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Heritage Tourism and Authenticity: The Case of Voroneț

Cristina Maxim

University of West London, UK

Carmen Chasovschi

"Stefan cel Mare" University, Romania

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Title: Heritage Tourism and Authenticity: The Case of Voroneț

Authors:

Cristina Maxim
University of West London, UK

Carmen Chasovschi
“Stefan cel Mare” University, Romania

Abstract:

Culture is an essential component that adds to the attractiveness of a destination and contributes to the authenticity of an area through its ‘unique imprint on the cultural landscape’ (Timothy, 2011, p. 58). To capitalize on this, cultural tourism has been proposed in many destinations as a path to economic prosperity, better job opportunities for locals and increased tax revenues.

This study focuses on heritage tourism, a popular choice among visitors and an area of research that has recently attracted increased attention from academics. Heritage is seen as one of the main tourism drivers for many regions, helping destinations to differentiate between one another in a very competitive environment. The literature on this form of tourism has expanded rapidly since the initial debates in the late ‘80s, with the topic being included by Cohen and Cohen (2012) among the current issues deserving further attention from researchers.

Additionally, the present work looks at the role that authenticity plays in tourist destinations, ‘an important attribute of heritage tourism [...] or at least the perception of it’ (Chhabra et al., 2003). While there is a wealth of research on authenticity and its applicability, this is mostly focused on Western countries. This research therefore contributes to filling this gap by exploring the applicability of the concept in a non-Western context, which it does by looking at the importance of the cultural landscape and traditional houses for the sustainable development of tourism in a heritage site from a former communist country in Eastern Europe. Specifically, the study focuses on objective authenticity and looks at the importance of preserving the built environment (i.e. traditional houses) for the sustainable development of tourism in the Voroneț area in Romania. Situated in the North-East of Romania, Voroneț is considered to be one of the main tourist attractions in the region of Bucovina, and one of the most important destinations for cultural, heritage and religious tourism in the country.

Due to the limited research available on tourism development in Voroneț, the present study adopts an exploratory approach. One of the study’s main strengths is that by gathering the views of the most important stakeholders in tourism development in Voroneț (i.e. locals, visitors, representatives of local and regional Government, non-governmental organisations, and the tourism industry – B&B owners and travel agents), it offers a comprehensive image of the topic at hand. To that end, the current paper reviews policy documents and analyses interviews conducted with a number of the stakeholders, complementing this qualitative data with face to face questionnaires. Moreover, the authors – both originally from the studied region, had the opportunity to observe first-hand the changes brought over the years by tourism development in

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Voroneț. Thus, the adopted methodology involves a mixed method strategy that allows the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data to help better understand the views of different stakeholders. The results show that the conservation of the area's authenticity and its traditional built environment is recognized by the majority of stakeholders as an important aspect in the sustainable development of tourism in Voroneț. However, the lack of appropriate policies and planning regulations to guide a harmonious development of the area, together with the lax enforcement of existing rules, are putting these valuable assets under threat.

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