

THE MONASTERIES AROUND SOFIA. PILGRIMAGE TRAVELS POTENTIAL AND TOURIST DEVELOPMENT

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The main goal of this article is to analyze the pilgrimage near Sofia and more specifically, the existing routes to The Holy Mount of Sofia (Bulgaria) as a cultural destination and sacred place. There is no doubt that this pilgrimage route could be used with touristic purpose in view of the fact that it combines art expressions and popular culture, which was insufficiently proclaimed and recognized.

The city of Sofia and its surroundings are characterized by high geographical and cultural diversity which is reflected in their landscapes, arts, festivals and cuisine. The city has as well been a place of deep christian beliefs. Robles (2001) explains that religious tourism could represent a significant opportunity for the development of some tourism activities, as religion motivated visitors seem to be more loyal to the destination than the traditional tourist.

Cànoves and Blanco notes that the heritage expressed by images, shrines, beliefs and devotions is related to the culture and the identity, but it's also closely linked to the tourist product's consumption. The author shows how the sacred spaces become transformed in multifunctional areas, where it is possible to develop a wide range of leisure and culture activities (Cànoves y Blanco, 2011, p. 116).

The cultural heritage of Sofia has a significant importance for the tourist development. Nowadays most of the available resources are still unused. If they were correctly managed and used for the tourist development, they would probably provide the visitors with more extensive and comprehensive perception for the city. The Holy Mount of Sofia is a very important part of this heritage that holds a unique and precious testimony of the religious end the popular culture of IX-XIV centuries. Our point of view is that the pilgrimage stimulates the destination development and transforms territories rich in cultural resources into sacred places. According to Kaszowski (2000) this process requires the area to be

provided with technical infrastructure, public facilities and legal regulation. That involves the responsible institutions to be focused on visitors. The planning of the long-term goals is essential and should be a key point in the shrine's strategy for tourist development.

Planning should be the main tool used for tourism development of a destination. The strategy is more than just a document which marks the key priorities. It is also a connection process between all the sectors involved. The principal goal of the strategic planning in tourism is to design a theoretical model with guidelines for competitiveness of specific product or destination and it includes the objectives and the policies to follow. The strategic planning is the only way to overcome the uncertainties of the environment, to foresee the future with some certainty and to deal with progressive changes.

The heritage destinations hold a great cultural diversity and possibilities for setting tourism products, whose future depends on the local authorities' ability to design and manage strategies for sustainable tourism development (Troitiño, M.; García, M.; De la Calle, M. 2011). For that reason will be necessary a dynamic and innovative vision, which keeps in mind the cultural, the economics, environmental and functional dimensions that tourism poses.

Sofia is one of the three most important tourist destinations in Bulgaria. It is a very important market for visitors coming through Sofia Airport and for people living in the capital too. The proximity of the city as the main outgoing and incoming market, determines the profile of the visitors in Holy Mount of Sofia, which are above all pilgrims and one day excursionists. After years of expansion and modernization, the hotel industry in Sofia and the tourist infrastructure are ready to receive the pilgrims to The Holy Mount.

Nowadays the Holy Mount of Sofia is a little known place, and only a small part of the monasteries that existed during the Middle Ages are conserved. Many of them are small and picturesque, but abandoned. Others are still conserving the monastic traditions. The visitors today are above all individual tourists or small groups. Most of them are motivated by secular reasons. Their structure, behavior and motivations clearly show tourism characteristics. The religious motives are primordial for 80% of the visitors. Despite that, religious activities linked to the orthodox traditions are weakly developed. The main reason is the lack of funding of the local administration. Because of this, many of the monasteries remain closed during the year and are open only for the most important religious holidays and celebrations of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

Another main attraction of the area, which attracts the pilgrims, is the nature and the thermal springs. According to the old Bulgarian traditions all the shrines in the past were built near natural springs whose waters people believed were healing. The mineral waters are with no doubt one of the major resources of the region, but unfortunately are badly developed in the city of Sofia and its surroundings. To carry out the potential of the thermo-mineral resources should be an essential task for the future development of the Holy Mount of Sofia.

In 2010 the Association for Development of Sofia nominated the city as a European Capital of Culture for 2019. One of the most important long-term objectives set by the Association is to expand the demand for cultural tourism. Right now, the promotion of the capital as a traditional business and congress destination gains over a professional demand with medium or high income, characterized by short stay and weak consumption

of complementary services. There is a clearly marked seasonality of the tourist demand, concentrated during the periods of May-June and September-November. During rest of the year and especially at the weekends the tourist infrastructure is underused and inadequately maintained. A predominant part of the tourists who visit Sofia are adults between 40 and 60 years old. Trying to focus their attention to weekend visits involves the development of a competitive proposals and some new cultural products which are especially attractive for this tourist segment.

In 2010 The Municipality of Sofia started a project aiming to renew the pilgrim traditions near the capital and to restore the routes between the monasteries of the Holy Mount. The main objective of the project was to provoke the interest, to promote a responsible attitude towards the heritage of the monasteries and to create conditions for development of cultural tourism.

The sustainable transformation of a spiritual place into a cultural and touristic space makes possible the balanced development of the leisure and cultural activities along with the religious practices. (Cănoves et al., 2013). Through the development of the product «The Holy Mount of Sofia» the municipal administration aims to present the tourism in the city by promotion of the religious, cultural and historical heritage of the monasteries around Sofia. Thanks to this, development of the shrines could supply good motivation and the starting point to get knowledge of other settlements in Sofia region with their landscape, traditions and customs. The analysis has shown that most of the people who visit the Holy Mount of Sofia are traveling in organized groups. As a result, it became evident that the religious motives are principal for the visitors, but also relevant are the historical and cultural aspects. Consequently, it is proposed that the tour operators in Sofia create tourist packages, including in them visits to settlements near the monasteries of the Holy Mount.

To improve the supply of the tourist product, which includes the Holy Mount of Sofia, it is necessary to propose adequate information about the resources, the main activities and services that facilitate the access to the area. At present time, the informational prospect prepared for promotion of the Holy Mount is accessible only in the Tourist Information Centre in Sofia. It is important that this information reaches the visitors in the settlements near the monasteries and through on-line promotional networks.

As the cultural diversity of the Holy Mount is emblematic and indispensable for the tourist development of Sofia, we think it should be relevant in the future to make a profound analysis of the potential tourism demand and how to improve the quality of the tourist supply in Sofia.

