



BEST PRACTICES FOR ALTERNATIVE TOURISM SERVICES IN BULGARIA

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Abstract. Among the latest trends of the development of the tourism sector in Bulgaria we can distinguish several key directions. The mass tourism is now more and more oriented towards new, alternative forms, harmonised with the principles of stable consumption of resources – cultural tourism, wine-tasting, rural and other forms, attractive for the modern tourist. The alternative tourism provides opportunities for regional development in Bulgaria within territories of low priority up to this point. This piece of work is aimed at analysis and study of contemporary methods and best practices of logistic of alternative tourism services in Bulgaria. We have explored the main sources of innovations and logistics and their impact on the sector of alternative tourism.

Keywords: alternative tourism, logistic, best practices.

JEL classification: Q01, O18, L83.

1. Introduction

Bulgaria has a great potential for developing alternative forms of tourism, thanks to its natural and historical wealth (Neshkov *et al.* 2007, Aleksieva, Stamov 2005, Gerov 2013). Over the past few years, the number of tourists from Germany, France, England, Israel, the Netherlands, the USA, Scandinavian countries and Japan has increased (Mihaylov 2005). There are many agencies, family hotels, guest houses and sports clubs offering services in this field. Prerequisites for the development of alternative tourism are the following (Marinov 2011):

- diversifying economic activities through extending the nomenclature of local products and services;
- maintaining optimum balance between ecological, socioeconomic and cultural systems;
- promoting exchange between cultures and people in the spirit of mutual respect – a factor that contributes to solidarity and social understanding;
- stimulating coordinated land-use planning policies to boost competitiveness of economic activities in underdeveloped regions;
- developing infrastructure in an environmentally-friendly way, combining private and public sectors' efforts;
- enhancing the development of small and medium enterprises;
- stimulating the formation of regional cooperation;

- attracting foreign tourists and extending their stay in the region;
- expanding the domestic tourism market.

Alternative tourism can be defined as “a set of sustainable tourism forms and practices, which are directed towards satisfying tourists' individual interests and needs, as well as preserving the local nature and culture” (Goeldner 2006). As far as alternative tourism is concerned, the focus is placed on the contact with “preserved natural environment, authentic atmosphere and cuisine, preserved traditions”.

Problems of logistics in the implementation of alternative tourism product in these conditions are highly relevant.

This research aims at examining and analyzing “good practices” in logistics in terms of alternative tourism services in Bulgaria.

2. State of tourism in Bulgaria

Tourism remains the most dynamic sector of Bulgarian economy, creating new jobs and steady income in the state budget (Dokova *et al.* 2011). Bulgaria is a cheap and affordable destination for foreigners (Aleksandrova 2010). Therefore, it attracts their interest. Of such interest are not only the Black Sea coast and the mountains, covering more than 1/3 of the country's territory, but also the nine objects, included in UNESCO World Heritage Site – over 5% of the country's territory has the status of protected territory (including 3

national and 11 nature parks) 35 managed reserves; 441 protected areas; 349 natural monuments; 40,000 historical monuments; 160 monasteries; over 300 museums and galleries; mountains with over 4,000 open caves; 33.6% forested area, 96% of which is taken up by forests; over 600 mineral springs, rich traditions in holding festivals and celebrating holidays, it has a well-preserved ethnographic heritage, national cuisine and quality wines, etc. Officially, there are 142 resorts in the country, of them 58 being balneological, 56 being mountain and 29 being seaside resorts (Apostolov 2003). This Bulgarian heritage sparks great interest among Bulgarian and foreign tourists.

Over the last few years international tourism in Bulgaria reported a steady upward trend in both the number of foreign tourists who have chosen Bulgaria as a recreation destination, and in revenues from international tourism in the current account of the balance of payments (Fig. 1).

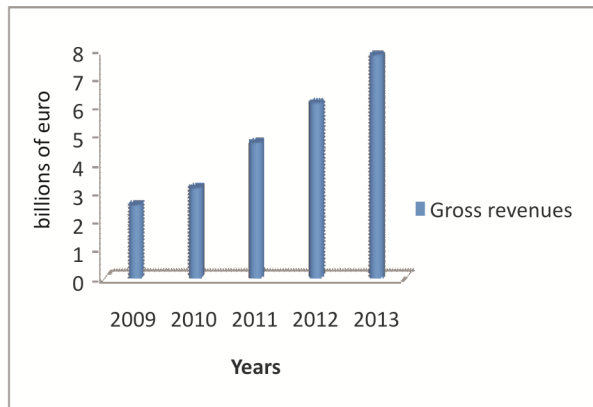


Fig. 1. Gross revenues in billions of euro from visits to Bulgaria for the period 2009–2013 (source: National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria)

The increase in revenues from tourism results from:

- Increasing the share of alternative forms of tourism: further development and validation of new tourist products (cultural-historical, balneological, SPA and wellness, eco- and rural tourism, congress, adventure, golf and yacht tourism);
- Wider involvement of the untapped potential of the majority of the country's territory in the tourism development through gradual but consistent implementation of regional approach, ensuring mobilization and integration of local initiatives, as well as forming integrated, attractive and economically viable regional tourist products and destinations;
- Increase in the number of tourists as a whole, as well as in the relative share of

more solvent foreign and Bulgarian tourists thanks to improved quality and added value of tourism services;

- Increase in the share of trips by Bulgarian citizens within the country;

Research period a trend of increasing the average daily revenue from tourists can be noticed (Fig. 2). This is mainly due to the lower price of packages for tourists coming from the Balkan countries, Eastern Europe and Western Europe. Tourists from Western Europe paid the most on average for their stay in the country, followed by tourists from Russia and Germany. Tourists from North America, the Balkans and Eastern Europe spent the less (Bolshanik 2012).

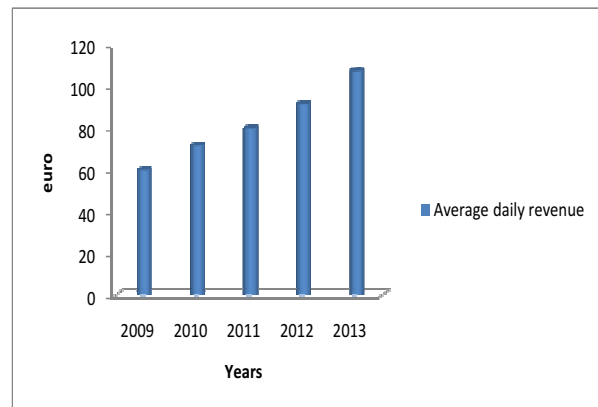


Fig. 2. Average daily revenue, denominated in euro in Bulgaria for the period 2009–2013 (source: National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria)

In the period 2009–2013 revenues from international tourism reported a steady upward trend in the number of foreign tourists who chose Bulgaria as a recreation destination (Marinov 2006).

The ratio of revenues and expenses in the balance of payment for the period 2009–2013 is research of Figure 3.

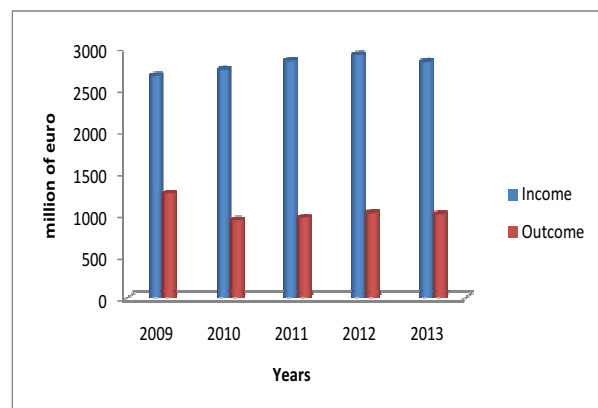


Fig. 3. Balance of payments of international tourism in Bulgaria (million of euro) (source: National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria)

Despite the significant growth of foreign tourists to Bulgaria most of the regions in Bulgaria do not manage to create quality tourism products. This leads to two main consequences (Koprlev 2004):

- Opportunities for further growth in traditional resorts and tourist regions (Black Sea coastline and ski resorts) have reached their limit;
- Most of the potential of a large part of the country's territory is untapped or slightly used, so the business and the population there cannot benefit from the opportunities of tourism.

The majority of foreign tourists have visited the country with the purpose of having a holiday or vacation (Minkov *et al.* 2007) (Fig. 4). Romania tops the ranking in visits by foreigners in absolute value for the period 2009–2013. The second place is held by Greece, while Germany ranked third in terms of volume. EU member states still are the most important generating market for international tourism in Bulgaria (Fig. 5).

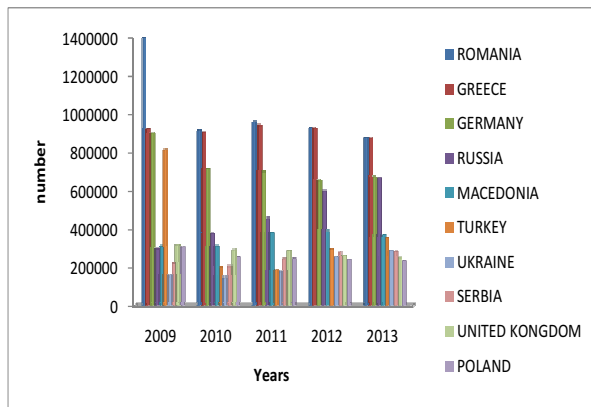


Fig. 4. Visits for tourism of foreign tourists to Bulgaria for the period 2009–2013 shown by countries (source: National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria)

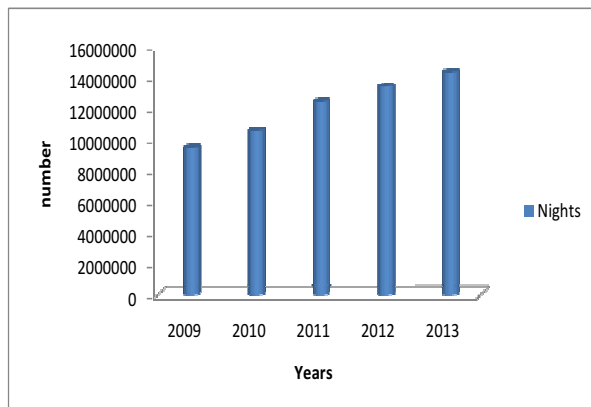


Fig. 5. Nights for the period 2009–2013 shown by countries (source: National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria)

For the last five years hotel infrastructure reported one of the highest growth rates in Europe, even compared to Bulgaria's direct competitors: Greece, Turkey, Croatia, Romania (Petrov 2005). The hotel capacity of the main host countries in Europe increases by 3-4% every year, while in Bulgaria its average annual growth for the past 5 years has been 12% to three times higher (Fig. 6).

The faster increase in the number of beds compared to the increase in the number of tourists and their overnight stays led to a general decrease in level of occupancy rate, including bookings by foreigners. The dominant role of the extensive approach, in which turnover growth and foreign exchange revenues strictly follow the increase in hotel facilities, was affirmed. Bulgarian business and state receive twice lower exchange revenues from a tourist unit (one tourist, one booked room), mainly due to relatively low price levels of hotels on the Black Sea (National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria 2009–2013).

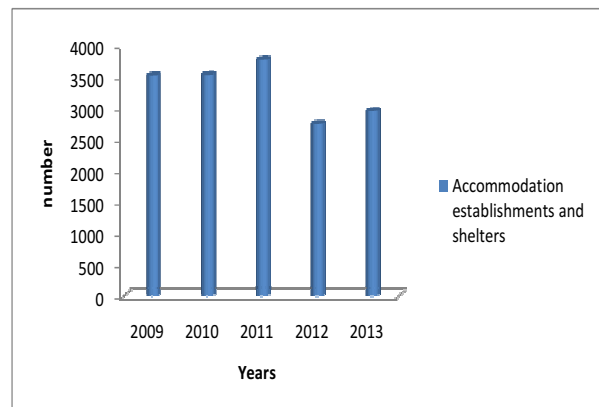


Fig. 6. Total number of accommodation establishments and shelters in the period 2009–2013 (source: National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria)

The overall competitiveness of Bulgarian tourism is defined as average on the international tourism market. Bulgaria holds 54th place out of 124 countries in the world's tourism attractiveness ranking.

In terms of regulatory framework, the country ranks 66th, in terms of infrastructure the country ranks 56th, and in terms of resources for tourism development it ranks 44th.

Turkey ranks immediately ahead of Bulgaria at the 52nd place, while the other direct competitors Greece, Croatia, and Romania rank 4th, 38th and 76th respectively.

3. Characteristics of alternative tourism in Bulgaria

3.1. Key features

Alternative tourism has the following features (Aleksieva, Stamov 2003):

- Sustainability – it aims not only at reducing the impact on the environment to the minimum, but also at shaping tourists' views before and during their travel, as well as invoking environment-friendly tourism practices as early as the conceptual stage in markets that are generating tourists. This is related to the evolution of tourism, which is consistent with the hosts' interests on the hand and the visitors' interests on the other hand. All hosting activities should comply with the capacity ceiling of natural resources, i.e. to respect the principle of as efficient use of resources as possible.
- Solidarity – responsible and solidarity tourism places the individual.

The cornerstones of sustainable solidarity tourism are:

- The participation of the local population in different stages of a given tourism product, respect to the individual, culture and nature, as well as more equally distributed profits from tourism;
- Small scale – with controlled and regulated development;
- A wide variety of activities on an individual or independent basis;
- Gaining experience and knowledge about the local cultural heritage and preservation of traditional values.

3.2. Major types of alternative tourism

The major types of alternative tourism according to several authors are (Neshkov, Kazandzhieva 2009, Nikolova, Linkova 2009, Fennell 2008):

- Rural;
- Ecotourism;
- Mountain tourism;
- Adventure Travelling (biking, horseback riding, skiing and snowshoeing, rafting, diving, caving, trekking);
- Thematic tourism, for example, tourism related to cultural-historical heritage, tourism related to esoterism and religion, wines, traditional cuisine, ethnography and traditional music and crafts.

Familiar forms of alternative tourism and their relative share in the overall supply in Bulgaria are presented in Figure 7.

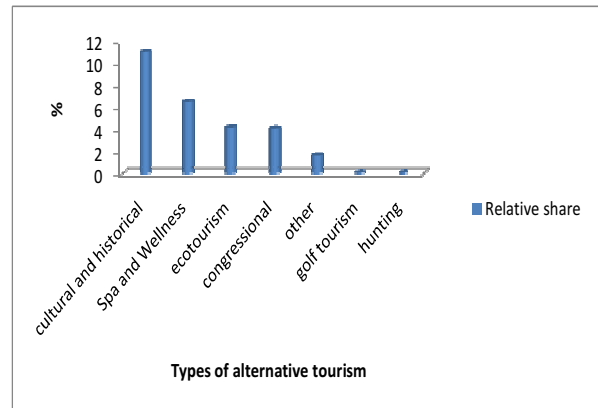


Fig. 7. Types of alternative tourism products and their relative share in the overall supply (source: Strategic Plan for Development of Bulgarian Tourism – State Tourism Agency)

Bulgaria has the third largest volume of cultural heritage in Europe (after Greece and Italy) (Angelov, Zhelyazkova 2007). Over 40,000 historical, ethnographic and cultural sites have been identified in the country, and there is also a huge potential for development of the SPA and wellness industry. What is characteristic of SPA tourism in Bulgaria is that it is based to a large extent on mineral springs (over 8,000 mineral springs are registered), while SPA tourism in many other countries is based on free flowing or spring waters (Nikolaeva 2012).

At present, cultural tourism brings 5 to 7 times larger revenues in comparison to traditional tourism (Gracheva *et. al.* 2010). This type of tourism forms the image of our country abroad. According to data by the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism, annually our country accepts about 10,000 international adventure and rural tourism enthusiasts. The reason for this huge interest are, of course, the natural beauties of Bulgaria. The share of individual tourists is 30%. Unlike international guests, who have stayed in Bulgaria for 8–10 vacation days on average, Bulgarians, who prefer non-traditional destinations and rural tourism, rest for shorter period of time, usually in the weekends. Day trips (without staying overnight) remain the most preferred type of trips. Cultural-historical tourism is the most preferred type of tourism for the weekends – 30.5%, followed by rural and summer mountain tourism – 21.5% and 15.2% respectively. Congress and ecotourism are less preferred types of tourism during weekends. This is due to the low level of awareness of people about the resources available and the good conditions for practicing different types of tourism

(www.tourism.bg.org-Institute for Tourism Analyses and Assessments).

Tourists usually start planning their vacation a week or a month before the trip. The coziness of private accommodations and guest houses makes them a preferred place for spending one's vacation in contrast to mountain huts and campsites where quality is low and serious renovation is needed (Levy-Hillerich 2009). During their vacation, tourists prefer places for dining and entertainment – 48% and passive recreation – 24%. Dynamic sports and games are of little interest.

The most widespread type of domestic tourism is business tourism – 44.66%, followed by visits of relatives – 19.44% and summer sea tourism – 16.60%. Interest in winter, eco- and rural tourism, as well as balneotherapy is the lowest – all three types of tourism accounted for 3% of popularity among the respondents.

Experts report that rural and alternative tourism as a whole are maintained mainly by Bulgarian consumers. This is supported by the fact that during the past few years spending weekends or vacations in a guest house among the nature became fashionable. Families with little children prefer renting entire villas, fitted with a children's playground. Meanwhile, companies, operating on the Bulgarian market, are often holding their team buildings in the countryside (Barchukov 2008).

The European Commission's recommendations for tourism development in the near future are related to drawing up programmes, based on gastronomy and wine, boosting the popularity of small towns and villages that have preserved architecture, as well as through different local festivals, holidays and cultural events (Weaver 2006).

Bulgaria's ambition is forms of tourism that are different from sea tourism and that currently account for only 25% to reach 42% of the revenues from tourism of the country by 2014 (Georgiev, Vasileva 2013). It is expected that tourists will increasingly demonstrate preference for alternative forms of tourism, as alternative tourism has the following advantages:

- relatively even territorial distribution;
- relatively slightly expressed seasonal character;
- use of wide range of diverse tourism resources;
- offering various tourism products;
- positive attitude of tourists towards the local community, expressed by respect of its identity and a striving to preserve it;
- striving to keep the natural environment;

- consistency with the principles of sustainable development;
- revenues remain in the local community.

4. Good practices for logistics management

The design of efficient logistics systems as a set of subsystems, units and elements is the primary task of the logistics management.

The objective of logistics management is the most effective way to plan, organize and control the supply of services at alternative tourism offer locally. Base to provide competitive advantages for the tourism organization excellence of its services in the field of alternative tourism. It can be based on either the lower expenditures or specific characteristics of tourism services, which distinguish it from the proposals of competitors in the eyes of potential tourists.

“Good practices” is a technique/method/ process/action that is considered more efficient when providing concrete results than any other technique, method or process. The idea is that by carrying out certain processes, checks, and tests, the desired end result could be obtained with fewer problems and unexpected complications (Bowersox 2010).

“Good practices” can be defined as the most efficient (i.e. making minimum effort) and efficient (i.e. the best results) way to accomplish a task, based on repetitive procedures that have been proved in the course of time to a wide range of people (Freyer 2009).

Despite the need for improvement of processes in time, “good practices” are considered a business concept, used when describing processes of development and following a standard path for implementing a certain practice, which many organisations may implement in their management, organisation policies and especially in the sphere of informational technologies.

With the evolution of the concept, the term “good practices”: gradually acquired the meaning of “good ideas”.

4.1. Clusters establishment

Currently, about 21 clusters are established on the territory of Bulgaria, of them 14% belonging to the tourism sector. The advantage of clusters is in that they support the development of start-ups and small enterprises and provide new opportunities for their funding (for example, through EU Structural Funds).

Tourism Rodopi-BG is such a cluster. The Rodopi cluster for tourist services is developing in a geographical area that has potential for develop-

ment of mountaineering, SPA, skiing, historical and congress tourism. The cluster combines a number of facilities, such as tourist paths with markings, ski lifts and tracks, new hotels, which accommodate many tourists from Bulgaria and the EU. There exists a well-developed Rhodope Regional Tourism Association, whose members have the ambition to develop the Rhodope brand and create an integrated product, which will have the comparative advantage of attracting more tourists, nature and mountain enthusiasts and of guaranteeing high quality services. One of the cluster's objectives is to furnish the tourist centre in the town of Smolyan, which will function as a hub managing the entire flow of tourists coming to the region.

4.2. Tourist routes

This practice is a very good example of logistics management in Bulgaria. The way in which tours to various tourist sites are combined and the way additional tourist attractions (such as visits of wine houses, tasting of local specialties, and rose products) are added to them are of particular interest. These additional attractions, especially when organised for visitors, make the tour much more interesting and attractive.

4.3. Examples of “good practice”

4.3.1. The “Alternative tourism between four mountains in Bulgaria and Macedonia” project

It is carried out by the Association for Economic Development of Bregalnica-Struma District, Probistip Municipality, and Razlog Municipality.

The project aims to:

- Promote partnerships as a way to achieve competitiveness and sustainable development;
- Establish contacts between owners of small tourist sites employed in the tourism sector and institutions from the Razlog and Probistip municipalities;
- Create capacity among owners of small tourist sites employed in the tourism sector to raise the quality of services offered by means of training seminars and consultations;
- Improve practical skills when offering services in the sphere of tourism;
- Create sustainable tourism resources in order to turn the region into a tourist destination.

The project is directed to representatives of small and medium businesses in the area of alternative tourism from Razlog and Probistip municipalities,

representatives of institutions and organisations related to the development of tourism, mountain guides, animators and translators. The end beneficiaries of the project are 40 people: owners of sites offering accommodation and food, usually in villages; owners or managers of sites offering various tourist attractions; representatives of institutions and organisations in the tourism sector, and local authorities (Holden 2008).

The main activities implemented under the project are the following:

- Information campaign among beneficiaries and media about the start of the project and the activities undertaken for implementation of the project;
- Inventory and analysis of existing tourism resources in Razlog and Probistip municipalities;
- Conducting a two-day seminar in Probistip;
- Two-day training seminar for end beneficiaries in three modules;
- Establishment of a Consultation Bureau with the Local Economic Development Agency-Razlog;
- Development, implementation and launch of a website containing online information in Bulgarian, Macedonian and English;
- Bringing out three tourist guidebooks;
- Conducting a two-day Bulgarian-Macedonian forum for exchange of contact information and presenting tourism resources;
- Provision of technical assistance for creating a marketing conception for the services offered by beneficiaries;
- Preparation and publishing of a catalogue of information about the existing tourism resources in the two municipalities;
- Concluding conference presenting the project results;
- PR campaign for achieving transparency and publicity.

The practice proposed is identified as good, as it combines elements of cross-border cooperation and development of sustainable tourism. It could be used as a methodological basis for the development of future projects for cross-border cooperation, with Romania in particular (Madgerova 2004). One of the greatest advantages of this practice is the website of the project that was launched and where all presentations and training materials used in the training seminars are available in order to increase the human resource capacity in the area of alternative tourism. What is striking is that the project plans to conduct intensive information and PR campaigns, as well as prepare tourist guide books and other advertising materials.

4.3.2. Geopark “Iskar Panega”

Bulgaria's first Iskar-Panega Geopark is located in the territory of Lukovit Municipality. It consists of two micro regions – The Karlukovo Karst Complex and Roadside Landscape Park “Panega”.

The geopark is a stable tourism product consisting of geological, geomorphological, or paleontological sites with an aesthetic or cultural-historical value.

It combines the various natural and historical characteristics of the municipality and increases their attractiveness both for local residents and tourists. The geopark as a single product offers educational and information programmes aiming to increase the interest of local residents and tourists in the environmental protection of the inanimate nature objects in the region and guarantee sustainable job creation .

The main purpose of the geopark is to stimulate geotourism development and preserve geological and geomorphological heritage for the future generations. Two geo-routes have been created: the Karlukovo Karst Complex and Roadside Landscape Park “Panega”.

The cultural-historical route includes rock monastery complexes of the St Marina, Sts Damian and Cosmas, and St Gregory sketes, the “Uspenie Sveta Bogoroditsa” Church, which is a national monument of culture and the only preserved building of the Karlukovo Monastery, and the village of Karlukovo, which is the birthplace of distinguished Bulgarian musician Diko Iliev.

The proposed geopark construction strategy is in compliance with modern European trends in the area of ecotourism.

4.3.3. “The Iron Curtain Trail: Sustainable mobility along the newest EuroVelo route” project

The project aims to:

- improve accessibility by bicycle to South-East European regions by means of a European cycle route network;
- connect cycle routes with public transport vehicles;
- promote cycling and its combination with public transport as a means of sustainable mobility;
- improve the effect of this development by exchanging experience and good practices.

4.3.4. Green House

This is a quality brand that offers addresses of hospitality, selected because of the authentic way

they welcome their guests and the way they take the environment into account when providing services to their clients.

The “Green House” Certificate is awarded to guest houses and family hotels that have successfully undergone assessment for compliance with EU criteria for quality accommodation where the negative impact on the environment is minimised (Marinov 2006). The hosts are usually families from the local community who know their region and are able to show guests the charm of traditional customs and the peculiarities of the local cuisine. They take care of saving natural resources used by their house or hotel and encouraging their guests to travel responsibly and respect nature. Each Green House is different and will make its guests feel at home and experience their travel as a personal discovery and adventure.

5. Conclusions

Bulgaria is an intriguing tourist destination. In order to feel the spirit of the country, one should deviate from the beaten tack and look for the charm of little towns and villages located in picturesque natural landscapes of the country. Bulgaria has remarkable natural, cultural and historical resources for developing village, eco- and cultural tourism. This natural heritage undeniably attracts the interest of Bulgarian and foreign tourists. At the same time, most mountainous and rural areas have no other alternative for development but this type of tourism. Sustainable development of village tourism opens up an opportunity for reviving the poorest regions in Bulgaria and making them a worthy place for living.

Particular attention should be paid to protection and preservation of Bulgaria's tourism potential. Tourists would agree to visit a particular tourist site driven by its natural, cultural-historical, or traditional attractiveness, but not without good logistics management providing easy access and comfort during the trip to and stay in the particular tourist destination.

The joint efforts of state institutions (State Agency for Tourism, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Environment and Water, State Forestry Agency), NGOs, and local tourism councils contribute to the overall development of Bulgarian tourism products and strengthening Bulgaria's position as an alternative tourist destination.

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