

## COMPETITIVENESS OF LOCAL DESTINATIONS BASED ON TRADITIONAL EVENTS

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to determine and indicate the opportunities for increasing the competitiveness of the tourist destinations by creating recognizable tourist experiences through valorisation the traditional culture using local events.

**Methodology** – In order to determine the opinions about the competitiveness, the originality of the contents, the target market and the contribution of the local events of the traditional culture in the positioning of the tourist destination, the authors have conducted a semi-structured interview with the organizers of the event and other local stakeholders in the tourism industry. On the other hand, the authors have conducted a survey among the visitors of the event held in October 2016 in order to look into their attitudes and to compare them with the attitudes of the organizers on the same issues.

**Findings** – The paper indicates that well-structured integral tourist experiences based on the traditional culture, contribute to the recognition and the positioning of small, local destinations. By doing that, they increase the visitors' interest and their immersion into the event itself and thus contribute to the better attendance of other tourist contents within the destination.

**Contribution** – The obtained data contribute to raising the awareness the destination management holders at local levels about the need of the development of the original and well-differentiated local events of the traditional culture, which can provide additional benefits for the local culture as well as raise the competitiveness and the tourist value of the still insufficiently valorised rural areas.

**Keywords** competitiveness of the tourist destination, traditional culture, traditional events, tourist experience

### **INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary global trends and continuous changes on the tourism market have a great impact on the development and orientation, i.e. the commitment of the tourist destination. Among various options and development scenarios, the tourist destinations seek their "place" based on the internal strengths on one side and the opportunities on the other side in order to insure a good competitive position on the ever more demanding tourism market, while at the same time taking into consideration the criteria of the sustainable development. In such conditions, tourist destinations face the challenge of whether they can truly attract and satisfy a certain segment of the tourist demand and offer them a highly personalized tourist experience, while also insuring a satisfying benefit for the local environment. It is certainly important to remark that the socio-cultural component is gaining more and more recognition in the development of

the destination tourism, regardless of whether this considers the creation of the offer or the benefits of the local community based on these elements.

In this case, DMOs should avoid mass tourism orientation, and they should focus on enhancing and differentiating their products by emphasizing their uniqueness, because themed tourism products enable destinations to provide unique experiences (Buhalis, 2000). Therefore, the role of the local community in influencing the tourism development activities is becoming more important and much clearer (Hall et al., 2005), because their culture, tradition and heritage may be a unique tourism product.

By focusing on the local identity and the uniqueness of the area, tourism development based on heritage can strengthen the economy and attract visitors, and have a positive impact on the quality of life and the territory attractiveness (Pinson, 2016; Kaminski et al 2014). In fact, local communities are becoming one of the main reasons for tourists to travel, to experience the way of life and the material products of different communities (Aref, et al, 2010). The fact that substantiates these claims is the fact that the tourists want to meet the local culture, get in touch with the residents, experience the national folklore, the gastronomy, to visit festivals, museums, galleries and to visit destinations that enable them to engage in different activities that cherish the tradition, as well as to adjust the offer according to the tourist's interests, needs, motivation and their behavior (Vrtiprah, 2006). In accordance with that, the culture of the destination is not the exclusive domain of the residents anymore, but rather a part of visitor experience. The traditional elements of the local community are now powerfully recognizable means of many local communities on the tourism market. Their appeal comes from an innate uniqueness of each event, which distinguishes them from fixed attractions, and their celebratory and festive surrounding elevates them above the ordinary life (Derrett, 2000). From a supply perspective, heritage has been defined in many different ways, including a great number of tangible and intangible elements, such as cultural landscapes, natural and physical element and experience and other intangible aspects (Fonseca, Ramos, 2012).

The tourism based on cultural heritage is defined in many ways, but the common and fundamental trait is that it stems from the human history. Tourism can thus be defined as an economic activity that makes use of socio-cultural assets to attract visitors, i.e. that it is based on folkloric traditions, arts and crafts, ethnic history, social customs and *cultural events*, which should be authentic (Chhabra et al, 2003). Therefore, heritage tourism encompasses a multitude of motives, resources and experiences; it is different for every individual, and every place visited (Timothy, 2011:4).

While mega events, as large international special events, tend to attract huge marketing fees, dominate the media time and present obvious tourism research opportunities, local sports carnivals, cultural festivals and community fairs generally attract no marketing fees and have a low media profile. Nevertheless, these local fairs and carnivals can be special events: in relation to their regional and local significance (Walo, et al, 1996:2). Cultural events should contribute to and benefit everyone, from visitors to organizers and local communities (Ali-Knight, Robertson, 2004). In academic literature, there are not enough researches about local traditional events of isolated and touristic poorly valorised and less known destinations, especially from demand perspective. There are

even less researches on influence of local traditional events on recognisability and competitiveness of such destinations. Therefore it is relevant to study more detailed this field and show the strength of events as well as thematic touristic events such as local cultural and traditional events.

The creation and organization of original traditional events that visualize the peculiarities, thus differentiate, and contribute to the positioning of the tourist destination on the tourism market are some of the efficient ways that can contribute to a better valorization of the value of the local community in terms of tourism. Tourist events are perceived as a powerful tool in creating a special tourist experience that can be achieved only in the moment of the event, hence only within a limited period of time, which causes a timely reaction of the arrival of potential tourists at the destination. This fact indicates that tourist events can also reduce the seasonality of the tourist destination if they are organized outside of the main season of the tourist demand, i.e. that they are suitable particularly for maintaining the attendance rate in other less visited periods of the destination, with the possibility of offering an authentic tourist experience. Even more today, with the advance of technology, the individuals are seeking more 'high touch' experiences to balance the high-tech influences in their lives. The events remain the most effective means of providing a high-touch experience (Goldblatt, 2000:3) and because of that, among other things, the event sector is increasing.

Figure 1: **The Four dimensions of an experience**



Source: Pine and Gillmore (1999), *The Experience Economy-Work is Theatre and Every Business is a Stage*, pp.30.

For events as a tourism product, the adventure, i.e. the authentic experience, is the root for the differentiation, which serves the purpose of achieving, maintaining and improving the competitiveness on the tourism market (Manthiou et al, 2011). Pine and Gillmore (1999; 2011) claim that the quality of the service alone does not suffice for the differentiation and raising the competitive advantages in the current economic environment anymore, and that the visitors (guests) are seeking original and authentic experiences. It is important especially for tourism compared to perhaps any other sector to embrace the principles of the experience economy as the last stage in the development of the economic environment (Sundbo et al, 2008; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011).

In connection to the trends present on the tourist demand market, the tourist events based on the traditional culture of the destination can be an extraordinarily attractive factor for visitors. The topic and the content of the events that are designed in such a way that they present a complete contrast to the usual daily routines of the visitors in their own places of residence enable the visitor's complete inclusion into the event. Gillmore and Pine's model of Four dimensions of an experience presented in the picture above shows the elements of the experience that enable a complete inclusion and connection of the visitor with the event, and thus also the visitor's satisfaction as an end result of his leisure experience and his participation in the event (Pine & Gillmore, 1999).

## **1. EVENTS AS A GENERATOR OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES OF DESTINATIONS**

Festivals and events are emerging worldwide as a growing sector of the tourism and leisure industries and they are thought to have significant economic, socio-cultural and political impacts on the local destination and community (Arcodia, Whitford, 2006). Throughout the history, the events have emulated cultural traditions or marked a religious or historical occasion associated with the local community (Arcodia & Robb, 2000). Events have been used strategically to bring 'new' money into regions, to promote the economic development and to highlight destinations to potential visitors. Today, there has been a tremendous growth in the number of special events that are being staged in tourism destinations.

Planned events are a spatial-temporal phenomenon, and each is unique because of the interaction among the key factors that hold them, and the most important instance is that they are never the same, which makes them very attractive. The role and the impacts of the planned events within tourism are of an increasing importance for the competitiveness of the destination (Getz, 2008) and they are an effective enhancer of the destination image (Hall, 1992). Tourist events are perceived as a one of the effective tools that help the destination to fight a low tourist demand (Ryan et al, 1998) and as a means of increasing the tourist appeal of destinations to potential visitors (Sherwood, 2007), thus increasing the destination attendance rate and the related investment in the longer term (Dwyer et al, 2000).

The events are an important motivator of tourism, and a prominent figure in the development and the marketing plans of most destinations. They play an important role in making significant contributions to the tourism, travel, leisure and lodging industries by becoming a creator of a strong tourist demand. They are an important tool for achieving the various economic, social and environmental aims and for creating benefits for the communities and destinations (Arcodia and Robb, 2000). Special events are now highly sought, in accordance with the previously mentioned, because they contribute in a major positive economic impact, are leading to an increased economic activity, to the creation of new jobs (Hussein, 2016; Dwyer et al, 2005), and to the profitability of a tourism destination in which they are taking place (Brent Ritchie, 1984).

While there are clearly significant economic benefits of the events for the communities in which they are taking place, the events present primarily a social phenomenon with the potential to provide a variety of predominantly positive social and cultural benefits for all the stakeholders involved (Arcodia, Whitford, 2006). In addition to this, it is evident that the events do not only serve the destination in attracting tourists, but that they also help to protect and develop the social identity (Derrett, 2004:39). They can thus enhance the exchange of ideas, the importance of the heritage preservation and conservation, they can foster business contacts, provide forums for continuing with the education and training and can also facilitate the technology transfer (Dwyer, et al, 2000).

However, despite multiple benefits, many special events are unable to collect sufficient revenue to cover their operating costs and they would not be run without some form of an assistance subsidy, which usually comes from the local government. Such expenditure and support would be justified in terms of the economic impacts that the events bring to their host region, especially the expenditure by visitors who would not have come to the region but for the event (Burgan, Mules, 2000).

The events fulfill their main role in the tourist development of the destination if they can lead to the achievement of certain impacts that are positive for the visitors (the fulfillment of expectations or the high level of excitement and satisfaction), as well as to the impacts that are positive for the organizers and the local community (the publicity and a better position of the destination, along with other economic and non-economic effects). Thus, it can be said, that they can present a tool for raising the competitiveness of the destination. According to that, local traditional events, can be a powerful tool for break through of smaller less known destinations on tourism market. Local culture, old traditions and local pride as a core of this paper can be sustained and enhanced by visitor attractions and events - particularly by the heritage, cultural attractions and festivals.

Finally, it can be concluded that there is a great number of advantages for tourist destinations when it comes to the organization of tourist events such as attracting the tourists (especially in the off-peak season), creating new sources of revenue for the regions, increasing the awareness and the attractivity of destinations, making a new infrastructure and new services or developing the current infrastructure and services, encouraging visitors to re-visit the destination, etc. (Getz, 1997). There is also such a

phenomenon called a 'psychic value' for the host communities, which is associated with the pride and value placed on being a host to a great event, and because of event's uniqueness, many of its benefits are intangible (Getz, 2000)., This factor varies in its authenticity and might be commercialized, standardized and reinvented to attract and sustain customers, resulting in a change to the underlying local and regional culture and heritage of the place or the host destination (Cooper et al, 2008).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to determine in which way and to which extent are the well-designed and well-managed tourist events able to contribute to the raise in the level of recognition and the competitiveness of the tourist destination, especially of the smaller and less-known ones on the continent, the authors have examined the event under the name of "Visiting the Old Times" which has been taking place for the past 10 years in the second half of October in Pitomača, a municipality of roughly 10,000 inhabitants in the Virovitica-Podravina county in Croatia. The main theme of the event is to show the way of life and the culture of the local community at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The organizer of the event is the local tourist Board and the participants are various cultural clubs, associations dealing with the preservation of heritage, the owners of traditional crafts, as well as local caterers with their wine and gastronomic offer. The authors have conducted a semi-structured interview with the organizers of the event (the Director of the Tourist Board of Pitomača), as well as with the representatives of the participants (one representative of each of the three associations).

The organizer's views were examined through the following questions:

- Do you think that the name of the event ,Visiting the Old Times' corresponds with the theme of the event?
- Are you familiar with some events of a similar theme in this area and do you think based on any particular reason that your event is different?
- In your view, which element of the offer is the most interesting and corresponds the best to the visitor's preferences?
  - Eno-gastro offer
  - The representation of old crafts
  - Music and entertainment
  - The possibility of selling the local products to the visitors
- Do you think that the term of the event is ,spot on'?
- Which is the target group of visitors due to the place of residence and the age?
- Which is your most common and most significant way of communicating with the market?
- Do you use the event as a means of promoting the overall offer of the destination and in which way?
- Have you thought about complementing the event with any new content or about extending the event's duration into more days?

The views of the visitors were examined with the help of a survey conducted at the time of the event 'Visiting the Old Times' in October 2016. Survey were examined demographic characteristics of visitors and their experience about an event. Although the exact number of visitors remained unknown due to the daily fluctuation and there were no entrance fees for the event, we learned the data of roughly 500 to 700 visitors through the conversation with the organizers. The survey was voluntarily completed by 50 visitors, which represents a sample of roughly 10%. There were more women among the subjects of the survey (60%). The visitor's experience regarding the event was examined by the table of 5-point Likert type scale, where the grade 1 expressed the view of "I completely disagree with the claim", the grade 3 "neither agree, nor disagree", and the grade 5 expressed the view "I completely agree". The table with the results is shown in Table 1 on the page 9.

### **3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

With regard to the theme, the organizers hold the view that the theme is well developed in accordance with the name of the event. They also think that the underlying event of this study is fairly different from other similar events in the area ("Podravski motivi" in Koprivnica, "Kaj su jeli naši stari" in Vrbovec, "Picokijada" in Đurđevac) due to the different content such as old crafts, folklore, traditional music, traditional cuisine and others, all of which are equally important for attracting the visitors and for the inclusion of the local stakeholders. They also emphasize that other similar events are mostly held during the months of June or May, so there are not similar events at the time when this event is taking place.

The target group are the visitors from a wider regional area, and considering the content, the most represented group of visitors should be in the segment of younger families with children. In order to communicate with the market, they use mostly the website of the Tourist Board, posters and radio stations. As the event is held on the square where the Tourist Board office along with the information center is located, the visitors can take the information materials about the tourist offer of the destination. There is no special stand offering promotional materials at the event itself.

With regard to the additional content, the organizers have pointed out that they are considering to put even more emphasis on the way of life and the culture from the time of Austria-Hungary due to the fact that the municipality was once an integral part of The Military Frontier, as well as the fact that this municipality is the place of birth of the famous Croatian poet and Austrian-Hungarian general Petar Preradović. They do not hold the view that the event should be extended into more days.

Data collected by the survey among the visitors shows that according to the age structure and the family status of the visitors, we can draw a conclusion that the events of this type attract visitors of middle to mature ages with children which is slightly different conclusion from organizers point of view about target segment. A positive indicator is that the greatest number of visitors (56,6%) are in the range of 31 to 59 years, i.e. in an age when they are the most active and the most productive. According to the sample, the greatest number of visitors came from the area of Virovitica-

Podravina county (66,7%), almost 27% of which came from the area of the municipality of Pitomača. This information points to the fact that the event slowly develops from an event of a local character (municipality of Pitomača) into an event of a regional character, with an intent of becoming an event of a wider regional significance (if we assume that it will be well-governed and promoted). As the data about the structure of the visitors from the previous years were not collected, we cannot determine the trend of the increase in the number of visitors from the area outside of Virovitica-Podravina county.

The data that were obtained based on the frequency of the visits of the event show that the so called 'faithful' visitors prevail when it comes to the visits. More than 60% of them have already visited the event two or more times. A positive indicator is that roughly one third of the questioned subjects has visited the event for the first time. If we look into the fact that around 80% of the questioned subjects affirmed that they will visit the event the following year, we can conclude that the structure of the 'faithful' visitors should not change significantly. We should increase the efforts for attracting new visitors.

With regard to collecting information about the event, the most common method is the method of "mouth to mouth" promotion, followed by advertising by the way of classic media (radio 57,1% and posters 42,9%), while 16,7% of the visitors affirmed that they visited the event because they were invited (direct mail – invitation). Only 3% of visitors affirmed that they heard about the event with the help of the website of the Tourist Board of Pitomača. It can be concluded that the oral promotion as the most represented means of communication represents an expected fact due to the age and the territorial representation of the questioned visitors, and that it will still remain the most important method for attracting visitors due to the fact that 73,3% of the questioned visitors affirmed that they would recommend the event to their friends and acquaintances. A positive fact is that 26,75% of the questioned subjects declared that they would recommend the event through some of the social networks, which leaves place for an additional opportunity of marketing communication in the future, especially if the organizers wish to attract a greater number of visitors from other parts of Croatia and raise the event's significance on an interregional level.

**Table 1: The visitor's views on the event of 'Visiting the Old Time'**

	Answers in %				
	1	2	3	4	5
The event is organized at a good time		3,4	20	33,3	43,3
Considering the name 'Visiting the Old Times', the contents of the event are appropriately connected with the theme			3,4	6,6	90
The presentation of the old crafts and customs is an important element of the event				10	90
The gastronomy offer is an important element of the event				13,3	66,7
The gastronomy offer is based on local and regional cuisine			3,4	26,7	69,9
The choice of wines is based on the offer of local and regional winemakers			10	40	50
I am satisfied with the content of the event			3,4	23,3	73,3
I am satisfied with the gastronomy offer			3,4	23,3	73,3
I am satisfied with the wine offer				50	50
The opportunity of buying different products in the event is important to me			10	33,3	56,7
The ratio of price and quality of the offer is good			10	40	50
The event has fulfilled my expectations			6,7	33,3	60
The event should be supplemented with additional contents and the duration of event should be extended into more days		10	20	33,3	36,7
The visit to the event has awaken my desire to inform myself more about the tourist offer in my near surrounding		3,4	10	40	46,7
During the visit to the event I felt like I was in another time for a short period of time		6,7	23,3	26,7	43,3
The visit to the event presented me with a special (unusual) experience		6,7	23,3	23,3	46,7

Source: Author's work

Generally speaking, the visitor's experiences are extremely positive due to the fact that most of the answers range between 4 to 5. Although the survey was anonymous, we can still take this fact with a grain of salt, as most of the subjects filled the questionnaires at the examiner's tables. The fact that most of the subjects came from the area of Pitomača and Virovitica-Podravina county, which makes them more sensible towards the organizers, should also be taken into consideration.

However, we have also noticed certain elements where the distribution of the answers was of a wider range, as well as noted a certain divergence with the attitudes of the organizers and the visitors and it can thus be hypothesized that these are the facts that the organizers should reconsider in the future:

- They should reconsider the time of holding the event due to the fact that the end of October presents the time when the weather conditions can spoil the experience that is greatly connected to the open space (which happened on several occasions and resulted in reduced attendance)

- The event should be complemented well with additional contents and the extension into more days should be reconsidered. Although the views of the visitors on the missing content were not examined, considering the somewhat lower grades on the elements such as the offer of wine and the last three questions in the table which consider the availability of information on other contents of the destination and thus on the increase of the interest for visiting other attractions, as well as the escapist elements of the event. The event could be supplemented with new 'original' experiences that are particular for the local surrounding and tradition, it could be connected to the story of local wines and the wine road that is located nearby as well as by designing a content for a greater inclusion of the visitor into the event (trying to work in old crafts, participation in daces, gastronomic workshops, etc.). A more direct promotion of the rest of the tourist offer by way of the direct communication with the visitors should also be taken into consideration.
- There are also opposing views among the organizers and the visitors in terms of the effectiveness of the means of communicating with the market. While the organizers emphasize the importance of websites and posters as the most important medium, visitors give the greatest importance to the oral promotion and advertising on the local radio stations.

Although the organizers hold the view that all the elements of the offer are equally important for attracting visitors, they still distinguish the element of the traditional life and the display of old crafts and customs as the most important one so the organizers should be more focused on the mentioned content in the future, as well as on the possibility of an active inclusion of the visitor into the experience.

In order to increase the competitiveness of the event itself, the organizers should consider making the event theme more recognizable and more original. The fact that Petar Preradović, a famous Austrian-Hungarian general and a famous Croatian poet was born near Pitomača should be used as a central theme that connects the story of the lifestyle in this area in the second half of the 19th century with the culture, music, gastronomy, fashion...The event itself would thus differ from other similar events in the area since there is by far no event with such a theme.

Visitors should be offered with contents that encourage an active participation in the tourist experience such as creative workshops for producing items made of linen, working on pottery wheels, painting ceramic or glass objects in the style of naïve art from Podravina, as well as culinary workshops and competitions.

In order to support the main theme of “visiting the old times” in the whole destination during the event and not only in the narrow area where the event is taking place, all the destination’s stakeholders need to merge. To accomplish that, it is necessary to connect and establish a certain cluster for managing this tourist product, as well as the integrated product of the whole destination with a recognizable theme and brand.

## CONCLUSION

Tourism continuously changes its 'face' under the influence of global trends, but also with the inclusion of an ever-expanding number of stakeholders, both when it comes to the tourist demand on one hand, as well as in the tourist supply. Under such circumstances and the influence of numerous other factors, the tourist demand shows a significant heterogeneity, which creates new possibilities for many destinations, which try to satisfy all the stakeholders involved by trying to meet the requirements of certain segments.

The tourist destinations should thus base their offer on the specialties of the area, on unique and original products which can offer a highly personalized tourist experience and thus position and differentiate the destination in comparison to the competence. One of the sub-segments of a certain interest of the tourist demand is connected to the event tourism. The socio-cultural component, especially the heritage of the local community as a special one for certain areas, can be shaped into a sought, attractive and highly valuable tourist product that can provide the destination with the fulfillment of the goals in terms of a higher level of the tourist interest and other positive effects that can stem from it.

In such a context, local traditional events can be a means of indicating the specialty of the destination as one of effective ways of the valorization of the tangible and intangible heritage of the local community in terms of tourism. Due to their distinctive features (the event taking place within a certain time span, the revival of the intangible, singularity, etc.), tourist events have an influence on the visit of the potential tourists to the destination at a specifically aimed time. Along with all the above mentioned facts, tourist events can also reduce the seasonality, i.e. they are suitable for maintaining the attendance rate in other less visited periods of the destination. It can be said that they present a tool for raising the competence because they fulfill their main role in the tourist development of the destination. They lead to the fulfillment of certain desired positive effects, both for the visitors (the fulfillment of the expectations, a high level of experience and satisfactions), as well as for the organizers and the local community (publicity and better position of the destination, along with other economic and non-economic effects).

Creating authentic experiences is the foundation for raising the competitive advantages of the tourist destinations (Tscaur at. al. 2006), especially the ones that have traditional values that a certain destination is recognizable for at their core. What is also important to DMO's that they understand the views and the visitor's satisfaction in order to be able to evaluate the competence of their product and thus make the necessary decisions connected to the re-design and the actualization of the tourist experience occasionally. In accordance with that, there exists a need for further research of this event, as well as other similar events in the area based especially on the methodology of Measuring Experience Economy concept, which was presented by Oh, Fiore and Jeoung in their paper from the year 2007.

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