in Hungary can be characterised as a small segment of the market that shows a dynamic development.

Bicycle tourism generated demand trends in Hungary

As regards the European market for bicycle tourism, our country can be classified as one of the developing regions and services as well as catering provided to cyclists our tourism sectors are showing intensive developments (ÖM, 2010).

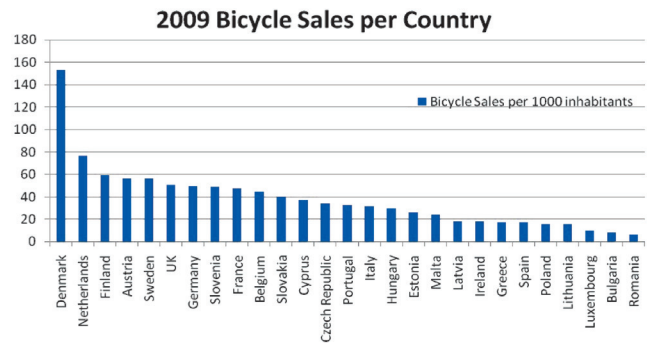


Figure 1: Number of bicycle sales in European countries in 2009 (piece/1000 inhabitants)
Source: ECF, 2010

Making bicycle trips are becoming more and more favoured and emphasising it and making people aware of its treasures (a healthy lifestyle, joint arrangement for the family, closeness to nature, environment-friendly characteristics) it is becoming more and more popular with Hungarian citizens (SALAMIN, 2010). Destinations also favour bicycle tourists because owing to the fact that they can carry only limited supplies (food, etc.) they rely on local products and services more heavily than any other branch of tourism. As a result the per diem spending of bicycle tourists exceeds the amounts that are usually experienced during trips (ÖM, 2010). This is highly beneficial for producers of local, provincial products and local service providers.

Primary target areas of domestic bicycle trips are hilly wooded regions and the areas of national parks. Demand-related surveys conducted in Hungary demonstratethat 70% of the bicycle tourists asked still primarily visit domestic destinations (SALAMIN, 2010), and since shorter bicycle trips are characteristic destinations near their places of residence are supposed to be preferred.

The demand aspect of our domestic tourism is also related to age and income situation. While cycling as a daily activity is also spreading strongly among those characterised with lower qualifications and incomes subjects of bicycle trips come first of all from the upper layers of the middle classes, typically from the younger age groups without children as well as the older generations which have already brought up their children (ÖM, 2010). Although these generations have partly different motivations they basically link their shorter trips to the activity of cycling with the aim of preserving and protecting their health.

Hungarian bicycle tourists highly prefer to choose their target areas on the basis of sights to see and the distances between the cyclist destinations and the distances between their places of residence, they like indulging in their sporting passion far away from traffic in relatively uninjured areas.

Priorities for product development in Hungary

Transport infrastructure development projects implemented over the past few years failed to bring the expected results in a number of cases (ÖM, 2010). The total of 2200 km bicycle

roads constructed can contribute to tourism only partly due to their width and providing access to natural beauties that are attractive to tourists (VÉGH, 2012). An example to note is the bicycle road in Szigetköz (an islan on the Danube near Győr), which is perfectly suitable for commuting but hardly for tourism as its width is not suitable for two-way traffic and from the Atlantic Ocean as far as the Black Sea this is the only stretch of Eurovelo route 6 where cyclists cannot ride side by side. In addition, those coming from the direction of Mosonmagyaróvár can no longer admire the river after leaving Halászi. Tourists would rather make a detour of 30 km if they can ride on wide enough roads across beautiful landscapes that are free from traffic (LACZÓ – SUDÁR, 2012). Of course the developments show considerable differences in their standards.

Within cross-border co-operation (CBC) projects the scope of services for bicycle tourists in certain regions, especially in Transdanubia, where the development of typically incoming bicycle tourism is also strong, could be enhanced with foundational as well as additional elements of service (ÖM, 2010),

Marketing activities aiming at tourists, providing precise and wide-ranging information still need improving and so in addition to current product development opportunities our most important task is to make cycling destinations in Hungary communicate strongly both on domestic and international markets.

The representative of the Hungarian Tourism Agency in Germany has been trying hard for years to provide information through different channels to as many people as possible about cycling arrangements and facilities in Hungary. This work is just starting to bring its concrete results. Among other things the German Bicycle Federation conducted an evaluation the bicycle tourism offers of 39 German, European and overseas tourism agencies in 2012. On the basis of the results there have been improvements as regards providing bicycle tourism information and offers in Hungary, Slovenia and Montenegro. Among the destinations surveyed Austria, Germany and Switzerland occupied the top positions (MTZRT, 2012b).

Another positive development in 2012 is that the bicycle road/route around Lake Balaton has been nominated as one of the 20 most beautiful bicycle routes by Bruckman Publishing, Germany. The Munich based publisher released its latest 168 page book for cyclists at the end of July, which introduces the 20 most beautiful bicycle routes in Europe, describing the trips on 6-8 pages. On the invitation of the Hungarian Tourism Agency the author took an eight-day trip on his own bicycle along the north-coast of the Balaton and summarized his own experiences about the destination in his book (MTZrt, 2012a).

Conclusions

The demand for bicycle tourism shows a dynamic development but on the supply side there is a strong competition between the different destinations both in Europe and Hungary. As regards the latter there is little comparable

information available. Although Hungary can be classified as a developing region as regards bicycle tourism the examples of the top international destinations it becomes clear that long-lasting success can only be achieved by making a complex development on the supply side. This will require a concerted and complex development of infrastructure, tourist attractions, standards of services and target-group oriented marketing activities in future.

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