STRATEGIES FOR THE EXTENSION OF THE WINTER SEASON AT MOUNTAIN RESORTS IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: The achievement of the sustainable development of mountain tourist resorts is questionable in the light of global warming. Increasing average temperatures is a precondition of the additional shortening of the winter tourist season at mountain territories in Bulgaria. The goal of the present publication is to extract strategies for extension of the winter season at mountain resorts in Bulgaria, by proposing effective mechanisms, based on the tourists' preferences and the abilities of tourist entrepreneurs. Based on expert analysis of Bulgarian tourist resorts, personal researches and experience in the researched topic, we determine alternative sources of offering and organization of event as the main possibilities of extending the season. The effect of this research can go in two directions: on one hand, by identifying and discussing the basic concept of seasonality, it will contribute to the enrichment of scientific knowledge in the field with potential for future research. On the other hand, it can be beneficial to destination managers as it will offer a better understanding of the importance of holding unique events to shape the destination's image, reduce seasonality and develop a sustainable economy based on tourism.

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Keywords: winter tourist season, mountain resorts, special events, alternative types of tourism

Introduction

Tourism plays an important role in the EU economy. According to the EC, it is the third largest socio-economic activity in the EU (after trade and construction) and has a positive impact on economic growth and employment. It also contributes to the development of European regions. When it is developed sustainably, it contributes to the preservation and improvement of cultural and natural heritages. That is why its development is desirable from European countries, including Bulgaria. Despite its major economic importance, since its inception, tourism has been confronted with a number of challenges, which are now on the agenda in the current situation as well. Emergencies such as viral epidemics and terrorist threats inevitably affect the sector. The aim is to achieve a sustainable development based on a minimal violation of the right of future generations to access and use the same resources.

Although the danger of Covid-19 will have a significant impact on the tourism industry, in this paper we will focus on a seemingly traditional and studied problem – seasonality in tourism. The availability of research on the problem is not a prerequisite for finding adequate solutions, and overcoming seasonality is in most cases impossible and a large part of the tourist base does not function in the months outside the active season.

Tourism in Bulgaria occupies a significant share of the gross domestic product, and the most developed is the summer recreational tourism practiced on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. Winter tourism is second in importance, which also faces a serious threat following global climate warming and the challenges of today. Available mountain tourist resorts in Bulgaria run the risk of losing their traditional ski destinations, which requires rethinking their product concept based on the available resource potential and consumer preferences. As a result of these challenges, the purpose of this article is to propose effective measures and strategies for overcoming seasonality in Bulgarian mountain tourist resorts.

State of the problem

Tourism is an extremely important engine for Bulgaria's economy, with a significant contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) and employment in the country. According to the WTTC, the contribution to travel and tourism to GDP is 11.7% of the total economy (BGN 12 625.6 MN (USD 7 639.4 MN), the contribution to employment is 346 800 jobs (11% of total employment), the international visitor Impact is 8 370 300 in visitor spend or 12.3% of total export (WTTC 2019). The long-term competitive advantage of tourism enterprises is mainly due to their ability to identify, build and manage their new competencies (Nikolova, 2014). Unlike in the past, when job applicants were competing intensively for several positions in the company, the tendency now is for companies to compete with each other in order to attract and retain the best available talent in the market (Mironova and Kicheva, 2018). Arnaudov (2013) states that in recent years Bulgarian business has made a concerted effort to improve and implement rules and mechanisms for human resources management in order to improve the quality and efficiency of the services provided. Therefore, new models of supply are being introduced in the tourist

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reality, which should meet the growing demands of the market. Gatovski & Yordanov (2018) point out that further development of tourism can be expected in the coming years, even at a faster pace than before. The reasons for this are the favourable geographical location of our country, the appropriate natural and climatic conditions, contributing to the development of both summer and winter tourism, the construction of a powerful material base of tourist complexes, hotels, campsites, chalets, rest stations and other sites. The question is how fast tourism will be able to recover after the crisis with Covid-19.

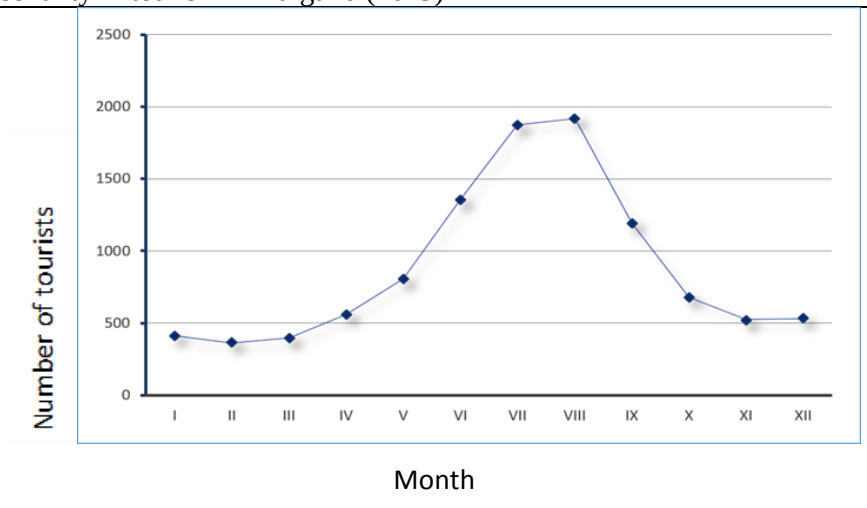
The roots of tourism in Bulgaria were laid at the end of the 19th century with the construction of beaches and related facilities in the Varna region, the establishment of the Borovets mountain resort and the establishment of the Bulgarian Tourist Union. International tourism marked a revival in the 1960s, when Bulgaria appeared on the international market as a typical destination offering sun, sand and sea (Vodenska, M., S. Gösling et al., 2017). Over the years, tourism has become an increasingly important component of the Bulgarian economy. The development of modern, global tourism, the introduction of new technologies that enable virtual travel and the emergence of new and unique destinations affect the overall culture of the individual, contribute to the formation of aesthetic attitude, sense, taste for the beautiful and appropriate and at the same time, it is one of the new trends in the competition to attract as many visitors as possible. The planning and construction of modern tourist destinations requires an emphasis on innovation to a great extent and keeping up with current and significant industry trends.

Analysis of the mountain tourist product in Bulgaria

Bulgarian mountains, as morphological structures, cover about 48% of the country's territory (Mihailov, 1989), and mountain areas over 600 m occupy about 28% of its territory. Three national parks have been formed on the territory of the mountain ranges – Pirin, Central Balkan and Rila (Hristova, 2018). The middle and high mountains (over 1000 m) represent about 12.5% of the Bulgarian territory. In the main mountains of the country - Rila, Pirin, Vitosha and Western Rhodopes, the regions with altitudes above 1000 m represent between 60 and 70% of them (Evrev, 1987). Due to their large territorial reach, mountainous areas are the main "territorial reserve" for extending tourism utilization in the natural environment off the coast. According to the broader variants, their area is about 10 times larger than that of the Black Sea municipalities, and their tourist capacity is 50% larger than that of the Black Sea coast (Evrev, 1999). The availability of this significant resource is a prerequisite for the development and supply of the many and varied types of tourism that can be practiced there.

Compared to the sea coast, another important advantage of mountain areas is the possibility of year-round (or at least two-season) use. Seasonality is recognized as one of the main problems of tourism in Bulgaria. In recent years, over 40% of the nights are realized only in two months (July and August) and about 70% in four months (June-September). At the same time, the duration of the season with favourable climatic conditions in the mountain territories is 8-9 months a year (Fig. 1) (Marinov & Asenova, 2016). However, there is a distinct seasonality associated with sea tourism in the country and a stronger winter season with significant attendance cannot yet be outlined.

Figure 1: Seasonality in tourism in Bulgaria (2019)



Source: National Statistical Institute (2019)

The mountains in Bulgaria provide excellent conditions for tourism. However, there are few tourist resorts in the country that enjoy international tourist demand. The most famous winter resorts in the country are Bansko, Borovets, and Pamporovo. In Bansko, there are 75 km of ski slopes, of which 35% are for beginners, 40% are for advanced and 25% are for experienced groups of ski and snowboard enthusiasts. They are covered by machines for the extraction of about 80% of the snow. In function are also cabin rope lines with a cabin capacity of 8 people, one 6 seats ski lift, six 4-seats ski lifts model Doppelmayer, one 3-seats ski lift Poma. In recent years Bansko has established itself as one of our most famous ski resorts, although the municipality is trying to develop year-round tourism. There are many cultural attractions and many organized events. The main season is winter – from December to April. There is also a weaker summer season in July and August.

The main tourist stream towards Pamporovo is through the winter months because the resort is suitable mainly for ski sports. Almost all ski slopes begin from peak Snezhanka, and they are situated from 1926m above sea level to 1400m above sea level. The tourist season begins in December and continues until the end of April. Because of the beauty of the nature, the region is visited by tourists in the summer months as well. Peak Snezhanka is among the one hundred national tourist sites of the Bulgarian tourist union.

Until 2009, Borovets was the largest and most important Bulgarian mountain and ski resort, but it has been left behind by Bansko. Borovets is located on the northern slopes of the Rila Mountains, at 1300 meters above sea level. The resort of Borovets has been welcoming mountain lovers since the late 19th century. During the second half of the 20th century, the resort grew, Alpine-style hotels were built, and ski facilities were gradually developed into a modern winter resort. It attracts tourists with its proximity to the capital (only 130 kilometres from Sofia) and climate with cool summer and snowy winter. The Borovets ski area has 24 tracks with a total length of over 58 km, cross-country trails, biathlon facilities, night skiing and a children's winter park. 12 lifts and ski lifts – modern, well maintained and with excellent capacity, ensure the comfort of winter sports fans. The ski season in Borovets lasts from mid-December to April. The resort offers ski and snowboard lessons, both group and individual. During the warm months there are great sporting conditions for avid cyclists. At their disposal is a bicycle park with over 20 km of marked trails with different levels of difficulty.

Dobrinishte is a natural exit from number of pedestrian mountain trails of Pirin Mountain. On the East a large swimming resort has been built consisting of one big swimming pool with warm mineral water and two smaller pools for children. The town was declared a spa resort due to the presence of 17 mineral springs with temperatures of 30-43°C. Dobrinishte offers great opportunities for winter and summer tourism. 11 km from the town is the Gotse Delchev hut (1412 m.) From where there is a chair lift to the Bezbog hut (2236 m.). Hiking trails lead to Tevno Lake, Popovo Lake and Bezbog Peak. There is a ski run from Bezbog hut to Gotse Delchev hut.

Nature Park Vitosha is the first nature park on the Balkan Peninsula and it was established in 1934. Together with the park, two resorts inside the park were created – Bistrishko branishte and Torfeno branishte. Vitosha offers 14 ski slopes with different levels of difficulty and trail for ski race with a length of 3 km. The slopes are North and East oriented and are on height from 1510m above sea level and 2290m above sea level. There are two ski centres on Vitosha: Aleko and Koryanka-Vetrovala. Ski-centre Aleko is situated on 1800m above sea level in the begging of mount Cherni vrah, in the range of the Aleko hut. The slopes are North oriented. Ski enthusiasts have at their disposal: 1 cabin lift, 4 seated lifts, 5 stationed ski lifts and 2 child ski lifts. There is a possibility for night skiing on slope Laleto-1, from 18:30 until 22:00. The proximity of the capital allows for night skiing after work hours and on working days. The slope makes use of machines for artificial snow. The access to centre Aleko is assured by cabin lift.

Chepelare is the next lesser known ski resort in Bulgaria. In the near proximity to Chepelare is the ski zone Mechi chal, there is the longest and one of the best alpine ski slopes in Bulgaria. In the period 2007-2009, significant investments have been made in the ski zone and Chepelare has been developing as a ski centre of its own. Chepelare offers 7 marked ski slopes and 5 ski tails, situated in the beginning of peak Mechi chal. The slopes are situated at a height between 1156m above sea level and 1870m above sea level and have different levels of difficulties – from beginners to advance. The longest slope is 5292m long. The centre has at its disposal machines for artificial snow. For guests of ski centre Mechi

chal there is a functioning modern 4 seats lift with a capacity of 2000 people per hour, which can make the trip from Chepelare to the peak Mechi chal in 9 minutes (Ministry of Tourism).

There are other lesser known mountain tourist sites in the country, which have the potential for development of diversified types of tourism. The significance of those at this stage is more or less on a local level, the attendance is related to weekend or short trips that usually last 2 to 3 days.

Seasonality of tourist attendances in the mountain resorts

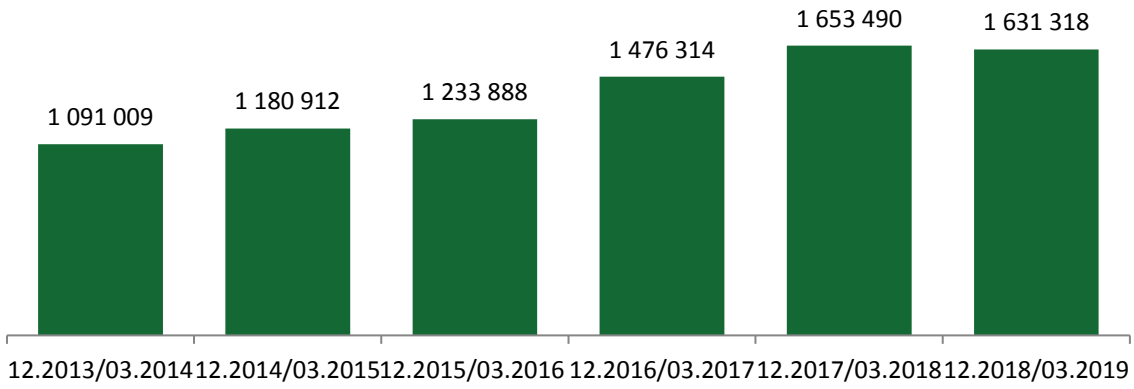
From the above mentioned only three resorts are developing international tourism, based mostly on winter ski tourism. Those are Bansko, Borovets and Pamporovo. From them the National Statistical Institute can track the tourist fluctuations only in Borovets and Pamporovo, since Bansko is a municipality and does not have a status of a tourist resort. From Table 1 is seen that the winter resorts Borovets and Pamporovo are far behind the seaside resorts of Zlatni pyasatsi (Golden Sands) and Slanchev bryag (Sunny Beach) (Table 1). This shows potential for expansion and increasement of attendance of the mountain tourist resorts.

Table 1: Activity of the resort complexes in 2019

Resorts	Number of beds	Overnight stays	People that spend the night	Profit of nights in leva
Zlatni pyasatsi	43 177	3 721 538	713 440	230 463 752
Slanchev bryag	64 050	9 057 115	5 263 967	313 364 278
Borovets	4 590	1 438 207	207 084	26 934 536
Pamporovo	6 139	1 492 764	463 431	22 566 464

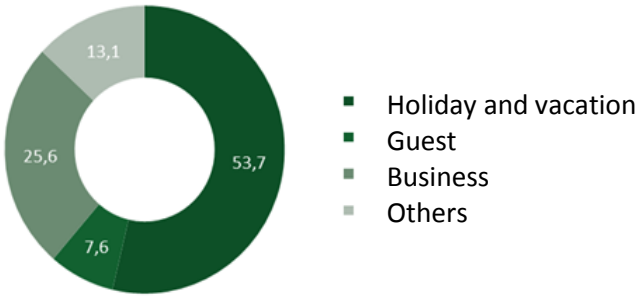
Source: National Statistical Institute (2019)

Figure 2: Tourist visits of foreign citizens in the period December – March (numbers)



Source: National Statistical Institute (2019)

Figure 3: Structure of tourist visits of foreign citizens in the period December 2018 – March 2019 in %



Source: National Statistical Institute (2019)

In the period December 2018 – March 2019 the general number of tourist visits of foreigners in Bulgaria is 1 631 318. The decline compared to the period December 2017 – March 2018 was 1.3% (Fig. 2). The winter season in 2017/2018 is the strongest reporting period after 2003/2004 (Ministry of Tourism). However, attracted tourists and overnight stays are low. There is potential for both an increase in nights spent in the winter and the formation of a second, although weaker, summer season, and why not for even and steady year-round employment. So far, only in Bansko there are signs of the formation of a second, weaker summer season to provide additional employment to the tourist base.

The number of visits for holiday and vacation purposes increased, with 875,945 visits and 3.8% growth. Visits for purpose of being guests are 124,078, which is down by 11.9%. Business tourism visits are 418,175, an increase of 3.2%. The number of visits with other tourist purposes is 213 120. The visits with the purpose of rest and vacation make up 53.7% of all tourist visits (Fig. 3).

This data indicate that the preferred type of tourism remains recreational, which means that there is a reserve there to increase demand for mountain tourist resorts. Within these holiday packages, additional options may be sought to extend the stay or to induce rest at other times of the year.

Bulgaria can develop year-round tourism types such as spa and cultural tourism, because there are over 550 mineral springs in the country, over 1300 years of history and many cultural resources. However, the country has a competitive advantage in seasonal tourism – summer sea and winter ski tourism. The presence of this competitiveness is the reason for the search for opportunities for the extension of the season for these types of tourism. This will increase the efficiency of Bulgarian tourist companies and improve employment in tourism (Velikova and Tzvetkova, 2018). The increasing travel needs are driving us to look for opportunities to improve the tourism supply. Finding effective solutions for extending the season or overcoming seasonality would contribute to increasing the tourism efficiency and better meeting of consumer needs.

Research and results

Seasonality, its causes and its impact on tourist destinations have been extensively explored in academic literature, and it is often seen as a problem for the tourism industry. Seasonality affects the activities of all hotel and restaurant sites and other types of tourism business. Due to differences in tourist demand, some resorts have a shorter season of three to five months, which creates challenges for managers managing them. The literature that looks at the impact of seasonality on the tourism industry is mainly concerned with strategies for overcoming or reducing its impact. In our view, this is the basis for overcoming the constraints caused by seasonality – to consider whether it is more cost-effective to overcome it altogether or to take more effective measures to extend the season. Seasonality in tourism can put a lot of pressure on business in all aspects – social, financial and environmental. Therefore, its research is a priority for tourist destinations.

The tourism industry of Bulgaria is highly dependent on weather conditions and is extremely seasonal. Particularly vulnerable are the two most developed types of tourism – rainy summer will affect beach tourism and the employment rate of beds in seaside resorts, while the lack of snow can have a serious negative effect on the revenues from ski tourism (Vodenska et al., 2017). Experts point out that global warming results from pollution (Bogomilova, 2017). In recent years, most cities in Western Europe have clearly stated their determination to reduce their negative influences on the environment by joining the European Initiative launched in January 2008, which requires ruling classes in cities to commit to reducing carbon emissions by 20% by 2020 (Tzvetkova, 2019). However, the forecasts for the winter tourist season are not particularly encouraging. That is why in Bulgaria it is of utmost importance to consider strategies for overcoming seasonality in the mountains.

The present analysis of the effects of seasonality has been prepared on the basis of an expert opinion survey through in-depth interviews on selected types of tourism, own observations and field studies, and a literature review of publications on the issue. The conclusions drawn are a step towards finding the right answers to overcome or limit the seasonality in tourism.

Mountain destinations offer a wide range of options. During the winter tourist season, tourists in mountain destinations can enjoy winter sports and activities such as: skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, ice hockey, ice skating and more. During the summer tourist season in the mountains, tourists can practice rafting, kayaking, rock climbing, mountain biking, bungee jumping, paragliding and more. All these mountain activities attract tourists from all over the world. At the same time,

mountain tourism and related mountain activities are very much dependent on the weather and the local climate of the tourist destination.

Bulgaria's climate forecasts are for a continuous decline in winter snowfall and earlier snowmelt. Rainfall can have a negative effect on the quality of snow and holidaymakers' perceptions. This will have significant negative consequences for ski resorts, especially those in the lower mountain ranges (Vodenska and Gösling, 2017).

Strategies that are specific to overcoming seasonality in tourist destinations are generated mainly by geographical location and climate effects (i.e. seasonal changes in weather). The possibility of extending the tourist season or introducing a second season largely depends on the location and competitiveness of the destination. For example, remote and peripheral areas may encounter difficulties when trying to develop a similar tourism product.

Although the seasonality will never be completely eliminated, there are many ways to offset peak and lowest tourist visit times during the year. The positive effects of the efforts to reduce the seasonality are present in some tourist destinations, thanks to the implemented strategies and the rapid growth of tourism in the last four to five years, with all efforts aimed at redirecting tourist visits to the quieter periods of the year, i.e. during peak season.

There are three major successful strategies that are used to reduce the negative effects of seasonality (Fig. 4):

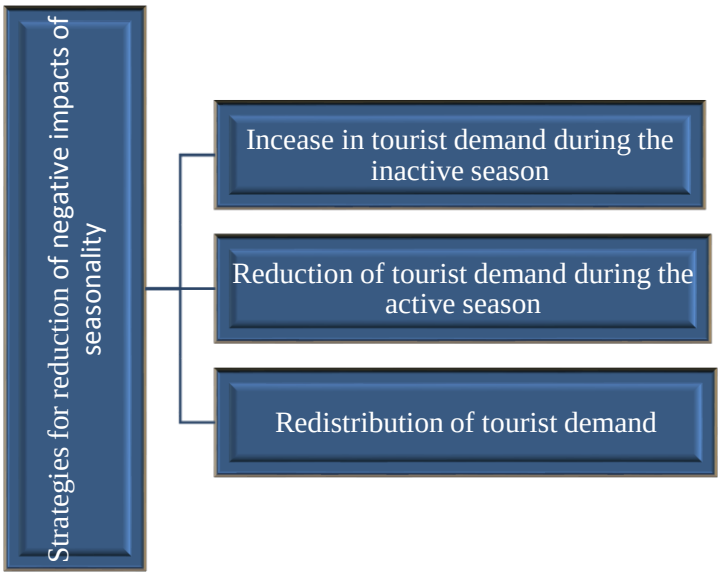
1. Increase in tourist demand during the inactive season;

2. Reduction of tourist demand during the active season;

3. Redistribution of tourist demand (Corluka, 2014, pp. 34-50).

The strategy of increasing tourist demand during the off-season can be realized in several basic ways. There are several common strategies at both destination and enterprise levels that are used to increase tourism demand during the off-season, including: differentiated pricing; diversified attractions (changing product mix); market diversification; selective forms of tourism; State support / facilitation (Lee et al., 2008, p. 3).

Figure 4: Strategies for reduction of negative impacts of seasonality



Source: System of the author Corluka, 2014, c. 34-50.

Our studies show that in terms of the Bulgarian tourist product, the most effective measure is to offer diversified attractions (changing the product mix). Their aim is to promote tourism products based on seasonal characteristics. To a large extent, this strategy approaches the concept of event tourism as a tool for overcoming seasonality (Velikova, 2020). This is about introducing new products such as: special events; festivals; development of attractions for a specific target market; vacation packages; offering healing and mineral water procedures; culinary and wine tourism; cultural and historical

tourism; hiking tours of nature parks and eco trails; weekend breaks; health breaks; sports and activity; educational tours (Corluka, 2019).

Therefore, the next actions of the tourist entrepreneurs in the mountainous territories of Bulgaria should be aimed at offering different attractions during the off-season. If it is thought that it is not possible to attract people outside the peak season due to the fact that the key attractions in the destination are only available during the active season (e.g. skiing and snowboarding depending on the snow), then managers in tourist destinations may take action by offering different and additional attractions beyond the peak season. Typically, these attractions will not be affected by weather conditions, so they may be indoor attractions or indoor events, and which may be attractive, regardless of temperature and rainfall. Events such as festivals, competitions and exhibitions are the most common types of attractions used in this strategy. It requires considerable organization, marketing and investment and can take a long time (years) to become a permanent feature of the tourism calendar, especially if similar events occur in neighbouring destinations.

To make fuller use of the tourist base, plans and programs need to be developed to organize some kind of events mainly during the seasons with the fewest visitors. Most managers use tourist attractions and organize events in more than one season, but not year-round. It is through a more in-depth analysis of the tourism market, the presence of investments and a good organizational structure that year-round employment in mountain tourist territories can be ensured.

Conclusion

In Bulgaria there are opportunities to practice many other types of tourism besides summer sea and winter ski tourism. We have many mineral springs and hundreds of cultural resources. Parusheva (2019) defines cultural tourism as a form that can significantly improve the tourism supply in the country. Expanding it by creating new packages is intended to encourage tourists during the off-peak tourist season to make more frequent vacations, repeat their vacations at the same place, or extend their stay. Tourism product development strategies need to be developed in the context of the overall destination development strategy so that new products are complementary and mutually supportive.

The opportunities to turn Bulgarian tourist regions into destinations for all seasons are good. The development of more unpopular specialized types of tourism, including event tourism is poorly constrained, mainly by a lack of information. It would be a good idea to look for options for organizing different events for building a vision of our mountain regions as destinations for "non-mass" tourism.

Based on the strategies, actions, measures and examples for overcoming the seasonality in tourism, it can be concluded that it is a problem that is extremely difficult to overcome. Few destinations manage to switch from a seasonal visitation model to a year-round visit. Attempts to extend the peak season or add a second active season may be successful but are costly to implement and success cannot be guaranteed. In general, it is much better for a destination to adopt a policy of adjusting and mitigating seasonality than trying to overcome this phenomenon.

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