

Heading for new shores – In the Bulgarian Danube region, collaboration is key to tourism development

Over 120 million tourists vacation in the Danube region annually, but countries of the Upper Danube like Germany, Austria and Hungary still account for the lion's share of visitors. A regional collaborative programme to strengthen tourism development in the Middle and Lower Danube region is now putting a spotlight on the cultural, sustainable and culinary potential of a large destination network in Eastern Europe.

Spanning over 2,880 km, and boasting no less than nine UNESCO World Heritage sites and a network of 20 protected areas along its shores, the Danube is one of Europe's green veins. Tourism represents an important economic factor and tourists' travel styles increasingly require regional authorities and tourism providers to collaborate across borders.

As part of a regional tourism development programme chaired by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Danube Competence Centre was set up in 2010, mobilising public, private and non-governmental organisations from all ten Danube countries to establish *Destination Danube* as a tourism brand.

In Bulgaria, the programme coincided with a national concept for establishing tourism regions and raising awareness of the benefits of tourism on the local level. The initiative was extended in 2013 when the Bulgarian Danube region was first in the destination network to apply the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) to assess destination sustainability and competitiveness.

Professor Vasil Marinov, Head of the 'Geography of Tourism' department of Sofia's St. Kliment Ohridski University, acted as Project Leader during the ETIS testing phase. His team, which consisted of over 40 researchers and students in collaboration with coordinators and working groups from the local municipalities of Vidin, Belogradchik, Rousse and Tutrakan, has carried out extensive monitoring, surveying and data collection work. Looking back at his experience, Vasil says, "*We immediately saw that ETIS*

provided a good basis to assess and then support tourism development in Bulgaria. The benefits of such comprehensive testing were not obvious to some local stakeholders though, so we ended up providing guidance and training along the way. The awareness raising aspect has become a priority because we want to show that monitoring of sustainable tourism is important over the long term."

On the basis of their analysis, seminars and surveys with local stakeholders, the team created various papers on the tourism indicator testing, as well as on cruise tourism on the Danube. The local working groups have also set 5-year targets on ETIS indicators for the four participating municipalities. "*There is lots of energy and a good dynamic amongst stakeholders. Some of the participating municipalities are introducing new initiatives and products to support sustainable incentives and are also willing to continue the monitoring process through satisfaction surveys that have been developed in Bulgarian, English and German. Our goal is to promote the monitoring of tourism development along the entire river*", says Vasil.

Spotlight on ETIS destinations: Rousse

Rousse, the biggest municipality in the Bulgarian Danube region and a major cruise port, is positioning itself as a centre of cultural and cruise tourism in the Lower Danube, catering especially to day-visitors that want to experience a mix of cultural and natural heritage, while also seizing opportunities for entertainment and shopping.

Through national and EU funds, the attractiveness of the city was enhanced, including better accessibility of its major touristic sites and improvements of the local infrastructure.



The ETIS training and field research has also paid off for the students of St. Kliment Ohridski University who participated in the programme: most of them were motivated to use the opportunity to become certified sustainability managers through the Travelife Sustainability System for tour operators and represent an entire new generation for whom sustainability and collaboration will form the core of further tourism development.

Further information:

Focal Point: Destination Danube
<http://www.fpdd.bg/>

Danube Competence Centre:
<http://www.danubecc.org/>

Danube tourist portal:
<http://www.danube.travel/>

Spotlight on ETIS destinations: Belogradchik

The municipality of Belogradchik, known for its famous rock formations and fortress, has introduced various activities to promote the development of sustainable tourism from within the local economy. Especially culinary discoveries are on the menu: the city now features various shops with local produce and local wines that are rather difficult to find on the market.



Image source: en.wikipedia.org