



SPORTS AND RECREATIONAL CONTENT IN THE TOURISM OF POPOVA SHAPKA - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Abstract: The tourist destination Popova Shapka is located in the north-western part of the Shar Mountain at 1700 meters above sea level. It has modest accommodation facilities and infrastructure. Geomorphological, microclimatic and hydrographic features have created favourable conditions for the development of sports and recreational tourism. Popova Shapka is primarily established as a ski center with 12.6 km of ski slopes prepared according to the international standards where international ski competitions are held, as well as recreational activities (skiing, sledding, snowboarding, etc.). The large number of mountain peaks over 2000 meters above sea level, rivers rich in waterfalls and other tourist attractions, as well as glacial lakes over 19, in the part of Shar Mountain that belongs to the Republic of North Macedonia that from a tourist point of view allows hunting, fishing, organizing of mountaineering tours, etc. Popova Shapka offers ideal conditions for hiking and mountain biking on marked trails with or without a guide. Extreme sports are becoming more popular thanks to the top natural conditions. Among the most popular extreme sports are mountain biking and paragliding, that are practiced as sports recreational activities but also as competitive disciplines. The potential for sports and recreational tourism is great but underutilized. It is necessary to invest in infrastructure and define a tourist product that will attract the attention of tourists. By promoting sports and recreational facilities, better positioning of this tourist destination on the tourist market should be achieved.

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Introduction

Lately, the sports and recreational tourism is interpreted as a societal phenomenon with a deep socio-cultural and economic impact. The sport and recreational activities are now part of the additional needs of the “new” tourists, whereas the sports recreation, in its core, represents the main driver in the active vacationing and tourism. [1]The active vacation includes psycho-physical activity, nowadays well-known as a stress reliever from work. The sport and recreational activities are becoming more and more represented in the overall tourist pie, having in mind that the tourist these days does not look for the 3S concept (sun, sea, sand), but an active vacation. At the same time, the modern tourist is looking for a well-kept nature to run to in order to escape the noisy and polluted environment from their everyday life. Researching the needs of the contemporary person, the one who lacks physical activity and reconnection with the nature, it can be concluded that the sports and recreational activities within the tourism make up for a complete stay and healing of the tourists.[2] The tourist destination Popova Shapka may offer an active vacation in a healthy and well-kept natural scenery.

Link between the sports and recreational activities, and the tourism

It is quite clear already that the tourism as a phenomenon is part of (wo)men’s life. Yet, the two most important functions of the tourism are: social and economic. The social function employs: health-recreational; education-culturological; social, and political characteristics. The sports and

recreation, as motives to the tourist travels, play a multi-purpose role. First, the athletes, referees, managers and audiences travel so they can take part in or observe various sporting events. These types of travels have clearly defined motives through which we recognize a special form of tourism – sports tourism. In addition to the above-mentioned travels, people these days travel more to satisfy their recreational needs. These needs can be fulfilled with various activities, but most often – through sports. The common driver of all these activities is the sport, however – the means to produce them, differ. [3]

The sporting and recreational capacities contribute towards the higher revenue rates of the destination, making it more attractive and more interesting for the visitors. The quality of the sporting and recreational activities may significantly influence the choice of destination or hotel, as well as toward the continuation of the tourist season of the destination.[4]

Popova Shapka's natural tourist values as a development factor in the sports and recreational tourism

The Shar Mountain is situated in the North-West part of the Republic of Macedonia, occupying 840,2km² - making it one of the largest mountains on the Balkans. It spreads South-West to North-East in a length of 80km. The Shar Mountain offers surfaces stretching 2,000m above sea level (158,8km²). Dominating mountain peaks on the Shar Mountain reaching heights 2,500m above sea level in the parts spreading across the Republic of North Macedonia are the following: Crn Vrv (2585), Kobilica (2528), Rudoka (2658), Skakala (2517), Titov Vrv (2748), Borislavec (2675), Golema Vraca (2582), Mala Vraca (2536) and others. [5] In terms of the terrain features, the Shar Mountain possesses a high level of potential to develop several types of a year-round tourism. When talking about tourism on the Shar Mountain, people mostly think of the Popova Shapka tourist center as the starting point of all activities.[6] Popova Shapka is situated in the very heart of the Shara massif, with an average height above sea level of 1,700m concluding on the Ceripashina Peak at 2,380m. The Shar Mountain accommodates rivers with waterfalls and other tourist attractions, such as the glacial lakes (more than 19): Karanikolicko, Crno Ezero, Belo Ezero, Krivoshisko, Bogovinjsko, and others in the part of the Shar Mountain situated within the Macedonian borders. From a tourist point of view, these rivers and lakes enable the development of fishing, organized mountain tours, and similar.[7]

In addition to the geo-morphological features of the locality, significant to the sports and recreational activities is the climate. The Popova Shapka climate offers all the advantages for tourism development. The winter season is filled with heavy snow fall, which may extend the tourist seasons for up to five months. During summertime, the stay at Popova Shapka is pleasant due to the windless, long, sunny days – perfect for conducting various recreational activities.

The sports and recreational tourism on Popova Shapka today

The hotels, mountaineering and other associations organize sports and recreational activities on Popova Shapka. Each of the hotels organize these activities for their guests, depending on the hotel's possibilities and guests' needs. A lot of tourist, sporting and other associations do not offer sports and recreational activities on Popova Shapka, however – they do organize sports and recreational activities which are then realized on Popova Shapka. The promotion of these activities is done through their web portals.

Popova Shapka has already been affirmed as a ski center with 12,6km long ski paths, built under international standards, where international ski tournaments take place (Shar Planina Cup), in addition to the recreational activities (skiing, sledding, snowboarding, etc.). Skiing followed by snowboarding – are the most popular winter sports which result in visitors making decision to spend their winter holidays on the mountains. [8]These two sports are attractive from several aspects: recreational, sporting tournaments and entertainment. Among the sports organized from the hotels at Popova Shapka, quite popular is the freeride skiing, that is the skiing which takes place outside the

marked skiing paths. The skiers are transported to the areas where the freeride skiing takes place with a snow groomer.[9]

The mountaineering takes a significant place in the sports and recreational activities, and is mainly organized by the various mountaineering associations. Popular are the traditional hikes to Titov Vrv, Leshnica, Jelak, Bogovinjsko Ezero and others. Some of the hotels organize mountain touring to different destinations with guides.

The trekking as a dynamic activity within the sports and recreational tourism is on the rise all over the world. It is specifically applicable to areas in their early tourism development which do not offer luxurious resorts, but an outstanding nature and scenery. Trekking is a form of hiking through marked medium to advanced paths in 'wild nature', interrupted by often stops for sightseeing and enjoyments in nature, especially from positions which offer a breath-taking view. The trekking does not require high investments, however, does not offer much in return in terms of finances either. The Shar Mountain area has trekking paths marked already. These paths are mainly mountainous, narrow wood trails, so-called 'goat paths', while some areas also have wider paths with clearly set earthly or stone trails. The paths are marked and offer signage and information boards.[10]

The geo-tourism involves a visit, sightseeing, taking photos and enjoying rare and interesting geo-attractions. This oftentimes happens as part of an outdoor sports and recreational activities. In that sense, the geo-tourism holds the possibility for a development. Especially amazing is the visiting, sightseeing and enjoying the untouched nature, the deep canyons, waterfalls and never-ending views.

The Popova Shapka offers excellent opportunities for development of the hunting tourism for both – domestic and foreign tourists. However, no hunting grounds are prepared to serve the tourism. When a hunting is organized, the hunters are accompanied by an association hunting guide, who then takes care of the game. Having the hunters stay for several days participating in the sporting tourism, the whole community benefits.

The river of Pena along with the mountain lakes offer the best possibilities for a fishing tourism. The higher parts of the river are filled with brown/river trout. In order to include this type of tourism in the offer of the fishing associations, tourist agencies and other concerned institutions, it deems necessary to arrange the fishing areas and suitable places for fishing for an easier promotion and presentation of the fishing tourism. Today, the fishing tourism is being organized individually or in groups by the fishermen and their associations.

The extreme sports become more and more popular thanks to the ultimate natural conditions. To name a few: mountain biking and paragliding, both of which are practiced as sports and recreational activities, but also as competitive disciplines. The mountain biking is a contemporary trend of a dynamic, sports and recreational tourism, offering excellent opportunities for development of the Popova Shapka area. Eight paths for mountain biking have already been marked, with a proper signage, information boards and GPS notes set in place. Traditionally, mountain biking competitions, as well as biking tours (most notable – Popova Shapka – v.Leunovo tour) take place.

The paragliding as a sport has been present on Popova Shapka in recent years. It is supported by the par Paragliding associations as a recreational sport with a companion, and as a competitive discipline.

On another note, the horse lovers can rent a horse to help them enjoy nature. As a recreational activity, the hotels offer spa and fitness services for the guests of their own, and for external guests.[11]

Conclusion

The potentials to develop sports and recreational tourism are large, however – not used sufficiently. Investment in the infrastructure and defining the final tourist product as an attention-grabber is needed. Through promotion of the sports and recreational activities, this tourist destination should better position on the tourist market. From total tourist system point of view – we can freely say that the sports and recreational facilities add to the activities included in the tourist offer, right

after the core elements of the tourism have been satisfied (accommodation, food, transport, etc.). The sports and recreational capacities increase the destination's revenue, making it more attractive and more interesting for the visitors.[12] The quality of the sports and recreational facilities may significantly influence the choice of destination or hotel accommodation, as well as the continuation of the tourist season of the destination of choice. The global sporting recreation holds an important health, cultural, social and other context, and does not represent a goal on its own, but is a mean to entertainment, fashion, education, status symbol – all of which may add to the revenue of the overall tourism in the country. The current form of the sports and recreational tourism on Popova Shapka is a result of individual associations which would like to benefit from holding sporting events, offering sports and recreational services, or renting sports and recreational facilities, equipment and space for the tourists. Contrary to the above listed, the sports and recreation as part of the tourism should not be left to chance but directed in line with the plans for the future development of the tourism of Popova Shapka. In addition to this, it is necessary to establish a better collaboration between the hotel management, tourist agencies and sporting organizations offering sports and recreational services independent of the hotel facilities.

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