

Original scientific paper

UDC: 911.3:338.48 (497.11)

DOI: 10.2298/IJGI1202081L

TOURIST EVENT "DAYS OF PLUM" AT BLACE - Demographic and geographic analysis of visitors

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Received 31 January 2012; reviewed 4 March 2012; accepted 14 August 2012

Abstract: The event "Days of Plum – My Plum" at Blace has been one of 42 events dedicated to fruits and vegetables and one of three events dedicated to plum in Serbia. It has been held for nine consecutive years in the town situated in the wide Toplica valley at the foot of Jastrebac, where in a relatively favourable climate conditions there are good conditions for development of plum, so it has become a traditional event. This paper analyzes the results of a survey conducted during the last event, August 2011. The survey is used as methodical procedure because in relatively short time period a relatively large amount of information and data has been obtained. The survey includes 304 randomly selected respondents of different gender, age and educational structures. It was performed to examine the tourism market, attitudes and behaviour of visitors, as well as tourism promotion. In addition to the survey, the tourist valorisation of events is done in which the elements of geographic and economic groups of criteria are analysed in order to investigate the tourism potential in terms of development of tourism as an economic sector that can contribute to the development of Blace as an underdeveloped area.

Key words: days of plum, event, poll, Blace

Introduction

In 2010 there were 2 426 tourist events held in Serbia. Events such as Exit and Guča attract a large number of both domestic and foreign tourists. In contrast to these events, there are a large number of those which have not been affirmed enough, such as "Days of Plum – My Plum" at Blace. Regardless of financial gain, each of them affects the local economy and to some extent reflects the spirit of the place in which it is maintained. "Events dedicated to fruits and vegetables are more and more represented from the 19th of the 20th century and are the site of agricultural products that are specific to a particular area" (Bjeljac, 2010). Events dedicated to the plums are held in Stragari, Blace and Osečina. "Šumadija days of plums" have been held in Stragari since July 2008 (www.stragari.rs). "Plum Fair" in Osečina is organized in August, and was first

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held in 2006 (www.sajam.osecina.com). The event dedicated to plum that has the greatest tradition of the three mentioned events is "Days of Plum – My Plum" that has been held each year in August in Blace, starting from 2003. The organizer of the event is Blace municipality, funds are provided by the sponsor, and the volunteers from youth office Blace are the significant segment of the event. Interest in the event increases from year to year which is evidenced by a growing number of visitors and participants. For 2003 and 2004 there are no data on the number of visitors, according to the municipality Blace, 3 000 people visited the event in 2005, 10 000 people in 2006, 12 000 in 2007, 15 000 in 2008, 30 000 in 2009 and 70 000 people in 2010 (www.blace.org.rs).

In "Agricultural Atlas of Serbia" by P. Marković, it is said that the biggest producers of plums in Serbia are among others the municipalities of the Toplica region – Blace and Prokuplje (Marković, 1994). "Blace is the urban centre of northern part of the Toplica valley, regional whole of Južno Pomoravlje and the centre of the same-called municipality, at the touch of the bottom of the middle Toplica valley and the zone of Dinaric Kopaonik on the one side and low terraces of Jastrebac on the other" (Stamenković, 2002). In the municipality Blace, fruit has been planted at about 6.000 ha. At 5.000 ha, 2 million plum trees were planted with a tendency of further growth, which puts the municipality Blace in the first place in Serbia according to the number of plum trees. For the purposes of comparison, in the municipality Osečina (31.900 ha) about a million plum trees were planted (www.sajam.osecina.com). Moderate continental climate of north-western part of the Toplica valley where Blace is located and specific soil (smonitza and a small part of sandy soil) favour the development of fruit growing, especially plum. The most common variety is "Stanley" (an American variety of plums) and "Čačak wound", while the autochthonous varieties are almost on the verge of extinction due to low market value and the impossibility of placing on the market. Precisely because of the importance that plum has for this region, the manifestation "Days of Plum – My Plum" has been held in Blace for nine consecutive years.

During the last event seven concerts were held, trumpeters, instrumentalists, vocal soloists, authentic groups and several cultural and artistic societies performed. A specialized lecture in agriculture and entrepreneurship in agriculture was given. On stands downtown there was a fair presentation of the plum products, branded souvenirs and preparation of traditional dishes from plums. The last day of the event was marked by celebration of the City Saint's Day, Assumption, and each year the prizes are awarded for the best plum orchard and the best plum brandy (slivovic). The maintenance of "Days of Plum–My Plum" has a great impact on the promotion of Blace as

underdeveloped area for "tourist events have encouraged the development and prosperity of places and regions in which they are held, attracting investments in the form of tourism, and in some cases through a new industrial activity" (Bjeljac, 2006). At the time of the event there is an increased sales activity, increased demand for taxis, the number of people in restaurants and cafes, while income to the hotel or private accommodation is irrelevantly small.

Tourist Valorization of the Event

The maintenance of the event has some impact on the promotion of Blace municipality and surrounding areas. To determine this influence, it is necessary to review these tourist events. Tourist valorisation of the event was conducted by qualitative and quantitative evaluation of parameters of geographic and economic groups of criteria. The results, although made by certain criteria, to some extent represent the subjective reflection of the researchers; however, with increasing competence of the researchers, subjectivity can be reduced to a minimum. Parameters that are evaluated, belonging to the geographical group of criteria are: character of maintaining, tradition, time of maintaining, the number of days of the event, visitors and the like. Quantitative analysis was performed in the range of zero to five, according to Bjeljac (Tourist Events in Serbia, Bjeljac, 2010). Event "Days of Plum – My Plum" is labelled as traditional as it is held for nine consecutive years, at the same location, with changeable date, but every year in late August. The function of supporting programs is to enrich the content of the event and therefore lectures, concerts and performances of cultural and artistic societies are held during the event.

The character of the event is determined by the geographic origin of visitors. Besides the natives most visitors come from neighbouring villages. The number of visitors from other cities in Serbia and abroad is negligible so that the event cannot be regarded as a national or international, but, for now, it has the regional character. The number of visitors increases from year to year. For the first two years there were no data on the number of visitors, and according to the municipality Blace the event was visited by 70 000 people in 2010. The event is held in August, during the holidays, immediately after the event "Handball TV Tournament at Blace", and the accessibility and transport links can be evaluated as very good.

As regards the economic criteria, the impact of capital projects, environmental impacts and the impact of the current political situation, they are on the same level as before the event. Economic relations have improved after the event, while the influence of the media decreases after the event.

Table. 1 Valorisation of event according to geographical group of criteria

Geographic group of criteria	Blace
Traditionalism	1
Number of accompanying events	3
Distance from attractive tourist sites	1
Rank by geographical origin of visitors	2
Rank by geographical origin of participants	3
Number of visitors	4
Number of participants	3
Artistic value	3
Traffic accessibility and connectivity	3
Time of event	4
Total score	27

The sum of the studied indicators of economic and geographical groups of criteria is 47 points, which ranks the event, according to Bjeljac, in the third category of tourist events in Serbia. Since the event takes place in the underdeveloped part of Serbia, for the state this area should be the priority group, because it has the potential to be an engine of economic development of the municipality Blace and Toplica region. Besides the economic impact of tourism, there are others without much attention paid, so "it has been suggested in recent years that equal attention should be paid to social, cultural and physical factors" (Backman, Hsu & Backman, 2011).

Table 2. Valorization of event according to economical group of criteria

Economic group of criteria	Before the event	After the event
Impact of capital projects	1	1
Economic impact	2	4
Ecological impact	2	2
Media influence	3	1
The influence of the current political situation	2	2
Total score	10	10

Subject, Aim and Research Methods

The subject of research: The study of tourism market, that is, tourist offers of the organizer of the event and the needs and possibilities of its improvement from the standpoint of the demand of visitors. Factors influencing tourism demand are: population age structure, sex structure, turnover, etc., so that the survey research included participants of different age groups, education and sex.

The aim of research: Establishing the relationship between the geographic origin of visitors and the residence time at the event, determining the motive of coming

to the manifestation and the socio-demographic characteristics of visitors. The obtained data can be used for promotional purposes and as suggestions and guidance to organizers in order to improve the tourist offer.

The method of research: At data collection, a survey is used as methodological procedure. The first phase of survey method has been the development of a questionnaire that is easy for application, precise and with clear questions. In designing the survey, special attention must be paid to layout issues. In this sense, the first part of the survey contains questions on biological, social and economic characteristics of respondents, while the second part of the survey contains questions related to the core of research and refers to the very purpose of the research. The survey used 'open' questions to which respondents give their opinion, 'closed' questions to which respondents are given offered answers, as well as the 'pivot' questions ("from-to" questions). The questions are phrased in such a way that they do not affect suggestively the respondents, and the survey is designed in such a way that it does not take much time to respondents. It has been emphasized to the respondents that the survey is anonymous, but nevertheless there is a possibility of presence of subjectivity in the answers. The collection of data and information on attitudes and opinions of randomly selected respondents was performed in writing. In addition to the authors, the survey was also carried out by volunteers of the "Youth Office Blace."

This mode of the research was carried out according to recommendation of Jeferson and Lickorish (1988), bearing in mind that "the most important elements that are used for tourism marketing research are the following:

- Socio-demographic characteristics such as sex, age, marital status, family size, nationality and social status;
- Socio-economic variables that indicate expertise (educational structure) and revenue;
- Travel motivations and
- Form of travel or behaviour (social and psychological) of certain group of tourists" (Ćurčić, Bjeljac, 2007)

The survey is also based on the ideas of Boo and Busser (2005) who believe that "travel experience to a large extent depends on the image that visitors have before, and during the visit." (Prayag, 2009), while Walmsley and Jenkins (1993) exploring the values of tourism in Australia suggest that "perceived notion of a place depends on sex and age structure of the visitor" (Ćurčić, Bjeljac, 2007). By the analysis of these elements, important parameters are obtained according to which the offer of organizers may be adjusted to the demand of tourists, the organization of tourist events improved and thereby as

many visitors attracted. Different socio-demographic characteristics and socioeconomic variables affect the selection of visit to certain events.

Geographical Origin of Visitors

The analysis of questionnaire shows that the largest number of visitors is local population. The survey included 59 inhabitants of Blace and surroundings, followed by visitors from Belgrade (38), Prokuplje (32), Niš (24), Kuršumljija (21), Kruševac (17), and 10 surveyed visitors were from abroad. In sum, the majority of visitors come from neighbouring cities. The reason for this is proximity and good transport links. Visitors from abroad are residents who work in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and they spend the holiday in their homeland. Besides them, a student of High Business School in Blace from Podgorica and a visitor from Trebinje who was visiting relatives in Blace were interviewed.

Table 3. Geographical origin of visitors

Town	Number of visitors	Town	Number of visitors
Alibunar	1	Ljubovija	1
Aleksandrovac	7	Merošina	8
Aleksinac	8	Minhen	1
Beograd	38	Ninberg	1
Beč	2	Niš	24
Blace	59	Nova Varoš	3
Brus	9	Novi Sad	4
Varvarin	3	Pančevo	5
Vlasotince	2	Podgorica	1
Vranje	4	Prokuplje	32
Vrbas	2	Raška	2
Žitoradja	1	Rekovac	1
Ipsvič	1	Ruma	2
Kikinda	5	S. Palanka	2
Kragujevac	4	Sokobanja	4
Kraljevo	5	Trebinje	1
Kruševac	17	Trstenik	4
Kuršumljija	21	Čacak	5
Leskovac	5	Čicevac	6
Lugano	2	Švajcarska	1
Total score			304

Motives for Visiting the Event, the Organization of Arrival and Consumption

The study of motives for visiting the tourist event is necessary for identifying the needs of visitors, which is a prerequisite for good marketing and compliance of elements of the event to their requirements. "The motive is an internal factor that arouses, directs and integrates a person's behaviour. The decision to visit the event is directed action that is initiated by the desire to meet specific needs. Although this is just one of many variables that explains the behaviour (others are related to social impact and understanding), the motives are the starting point that drives decision-making process" (Crompton & McKay, 1997).

Good fun as a reason or motive for visit prompted 43 visitors, 31 visitors stated that they came because of the concerts, 29 for socializing, 20 visitors were on vacation, 14 for business reasons, etc. Only eight visitors said they came because of plum brandy, and only three for plums. Although the event is dedicated to plum, only one % of visitors said that came because of plum, while 103 visitors (33 %) came for fun (partying, concerts and socializing). The reason for this is a great representation of young people aged 20-29 years (40.13 %). Between men and women there are some differences in the motives of arrival at the event. Thus, 135 males said they came because of the companionship, rest and good entertainment and fun, 11 for work, eight for plum and plum brandy, five for travel, etc. As for females, 101 of them also came due to friendship, rest, good entertainment and fun, nine said they loved Blace region, six came as tourists and two as participants.

Motive research is of great importance for the organizers of the event. By defining the target group and discovering the main motive for visit it is possible to improve the content which is considered primary. Conversely, it should work on improving other content that will attract visitors of all ages. Travel agencies are involved in promotion and organization of visits to events. To explore whether and how much influence the travel agencies had on the attendance of the event "Days of Plum – My Plum", we asked: "How did you organize your arrival at the event?" That the arrival was self-organized responded 304 visitors. This indicates that this event has not been promoted enough either in Serbia or abroad and that the travel agencies have no interest to participate in the organization of arrival.

In respect of transport used, during the visit of the event, one of the questions was: "What transportation do you use?" When choosing a vehicle, 170 visitors said they used the car, a bus 134. Regarding the gender structure, 108 male

visitors said they opted for the car, 34 for the bus, and as for females, 62 of them came by car to the event, and 43 by bus.

In relation to the spending of money during the manifestation "Days of Plum– My Plum" service prices were not increasing, while in the maintenance of certain events such as Exit and Guča prices of taxi services, food, beverages and the like were markedly increased. To the question "How much are you planning to spend?" 44 visitors (14.47 %) answered up to 2 000 dinars, 118 (38.82 %) 2 000 - 3 000 dinars, 43 (14.14 %) 3 000 - 4 000 dinars, 49 visitors (16.2 %) 5 000 dinars, five visitors (1.64 %) 10 000 dinars, and there were vague answers: 46 visitors (15.13 %) said they did not have in mind in advance a certain amount of money they would spend, three visitors (0.99 %) said as much they had and one visitor said not much (0.33 %).

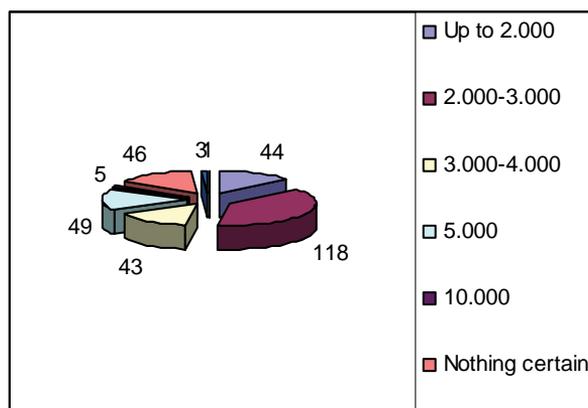


Figure 1. Consumption money at the event "Days of Plum – my Plum"

Allocated funds the visitors spend most on food and drink (116), beverages (102), souvenirs (58), and the least on food (28). Females spent the most money on souvenirs (45), the least on food (12), while men spent more money on drinks and food (75), and the least on souvenirs (13).

Compared with the tourist event "Haymaking on Rajac" which is traditionally held on the mountain Rajac in the summer months since 1892, one can come to the conclusion that most visitors typically spend money on drinks, food and souvenirs (Bjeljac, Brankov & Popović, 2009). As for the amount of money they are willing to spend there are some differences. The largest numbers of visitors of "Haymaking on Rajac" (78.07 %) were willing to set aside for consumption

up to 4.000 dinars, while the largest numbers of visitors of "Days of Plum" (38.82 %) were willing to allocate up to 3.000 dinars.

One of the questions in the survey was: "If you stay longer, where you spend the night?" The largest number of visitors, 155 (50.99 %) retained a day at the event, 74 (24.34 %) spent the night at relatives, 61 (20.07 %) with friends, 11 visitors (3.62 %) used private accommodation, and three visitors (0.99 %) used the services of the hotel. The geographical origin of visitors affects the time of holding at the event. Visitors who come from surrounding areas remain one day. Representatives of organizations opted for hotel accommodation, while students who are at Business School in Blace used private accommodation.

We also asked the visitors we interviewed the following: "How did you inform about the event?" The largest number of visitors, 142 (46.71 %) responded that they heard about the event from other visitors. Through the internet site of the event, 83 visitors informed (27.3 %) and video presentations over 40 visitors (13.16 %). Printed promotional material used 21 visitors (6.91 %). The least visitors directly contacted with the organizer, four (1.31 %), 14 (4.61 %) visitors responded "other." Of the given answers we also had a "talk with tourism workers in the agency," but not a visitor circled this answer.

Nearly a third of the visitors used the internet as a means of information. It only tells us about the increasing expansion of internet technology and the importance of the Internet as a propaganda means. Data on "days of plum" are on the official website of the municipality Blace, and there is a page on the social network facebook. Although facebook is one of the most popular Internet networks in Serbia, the main drawback is the existence of the site where the users can obtain all necessary information about the event, held this year and all previous, with the gallery. For example, organizers of the "Plum Fair" in Osečina set a site where one can find all information related to the event, and an accompanying program of tourist offers and links that may interest visitors. Talk with the visitors who have already been on "Days of Plum – My Plum" is one of the most significant factors of promotion. Positive experiences can be the best propaganda tool. Therefore, visitors are asked the question: "Would you recommend the event to your environment?" All 304 visitors responded "yes". It is a positive experience of visitors and their recommendation express their satisfaction and intention to re-visit the event, which causes more and more attendance each year.

Positive and negative reviews of visitors can be very important for the organizers and serve them as guidelines for organizing the next events. To

explore the attitudes of visitors we have put the question: "Do you have any comments and criticism to improve quality?" Some of the comments are: to organize some other event (six visitors), higher promotion of plum brandy and plum (five visitors), to produce more souvenirs branded with plums (four visitors), five visitors said that events may take a few days longer and the like. Negative comments related to the large number of barrooms on the street (seven visitors), six of visitors said that during the event dedicated to plum there were a lot more beer on the street than brandy, and three visitors told that care should be taken about the budget, while 72 visitors had no comment.

Conclusion

Event "Days of Plum – My Plum" is dedicated to the most important brand Blace region and as such it contributes to the affirmation of Blace as an underdeveloped area. Due to the increasing attendance and importance special attention must be paid to the organization of the event.

The main deficiencies in the organization of the event are: the lack of the website as a major source of information for visitors who are increasingly using the internet and the creation of a database with all relevant information about the event, then the co-operation with agencies that can contribute to greater promotion in the country and abroad, many barrooms on the street that bother many visitors, both due to lack of space and because of the noise. It is necessary to do the presentation of the event with the maps that can provide data on the geographical location of the place, with the thematic content of accommodation, tourist values, etc., which would increase the attractiveness of tourist event. Also, possible is the cooperation with the events of a similar character in Osečina and Stragari by organizing joint events and tours called "Plum Roads" with the tour of the most important plum-growing regions. In addition, an association is possible with companies in the hotel management and tourism industry, supported institutions and science research activities, that is, the formation of clusters in order to promote the development and promotion of tourism, with special emphasis on the promotion of local tourism products. Positive reviews of visitors and what they singled out in the offer is: preserving tradition in terms of the performance of cultural and artistic companies and the preparation of traditional dishes of prunes, plum branded souvenirs, promotion of Blace municipality, and the atmosphere that prevails during the manifestation.

Suggestions for the improvement of event include: the establishment of museum of plum and brandy, organizing several lectures related to the production of plum and plum brandy, organizing visits to major sites in the vicinity of Blace,

organizing the event dedicated to brandy, and one of the suggestions of the participants was "to proclaim Blace the kingdom of plum". The program can include campaigns to raise environmental awareness among citizens, and with the aim of maintaining tradition and passing on to younger generations, it is possible to organize workshops of old crafts. Plum and prune products can become a trademark of Blace and a sign of recognition in Serbia and abroad.

Acknowledgement

The paper has been the result of the project no. 47007 financed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.

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