

ALTERNATIVE AND SPECIAL FORMS OF TOURISM IN THE GREEK CONTEXT, AS A MOTIVE FOR RUSSIAN SPEAKING TOURISTS TO VISITING GREECE

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Abstract

Among other motives for paying a visit in Greece, alternative forms of tourism derive as a special purpose for the implementation of a journey to the country. Greek heritage and the landscape (natural and urban) comprise an autonomous background which can successfully support a plethora of alternative and special forms of tourism. The purpose of that paper is to present and analyse various forms of special and alternative tourism in Greece and their attractiveness among Russian speaking tourists who choose Greece as their destination (actually as it was mainly happening till 2022).

Various types of special forms of tourism are discussed, among them cultural and religious-pilgrimage tourism, sailing tourism, health and educational tourism, sports tourism, tourism for the older age groups and people with disabilities and business tourism. Russian speaking tourists are keen on being involved in all those various types of activities. A key question was that if any of these types of tourism could be the only reason for visiting the country.

The main part of the research was done in 2022, involving a questionnaire which aimed finding out which categories of Russian speaking tourists come to Greece and for what purpose. As people of such an ethnicity are really connected to Greece due to religion, the survey wanted to find out whether special and alternative forms of tourism could be the sole reason for visiting Greece. Furthermore, research looked at other types of motivation such as shopping and whether they could be the prominent reason for paying a visit to the country, beyond the sea and sun attractions. Time and space redistribution of tourism in Greece remains a key target for national tourism policies. Development of special and alternative forms of tourism remain a main tool towards that direction. Development of them however, has to look at the demand side. This means that policy makers have to look at key markets and how willing they are for the adoption of such tourism products, reducing at the same time their interest on mass sea and sun products.

War in Ukraine and Sanctions which followed against Russia have eliminated the arrivals of Russian tourists in Greece. As the research was done during the period just before the sanctions' introduction, it can give us plenty conclusions concerning the motivation of Russian Speaking people for the implementation of their potential visit to Greece, in the future.

Key words:*Sustainable forms of Tourism, Special forms of Tourism, Greece, Russian Speaking Tourists, Sea and Sun Tourism*

Introduction

The purpose of that paper is to present and analyse various forms of special and alternative tourism in Greece and their attractiveness among Russian tourists who choose Greece as their destination (actually as it was happening till 2022). The main part of the research was done in

2022, involving a questionnaire which aimed finding out which categories of Russian tourists come to Greece and for what purpose

Additionally, statistics on the number of Russian tourists arriving in Greece were studied. Finally, an analysis of these statistics and questionnaire results was done, in order to draw conclusions about the preferences of Russian tourists of various age groups, as far as the attractiveness of various forms of tourism are concerned, (besides of course the main established one, that of sea and sun).

Russian speaking tourists are mainly tourists going abroad from Russia. A small minority of them come from other countries which used to be part of the Soviet Union such as the Baltic States. As Russian speaking people are sharing common cultural characteristics with Russian people leaving in Russia, they can be considered in a way, as a common market generating demand with similar characteristics.

Conclusions are drawn at the end and it is for sure that are quite interesting. Russian speaking tourists are generally not so consciously consuming tourism products of alternative and special forms, neither in the country of origin or abroad. A journey to Greece always remains a journey to “sea and sun”.

Alternative and Special Forms of Tourism in Greece

Alternative tourism can be defined as forms of tourism that aim to be consistent with natural, social and community values that allow both hosts and visitors to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences (Coccosssis et al 2011). It involves travel to relatively remote, undisturbed natural areas with the aim of admiring, studying and enjoying the landscape, wild plants and animals and cultural features.

In general, alternative forms of tourism consist an alternative to mass tourism as a philosophy and attitude. The main emphasis in these trips is on the preserved natural environment, authentic atmosphere, cuisine and local traditions. It also takes into account environmental conservation, nutrition and the well-being of local residents. In addition, guests are expected to be private individuals. Units of accommodation is locally owned and small-scale.

Alternative forms of tourism combine tourism products or distinct tourism services, different from mass tourism through the offer, organization and human resources involved. These are rural tourism, wine tourism, ecotourism, adventure (cycling, horseback riding, snowshoeing, ski mountaineering, rafting, diving, caving, climbing), thematic tourism that is linked to cultural and historical heritage, religion, wine, traditional cuisine, ethnography, traditional music and handicrafts. The effort to preserve, protect and enhance the quality of the resource base, is fundamental to tourism itself (Boniface and Cooper, 1994). Some basic steps on developing such kind of tourism are as follows:

- Encouraging and actively promoting development, in relation to additional attractions and visitor infrastructure, rooted in the specific location and developed in ways that complement local characteristics
- Approving infrastructure, and therefore economic development, when and where it improves local conditions and not where it is destructive or exceeds the carrying capacity of the natural and social environment
- Enhancing tourism that strives to minimize its impact on the environment, tourism that is ecologically sound and avoids the negative impacts of many large-scale tourism developments that take place in previously undeveloped areas
- Emphasizing not only on ecological sustainability, but also on cultural sustainability. This is a kind of tourism that does not harm the culture of the hosting community,

encouraging respect for the cultural reality experienced by tourists through education and organized ‘encounters’

In Greece the context of alternative and special forms of tourism has been developed significantly during the period after the 1990s. Several forms of tourism have been developed in various regions of the country. Various conditions in local level create a quite significant platform for the development of such forms of tourism. In this way, it can be said that the following forms are clearly developed:

- Urban Tourism
- Cultural Tourism
- Gastronomy and Wine Tourism
- Shopping Tourism
- Religious and Pilgrimage Tourism
- Sailing Tourism
- Health and Thermal Tourism
- Athletic Tourism
- Educational Tourism
- Eco tourism
- Conference and Congress Tourism
- Exhibition Tourism

It is for sure that all forms of tourism mentioned above, are not equally developed in all areas of the country. It is clear that the potential for the development of a certain form of tourism comprises a comparative advantage for a certain area (Zografos, 2019). Tourists visiting the country for sea and sun tourism, tend to encompass in their vacations certain activities which are related to certain forms of tourism mentioned above (Zografos, 2021). In this way they enrich their sea and sun vacations program with several other activities. Moreover, history plays a significant role in the development of urban tourism in Greece (Zografos, 2016).

Time and space redistribution of tourism in Greece remains a key target for national tourism policies. Development of special and alternative forms of tourism remain a main tool towards that direction. Development of them however, has to look at the demand side (insete.gr, 2022). This means that policy makers have to look at key markets and how willing they are for the adoption of such tourism products, reducing at the same time their interest on mass sea and sun products.

In this way, the following question can be clearly defined: ‘How knowledgeable are Russian tourists about the experiences they can enjoy in Greece, when it is clear that due to the totally different climate and landscape conditions they face Greece as a true sea and sun destination?’ Research mentioned below tried to figure out what is happening.

Methodology

The main part of the research was done in 2022, involving a questionnaire which aimed finding out which categories of Russian tourists come to Greece and for what reason. For the research purposes, a questionnaire was created and was sent to 100 randomly chosen Russian potential tourists in order to investigate what forms of alternative tourism attract Russian tourists to Greece. Various questions were selected.

Additionally, statistics on the number of Russian tourists arriving in Greece were studied. Finally, an analysis of these statistics and questionnaire results were done, in order to draw conclusions about the preferences of Russian tourists of various age groups, as far as the

attractiveness of various forms of tourism are concerned, (besides of course the main established one, that of sea and sun).

This research was really focused on the preferences of the frequently characterised as dynamic age group (that between twenty and forty years old). It is challenging to be proven that tourists from Russia are interested in Greece especially for its offers in sports tourism and historical-cultural tourism.

Statistics about Russian Tourists

According to Association of Russian Tourism Organisers (atorus.ru, 2020) every year Greece is one of the most popular tourist destinations among Russian tourists and this is shown by the statistics for the last years (before the corona virus and the Ukraine war).

- 2016- 595,5 thousand Russian tourists
- 2017- 786,6 thousand Russian tourists
- 2018- 844,1 thousand Russian tourists
- 2019- 777,9 thousand Russian tourists

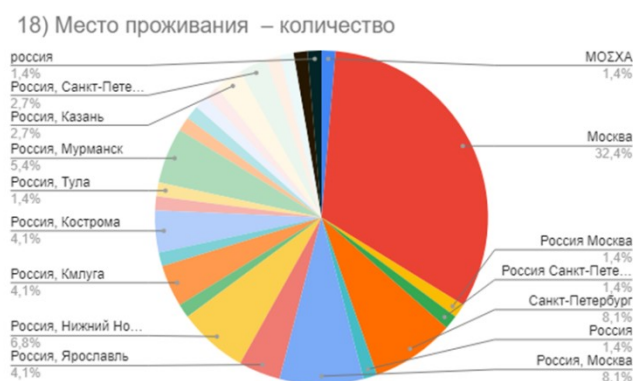
According to a survey conducted in 2015, most Russians (32%) want to travel to Greece for family holidays. The main part of the flow from Russia is the middle class (35%). Above all, Russians are attracted by the sea and the islands of Greece. The main reasons for tourists visiting Greece are the islands (50%), culture and history (20%). The rest chose Greece as a holiday destination because of the price, safety and hospitality (10% each). At least 40% of Russian tourists choose beach holidays (Kozlov & Popov, 2015).

The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation has published the final list of the deportees of Russian citizens in 2019 (atorus.ru, 2020).The total outbound flow increased by 7.9% compared to 2018, or by 3.5 million trips. At the same time, almost a third of the annual increase in trips of Russian citizens (31%) was made (48,072,285 trips in total). This is a 7.9% more than in 2018 (44,551,092) (atorus.ru, 2020).

Findings

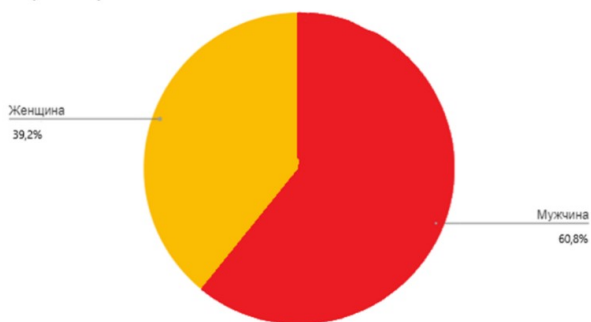
While almost everyone sees Greece as a great place for tourism in general, when it comes to alternative forms of tourism, the number of people who see it positively drops significantly. This is maybe due to the fact that Greece is one of the perennial "all-inclusive hotel stay" options in the minds of Russian tourists.

Graph 1: Where do you live? Moscow: 43%, Other Cities 37%



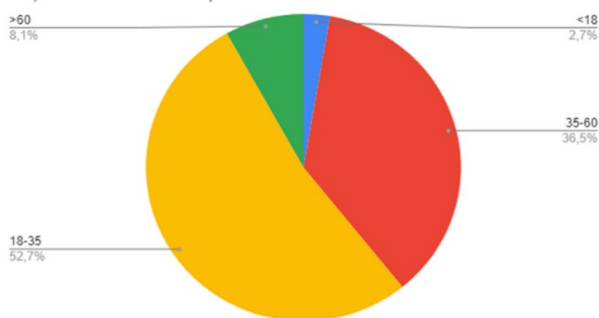
Graph 2: What is your sex ? Male 60%

17) Выберите ваш пол – количество



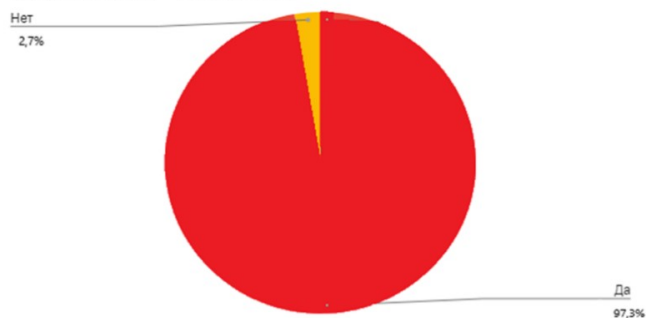
Graph 3: What is your age? 18-35 53%

16) Укажите ваш возраст – количество



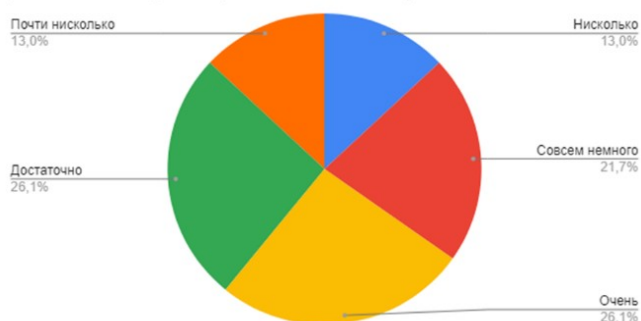
Graph 4: Do you like Greece? 97% said yes!

2A) Нравится ли вам Греция как туристическое направление? – количество



Graph 5: Would you be interested in organizing a religious and pilgrimage trip to Greece? Maybe 26% - Very Much 26%

[Посетить места православного паломничества и другие религиозные достопримечательности.] – количество



There are some interesting findings in the questionnaire results. For example, while almost everyone sees Greece as a great place for tourism in general, when it comes to alternative forms of tourism, the number of people who see it positively drops significantly.

This may be due to the general misunderstanding of Russians regarding alternative tourism, as in answering the question related to if they have ever taken part in an alternative form of tourism, it appears that only about 60% of Russian tourists have ever dedicated their travels to some form of it. When they were asked however directly about various forms of tourism in Greece and whether they would consider them, the situation improves somewhat. For example, more than half respond positively to ideas of gastronomic and commercial tourism in Greece, and reactions are generally positive regarding religious tourism and cruises.

Answers to the question regarding what activity you enjoyed mostly during your trip to Greece, show that almost half of the respondents see sports as something interesting they would like to do on their trip to Greece. This correlates very well with the answers to questions regarding what special activities (which are directly related to a special or an alternative form of tourism) are interested in doing, during their potential visit to Greece. Almost 30% of people who responded that they would like very much to do their favorite sports represent the largest share of "very positive" reactions of all the questions asked in the entire questionnaire. Considering that people aged 20 to 40 make up more than half of the respondents and that older people generally prefer calmer and safer ways to spend their time, it is reasonable to conclude that people aged 20 to 40 really consider Greece to be a very tempting destination for sports tourism.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the results, more people aged 20 to 40 are either single or have no children, and this allows them to be more flexible in planning sporting activities as they often exclude other family members due to skills or safety barriers (e.g. children cannot snorkel or windsurf in more extreme conditions or locations).

Reactions towards various forms of cultural tourism are less enthusiastic, although still quite positive, even among young people. It is possible that if, for example, instead of a question about Greek theaters (usually not a popular form of entertainment among younger age groups) a question about the Greek carnival season was asked, the number of people choosing "very interested" in Greek cultural tourism would be higher. Cultural tourism however still ranks second after sports in the overall list of things that Russian tourists would like to do in Greece, showing significant interest in it.

Conclusions

Russian tourists want to combine different forms of alternative tourism throughout their trip. The most popular are cultural tourism, sports tourism and various recreational activities, although the popularity of Greece as a religious destination cannot be denied, especially among older and more pious Russians. Also, very popular among Russian tourists are cruises to the islands of the Aegean and the Ionian Sea. There, tourists get to know the historical and archaeological sites and enjoy the nature of Greece. Cruises to islands such as Rhodes, Patmos, Crete, Santorini, Mykonos and others last from 3 to 8 days.

Many of these forms of tourism are available not only in the summer but also at other times of the year. Russian tourists are interested in combining different forms of alternative tourism throughout their trip. Greece offers great opportunities for those who love sports and sporting events. From hiking trails and winter ski resorts to water polo, diving, snorkeling, surfing and a plethora of other water-based sports activities such as sailing, Greece has

something for everyone when it comes to sports tourism. Apart from that Greece has significant infrastructure for sporting events of various levels. The country's product manages to combine all these things at a competitive price level. Even without any concentrated efforts for the country to be marketed as a sports tourism destination, it is already quite popular with Russian tourists, and especially among millennials.

Russian tourists go easily to any of the major cities in Greece in order to visit many ancient cultural sites and enjoy antiquities. Excursions and tours are extremely popular and sometimes combine trips to the sea and beaches just a few hours away in one great package. This is a very attractive proposition for any Russian tourist, especially older groups who tend to prefer packages and complete tours as opposed to booking different parts of their trip. Orthodox Christians travel to Greece to visit legendary monasteries and churches. They come to pray at the icons and relics of the Saints. It is also a dream of many Orthodox believers from Russia to visit the monastic state of Mount Athos.

People with health problems are offered relaxation in the thermal springs, diagnosis and treatment in modern medical centers that are quite well equipped and employ experienced staff. Tours are also organized for people over 50 years old and people with disabilities. Such tourists need special treatment when moving and staying in a hotel as many of them are users of wheelchairs. There are hotels in Greece that are able to provide comfort to these tourists with disabilities, which is a big advantage for choosing a destination. Family hotels create bright and wonderful holidays with lots of games for children and adults.

Also very popular among Russian tourists are cruises on cruise ships to the islands of the Aegean and Ionian Seas. There, tourists get to know the historical and archaeological sites and enjoy the amazing nature of Greece. Cruises to islands such as Rhodes, Patmos, Crete, Santorini, Mykonos and others last from 3 to 8 days. Lovers of sea walks and free swimming can easily rent a boat. Sea trips can be made even in winter.

Conference tourism includes the organization of business events, exhibitions, presentations, forums, business lunches. It offers the opportunity to combine work and vacation. Event tourism is a trip for tourists who like to receive vivid impressions from cultural events. These are usually weekend trips or two-day trips. Entertainment trips can take place all year round and corresponding activities can be organized. Event trips are dedicated to a specific event, such as the Carnival in the city of Patras.

Greece as a country puts several efforts for the establishment of quality higher education. There are many benefits for young people from Russia if they decide to study in a Greek University, such as entrance without exams, free accommodation and meals, discounts on travel and free visits to museums and exhibitions. There are also many educational trips to Greece in order to study Greek and English.

In summary, this study fulfilled its objective of presenting many forms of alternative tourism in Greece and discussing which ones are most preferred by tourists coming from Russia. The research conducted, helped in reaching definitive conclusions regarding the popularity of sports and cultural tourism in Greece among Russian people and established further possible areas of research, such as the issue of deciding which forms of cultural tourism would be preferred. Sanctions of European Union against Russia have eliminated the arrivals of Russian tourists in Greece. As the research was done during the period just before the sanctions' introduction, it can provide us with fruitful conclusions concerning the motivation of Russian people for the implementation of their potential visit to Greece, in the future by Russian visitors.

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