

Are the Volunteer Projects Included in Package Holiday Tour? Case Study Evidence from the Slovakia and Czech Republic

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Abstract

The study approaches volunteers' projects in package tourism, which is a predominant form of outbound leisure tourism in Europe. The aim is to study the contemporary offer of tour operators and travel agents in Slovakia and the Czech Republic with emphasis on volunteer tourism. Data were obtained by mystery e-mailing based on measuring reaction to e-mail inquiry of client. The members of the Slovak Association of Tour Operators and Travel Agents and members of the Association of Tour Operators and Travel Agents of the Czech Republic were addressed. The research results show that the proportion of tour operators and travel agents which offer package holiday tours with volunteer activities is negligible. None of the subjects specializes in volunteer tourism as the global growing alternative form of tourism. Tour operators and travel agents that offer volunteer projects included in package tours do so only marginally.

Key words: Volunteer projects, package holiday tour, tour operators, travel agents, volunteer tourism

JEL Classification: L83, M38

1. Introduction

The form of contemporary tourism is significantly influenced by various economic, technical and social changes (Malachovský and Királ'ová, 2015). As a result of rapid growth of mass tourism and increased interest in its socio-cultural and environmental impact have emerged alternative forms of tourism, including volunteer tourism. The need to travel, to spend free time outside the residence for the purpose of learning, distraction and entertainment, participation in cultural and sporting activities, has been associated with personal free will to do activities for the benefit of others, usually for no or not expected reward.

The combination of volunteering and tourism has in practice various forms. Volunteers can participate in environmental, humanitarian and cultural projects in heterogeneous countries. Most of these projects are usually organized by non-governmental organizations, local groups, clubs or associations and local authorities, which are also called the third, non-governmental, non-profit or voluntary sector (Chobotová, 2015). These organisations play an important role in specific areas of the tourism industry. They do not perceive it as the activities associated with the satisfaction of the needs of holidaymakers, instead they see tourism as an opportunity to create new, positive values and activities for tourists as well as local communities (Lyons and Wearing, 2008). At the same time non-

governmental organizations better reflect the specific problems and requirements of the communities (Svidroňová, 2014) and help to create targeted activities and projects.

Since volunteering is predominantly the domain of the third sector, it was important to find out, whether the growing trend of volunteer tourism was also reflected in the offer of commercial entities operating in tourism.

2. Literature review

Despite the fact that a lot of authors consider volunteer tourism as an important trend of today, volunteer tourism is one of the least explored alternative forms of tourism (Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004 In Wearing and McGehee, 2013). According to Wearing (2001), the reason is that volunteer tourism has been the subject of selective pragmatism rather than a specific definition or method for a long period of time. However, in the last years the growing interest in volunteer tourism and the effort not only to delineate volunteer tourism, but to distinguish it from other forms of volunteering and forms of tourism has been observed.

There is no singular definition of what volunteerism entails. According to available literature (Wearing, 2001; Clemmons, 2009; Chen and Chen, 2011; Tomazos and Butler, 2012) volunteer tourism can be characterised as an integrated organized combination of volunteer service at a tourist destination and specific tourism activities, which are performed in free time, out of place of residence, in home country or abroad and that is beneficial not only to voluntourists, but also to local communities and the environment.

One of the indispensable characteristics of voluntourists is that they volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might include aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment (Wearing, 2001). Just as destinations vary, so do the volunteer activities in which people can engage (Strzelecka, Nisbett and Woosnam, 2017).

Volunteer tourism attracts not only tourists but also gets the attention of many researchers. The theoreticians are particularly interested in the motivation, value and behaviour of voluntourists (Brown, 2005; Wickens, 2011; Tomazos and Butler 2012; Coghlan, 2015, Stainton, 2016, Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017), their experience (Simpson, 2004; Chan, 2011; Wilson, 2015), their satisfaction (Brown, 2005), the impact of volunteer tourism projects on local communities (Lupoli and Morse, 2015) and sustainability of volunteer tourism (McIntosh and Zahra, 2007).

Available studies explore mostly environmental and development projects in less developed countries, whose culture is significantly different from voluntourists culture (Wearing and Grabowski, 2011; Wearing and McGehee, 2013). However, the perception of volunteer tourism as a combination of travel and volunteering only in developing countries is inadequate and short-sighted. The participation of voluntourists from developed countries to environmental, humanitarian and cultural projects in developed countries (Mwara, 2012 In Taplin, Dredge and Scherrer, 2014) is becoming more and more popular, including the countries from which voluntourists come from.

Considering the nature of volunteer activities, volunteer tourism is primarily concerned with non-profit organizations. The connection with tourism and the growing demand for meaningful activities have led to the emergence of a growing number of profit making organizations in the volunteer tourism market. Corporate access to volunteer tourism market in the world is mainly provided by tour operators and travel agents. The number of tour operators and travel agents offering volunteer trips to different destinations is growing, especially in the US and UK markets.

Regarding the growing number of tour operators and travel agents abroad, which act as volunteer project intermediaries, we were interested in the situation in the Slovak and Czech markets.

3. Methodology

During the past years, European tour operators have had to respond to the presumed crisis in traditional package travel by creating more diversified and individualized packages. We have been also investigating how tour operators and travel agents operating in Slovakia and the Czech Republic responded.

The aim was to examine the current offer of tour operators and travel agents in Slovakia and the Czech Republic with emphasis on volunteer tourism. The requested data was obtained by mystery e-mailing realized in summer 2017 which is based on measuring reaction of employees to e-mail inquiry of client. The regular members of the Slovak Association of Tour Operators and Travel Agents (151 tour operators and travel agents) and members of the Association of Tour Operators and Travel Agents of the Czech Republic offering tours (237 subjects) were addressed.

Obtained data were re-coded and a data matrix was created in a MS Excel spreadsheet. Relevant information was also compared with the contents of the websites of the selected subjects.

4. Results and discussion

Three hundred eighty-eight tour operators and travel agents operating on Slovak and Czech market were contacted electronically. As a potential client, we were interested whether the businesses have volunteer projects in their package holiday tour offer.

4.1 The Slovak market

We have obtained the e-mail addresses of 151 entities from the up-to-date database of a professional association that reflects the interests of tour operators and travel agents and sent them a request for information. Nonetheless, nearly 6% of emails returned as a non-delivered message. Further, we have only considered the reactions of the remaining 142 subjects.

More than half (53.5%) of tour operators and travel agents surveyed did not respond to the request of a potential client (Table 1). We assume that these were businesses that do not consider the volunteer projects as permissible part of business activities. Therefore a potential client's email was irrelevant to them.

Table 1

Tour operators and travel agents offering volunteer projects included in package holiday tours in Slovakia

Measure	Frequency	Percent
Tour operators and travel agents that do not offer volunteer projects thereof	141	99.30
subjects ignoring the client's request	76	53.52
subjects sending a negative response	53	37.32
subjects asking for an explanation of the concepts	11	7.75
Tour operators and travel agents offering volunteer projects	1	0.70
Total	142	100.00

Source: Authors

We received a negative response from 38% of companies, of which one travel agent tried to find at least some offer from British or American tour operator specializing in volunteer tourism. Part of the subjects (7.8%) asked for an explanation of the concepts volunteer project and a tour focused on volunteering activities at visited destination. Subsequently, it admitted that it does not offer such type of tours (Table 1).

Only one tour operator, offered a volunteer program in Sri Lanka for elephant care, English lessons, or a combination of these activities, responded positively to a fictitious client's request. In addition to the organizing fee, which includes accommodation and meals, the volunteer - the visitor pays for the ticket and transfers from the airport, or to the airport in the tourism destination. The offer is not on the tour operator's website. We assume that it is a product for an individual request, and the potential candidate cannot find it without a contacting the travel agency directly.

4.2 The Czech market

We have proceeded equally when examining the offer of tour operators and travel agents operating on the Czech market. We have selected entities that offer and sell package holiday tours from the database of the Association of Tour Operators and Travel Agents of the Czech Republic. An email with a request from a fictitious client was sent to 238 addresses. More than 2.5% of emails returned as a non-delivered message giving us a response from 232 subjects.

More than six out of ten addressed subjects (62.93%) did not respond to email (Table 2). The extent to which tour operators and travel agents showed their lack of interest in a potential client's request is surprising. We assumed that businesses would use more ability to communicate with the client and would suggest alternatives to their own offer.

Table 2

Tour operators and travel agents offering volunteer projects included in package holiday tours in the Czech Republic

Measure	Frequency	Percent
Tour operators and travel agents that do not offer volunteer projects thereof	229	98,71
subjects ignoring the client's request	146	62,93
subjects sending a negative response	67	28,88
subjects asking for an explanation of the concepts	17	7,33
Tour operators and travel agents offering volunteer projects	2	0,86
Total	232	100,00

Source: Authors

The lower rate of responses of entities operating on the Czech market was outweighed by the faster responses and better quality of communication. While some of the Slovak tour operators and travel agents took five business days to answer, most Czech businesses sent the email directly to a fictitious client.

Nearly 29% of tour operators and travel agents said they did not offer products included volunteer activities. As in the case of the Slovak market, one entity tried to compensate its negative response with sending information on the volunteer projects in France. Another subject informed us about the possibility of voluntary assistance in the Dominican Republic where a visitor instead of relaxing may teach English, or help with growing cocoa, reforestation or cleaning drinking water sources. More than 7% of subjects requested clarification of the term volunteer project and tour included volunteer activities since they were not familiar with it. For example, some tour operators and travel agents thought that the term means animation programs in hotels.

We have received only two e-mails with positive responses. The first tour operator introduced a 12-day standard product of a Nepalese partner with the option to customize the tour according to individual requirements. It includes one-day voluntary help with the house reconstructions after the earthquake. The price of the package holiday tour includes the contribution for building materials. Even in this case, we assume that a potential client does not find this package tour without direct request to a tour operator.

A tour operator that specializes in tours to Africa offered a one to three month volunteer project in Tanzania with a choice of volunteer activities and with cooperation with volunteer organization You2Africa. A number of volunteer projects in South Africa (focused on working with animals, taking care of orphans, working at farm or children's education in Cape Town) with a duration of at least one week. The website does not mention the offer of package tours though.

5. Conclusion

Tourism in the Slovakia and Czech Republic recorded dynamic changes since the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993. As argue Királová and Malachovský (2016), significant changes and modernization can be seen in tourism offer.

The aim of the paper was also to survey the present-day offer of tour operators and travel agents in Slovakia and the Czech Republic with emphasis on volunteer tourism. As a potential client, we have addressed all regular members of the Slovak Association of Tour Operators and Travel Agents and members of the Association of Tour Operators and Travel

Agents of the Czech Republic offering package holiday tours. We have received the necessary information by email and compared it with the content of websites of selected tour operators and travel agents.

We found that the percentage of the professional association members of tour operators and travel agents on the Slovak and Czech market which offer package holiday tours with volunteer activities is negligible. None of the addressed entities specializes in volunteer tourism as the fastest growing example of alternative travel experiences moving the goals of tourism away from for-profit forms of escapism towards something that will place social, cultural and ecological value on local environments and communities (Lyons and Wearing, 2008).

Tour operators and travel agents that offer volunteer projects as a part of package holiday tours do so only marginally, at the individual request of the client, while volunteer activities are not a core of package tour program.

Since not all tour operators and travel agents operating in the market under examination are associated in a professional association, we have verified the results of the mystery e-mailing. We used the researching for selected combination of volunteering, volunteer program, tour operator, travel agent and package holiday tour in the Google web search. Nevertheless, we have not found any relevant offer of volunteer activities in organized tourism.

We assume that tour operators and travel agents operating in the Slovak and Czech markets have not responded to the globally growing trend of volunteer tourism. They are also concerned about including a product designed for a specific client sub segment. As intermediaries in volunteer tourism they play a negligible role. Voluntary tourism thus remains in the domain of non-profit organizations on the Slovak and Czech markets

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