



*Original Contribution*

**ROLE OF BULGARIAN COUNTRY IMAGE AS INTERNATIONAL RURAL TOURISM DESTINATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

In Eastern Europe rural tourism is widely regarded as a key tool for development within the context of foreign aids grants and EU membership requirements. Since foreigners form the main targets of any tourism venture, including rural tourism, a right image of a country would go a long way in attracting quality visitors from abroad. Accordingly, this paper shows some evidence gathered from a prospective study done in Spain regarding the perceived Bulgarian country image vis-à-vis its rural tourism status and future potentials in this direction. This study was done on customers and other prospects. Finally, it is expected that results of this study would be used as indices for future designs and improvement of Bulgarian rural tourism.

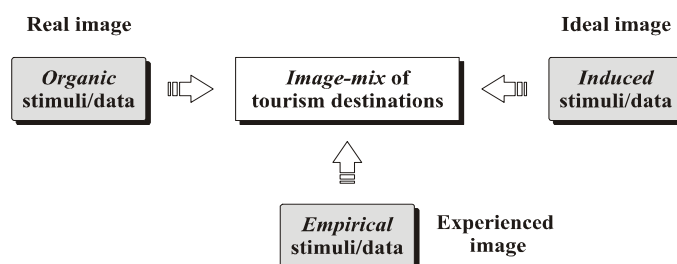
**Key words:** Rural development; rural tourism; country image; international context; tourist's perspective.

**INTRODUCTION**

Rural tourism is widely regarded as a key-tool for development. While it may be argued that an internal or domestic market provides a much greater opportunity for business sustainability, the international variety (of which tourism is part) is no pushover in this direction if we consider its potential to generate the much-needed capital that would enhance the competitive and infrastructural build-up expected of the accession countries.

Rural tourism appears to be an appropriate tool to revitalize declining areas in

Bulgaria and to ensure the chance of a sustainable development by job creation, business support and also maintenance of landscape, nature resources, handicraft, etc., at least as attractions for visitors. The idea of tourism in Bulgaria becomes even more pronounced when one considers the already existing attractions that include, the under the "sun and beach" scenery located around the Black Sea Coast (providing around 70 % interest), the snow resorts with 10% interest. The real thing is, however, that rural tourism in Bulgaria is under high pressure of high speed of tourism supply at national and international level [2].



**Figure 1.** Components conforming image-mix of tourism destinations.

Therefore spreading a “right” country-image world around becomes essential when looking for “quality” visitors’ attraction. Meantime individual’s perception about national tourism destinations (the “tourism country image”) is mainly based on induced stimuli and data (that is, materials specially designed for purpose of generating and spreading a desired “ideal” image), perception about international destinations relies more on organic ones (general and more “objective” information on news, policy, economy, sport, etc.). Third element in this “image-mix” relates to experience by oneself and/or relatives, friends, etc. [3].

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper shows prospective evidence in Spain about Bulgarian country image as rural tourism destination. After running a pilot research to test the questions, a first survey was carried out in 2001-02 over a sample of 200 potential international rural tourists in the whole country, as part of research work for European Commission FP5 OPTOUR Project (2000-04). To make the results more representative (that is,  $e = \pm 5\%$  at 95.5 % level) additional survey on 300 individuals was carried out, thus giving a total sample size of 500 individuals.

Questionnaire was designed under tourists’ perspective –as looking for their perceptions on research topics– rather than tourism suppliers and/or facilitators’ –which most times does not provide such and objective interpretation of benefits, attractiveness, etc. at all–. Answers were codified and frequency tables (absolutes and percentages) obtained through SPSS software. All respondents were identified as rural tourists.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Main reasons for not considering Bulgaria as international rural destination (that is, not being attracted by Bulgarian rural tourism destination image) were said to be “lacks”, either of “interest” (22.20 % of interviewees), disposable “time and money” (17.60 %) or “information” (17.20 %). Other mentioned causes were “preference for alternative destinations” and, far away, “distance”, expected/perceived “underquality of infrastructure”, “socio-economic” context, “language difficulties”, “undesirable environmental conditions”, and “political situation” were also mentioned as real obstacles (see **Table 1**). Finally, 7.80 % of respondents said not to be predisposed to try a rural vacation in Bulgaria, having “no concrete reason” to support their decision.

When asking on causes for considering Bulgaria as destination (that is, the attractiveness of Bulgarian international rural tourism destination image, **Table 2**), an induced-image-factor as “readings and/or pictures on rural Bulgaria” was mentioned as clear main justification (30.20 %). Far away, “advise from friend/relative’s experience”, an empirical-image-factor, was also identified, and so reasons like “data search” or “conversations” on Bulgaria, “business contacts”, “previous travel experience” or “friends/relatives” in the country. “Other reasons” scored a whole 6.40 %, meanwhile a very significant percentage of 50.20 % of respondents said not to perceive any real reason or attraction to try a Bulgarian holiday (even when they were strongly demanded about chance of a concrete answer).

**Table 1.** Causes under decision of not considering Bulgaria as international rural tourism destination (in decreasing order of importance)

<i>Cause</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>
Lack of interest	111	22.20 %
Affordable time and money	88	17.60 %
Lack of information	86	17.20 %
Preference for alternative destinations	81	16.20 %
Distance	44	8.80 %
Expected underquality of infrastructure	19	3.80 %
Socio-economic perceived situation	18	3.60 %
Expected language difficulties	9	1.80 %
Expected undesirable environmental conditions	3	0.60 %
Political perceived situation	2	0.40 %
No concrete reason	39	7.80 %
<b>Total:</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100.00 %</b>

**Table 2.** Causes under decision of considering Bulgaria as international rural tourism destination (in decreasing order of importance).

<i>Cause</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>
Readings and/or pictures on rural Bulgaria	151	30.20 %
Advise from friend/relative's experience	28	5.60 %
Data search on rural Bulgaria	16	3.20 %
Conversations on Bulgaria	12	2.40 %
Business contacts in Bulgaria	5	1.00 %
Previous experience on travelling Bulgaria	3	0.60 %
Friends/relatives living in Bulgaria	2	0.40 %
Other reasons	32	6.40 %
Not considering rural Bulgaria as travel destination	251	50.20 %
<b>Total:</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100.00 %</b>

**Table 3.** Cognitive perception on characteristics of rural Bulgaria.

<i>Geophysical characteristics</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>Av*</i>
Monotonous / varied landscape	17	35	53	243	50	67	35	4.23
Man-made / natural scenery	5	25	48	130	93	107	92	4.94
Not / heavily wooded	7	22	30	220	98	83	40	4.58
Run of the mill / majestic scenery	15	22	50	258	93	42	20	4.20
No distinctive / dist. architect. style	22	38	30	165	78	105	62	4.60
Polluted / unpolluted environment	17	57	65	203	43	65	50	4.19
<i>Infrastructure characteristics</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>Av*</i>
Very bad / very good roads	37	108	75	203	50	15	12	3.43
Few / wide range of activities to do	7	87	65	203	68	38	32	3.96
Limited / wide accommodation choice	25	85	88	180	65	37	20	3.73
Not / distinctive style of cookery	2	10	15	113	78	142	140	5.48
Crowded / few visitors	10	13	25	175	65	140	72	4.96
Unsure / certain about liking food	17	30	38	200	105	58	52	4.46
Not / commercial feeling	5	20	72	175	98	95	35	4.53
<i>Cultural characteristics</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>Av*</i>
Not / distinctive local culture	---	10	10	118	50	130	182	5.65
Not / normally welcoming	17	20	30	195	108	93	37	4.57
Not / normally good service provided	10	33	50	218	100	67	22	4.31
<i>Affective environment characteristic</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>Av*</i>
Stressful / relaxing environment	15	10	3	85	70	145	172	5.62
Safe / dangerous environment	37	15	70	113	55	85	125	4.78
Calming / stimulating environment	40	42	53	143	60	87	75	4.40
Boring / interesting environment	10	12	13	85	63	127	190	5.64
Unpleasant / pleasant environment	10	12	20	108	78	117	155	5.41
Distressing / comforting environment	12	18	25	125	73	120	127	5.19

*Av\**: average values ranging from 1 to 7.

Similar to previous field research (e.g. 1, 2, 3, and 6), cognitive perception on characteristics of rural Bulgaria was measured by bi-polar contrast of psychological variables grouped in the four categories of geophysical, infrastructural, cultural and affective environment characteristics and ranging in a scale from 1 (the closest to the "negative" term) to 7 (the closest to the "positive" one).

Most average values scoring "slightly positive indifference" on **Table 3** (that is, a

bit more than the intermediate value of 4), positive exceptions appeared in a perceived "distinctive style of cookery" (5.48) and "distinctive culture" (5.68), and specially by characterising affective environment like "interesting" (5.64), "relaxing" (5.62), "pleasant" (5.41) and "comforting" (5.19). On the other hand, negative exceptions came from perceptions on infrastructure: "bad roads" (3.43), "limited accommodation choice" (3.73) and "few range of activities to do" (3.96).

## CONCLUSIONS

When looking for a reference position as rural tourism destination at international level, hard work must be done to building and maintenance of a strong country image at the same international context.

In this regard, and even when designing and implementing induced elements, it would seem to be the easiest and most controlled way to improve such a country image. Empirical evidence points to a major practical transcendence of more “objective” organic components and more “consumer-subjective” experienced ones. Moreover, when talking about long-distance international perceptions, organic elements become essential.

In this particular case, according to survey data, personal and organic factors appear as main reasons Spanish tourists do not consider Bulgarian rural tourism. Personal, induced and experience justifications are the underlying decisions.

Going deeper in potential tourists’ motivation, perceived infrastructure “lacks” are to be some of main barriers against Bulgarian position as international rural tourism destination; meanwhile local culture, cookery and affective environment seem to be some of main opportunities. Hard effort is required in Bulgaria to avoid such obstacles.

However, consciousness of prospective character of this study suggests convenience of additional future survey in order to test results, both spreading range of considered stimuli/topics conforming country

image, and considering new countries for field research work. Deeper –and then possible– statistical analysis will also be helpful for this purpose.

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