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Natural tourist resources in the Stara planina tourist region (Bulgaria)

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Abstract: *The Stara planina tourist region is one of the most attractive regions for tourism in Bulgaria and one of the few that have almost year-round tourist activities. The outline of the area includes the mountain of the same name, but also the Pre-Balkan. This fact predetermines the exceptional richness and diversity of natural tourist resources. Here are some of the largest broad-leaved forests in the country, waterfalls, bizarre rock formations, etc. The relatively well-preserved natural environment is a prerequisite for the presence of exceptional biodiversity, as well as a significant number of protected areas. The region is specialized mainly in mountain tourism, including recreation, mountain trekking, rural and ecotourism. Due to the scarce tourist infrastructure, ski tourism still lags behind in its development compared to other mountain regions in the country. Very often, the Stara planina Region is primarily identified with its cultural and historical heritage, while its natural features remain in the background. Regardless of this, and as a result of the more intense tourist load, the problem of protecting natural tourist resources from the growing anthropogenic pressure is gaining special relevance. There is also an urgent need to identify and evaluate the prospects for sustainable development of the tourism industry in the region.*

The purpose of the present study is to valorize the natural tourist resources of the Stara planina tourist region and to provide guidelines for their sustainable use.

Keywords: Stara planina tourist region, natural tourism resources, valorization, sustainable development

Introduction

The Stara planina tourist region covers the central part of the country, along the mountain with the same name. It includes 32 municipalities from 10 regions (Table 1). The Danube region is to the north. To the

east – the tourist regions of the Northern Black Sea and South Black Sea. To the south are the regions of Trakia and the Valley of Roses, and to the southwest is the region of Sofia. To the west, the Stara planina tourist region reaches the state border with Serbia. It is divided into two sub-districts: West Staroplaninski and East Staroplaninski. The main tourist office is based in the town of Veliko Tarnovo. Only Gabrovo district falls entirely within the considered tourist region, and four other districts are represented by only one municipality.

STARA PLANINA TOURIST REGION	
Main specialization	Mountain and cultural tourism
Advanced specialization	1. Mountain hiking and recreational tourism 2. Cultural-historical, festival and creative tourism 3. Adventure and ecotourism 4. Rural tourism 5. Religious and pilgrimage tourism 6. Mountain ski tourism
Main tourist office	Veliko Tarnovo
Districts	Municipalities
1. Vidin (part)	Chuprene
2. Montana (part)	Berkovitsa, Varshetz, Georgy Damianovo, Montana, Chiprovtsy
3. Vratza (part)	Vratsa, Krivodol, Mezdra, Roman
4. Lovech (part)	Apriltsi, Lovech, Lukovit, Teteven, Troyan, Ugarchin, Yablanitsa
5. Veliko Tarnovo (part)	Veliko Tarnovo, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Elena, Zlataritsa, Lyaskovets, Strazhitsa
6. Gabrovo (whole)	Gabrovo, Dryanovo, Sevlievo, Tryavna
7. Targovishte (part)	Antonovo, Omurtag
8. Shumen (part)	Varbitsa
9. Sliven (part)	Kotel
10. Burgas (part)	Sungurlare

Table 1. Territorial range of the Stara planina tourist region [1]

Purpose and methodology of the study

The purpose of the present study is to valorize the natural tourist resources of the Stara planina tourist region and to provide guidelines for their sustainable use. This is important, among other things, because "the national natural heritage has a good potential to provide a 'greener' alternative for the development of the territories within the tourism regions" [2].

A combination of research methods was used to achieve the set objective. Field research is a basic approach for geographical (including tourist-geographical) research of territorial units diverse in scope and rank, including tourist regions. In this case, it was conducted in a long-term period, which makes it possible to note the changes that have occurred in the studied territory from touristic perspective. The numerical data cited are based on the review of the literature on the subject. A combination of general methods such as analysis, comparison, induction, deduction, etc. was used to present the obtained results.

Characteristics of the natural environment

The Stara planina Mt is the longest mountain range in Bulgaria, part of the Alpo-Himalayan Mountain system. It is a typical mountain range that stretches across the central part of the country, starting at its easternmost point near the Black Sea and continuing almost in a straight-line west to the border with Serbia. The mountain is 530 km long and about 15 km wide (in its middle part). The area it occupies is 11,596 km². It is referred to as the "backbone of Bulgaria" because it naturally bisects the territory of the country into north and south. Its western border is considered to be Vrashka chuka pass, and to the north it is surrounded by the Danube hilly plain. To the south, the mountain slopes steeply down and its boundaries are clearly defined. From west to east, it abuts the Sofia Field, Sredna Gora and the Upper Thracian Plain. In the east it ends at Cape Emine, descending steeply to the waters of the Black Sea. Its average altitude is 722 m. 29 are the peaks that rise above 2,000 m a.s.l. This gives the high parts an alpine look, which makes them attractive for hiking and mountaineering. The longest tourist hiking route in Bulgaria, Kom – Emine (almost 600 km), runs along the main Stara planina ridge. The road from Mount Kom (the westernmost point of the mountain) to Cape Emine (its easternmost point) is the Bulgarian part of the international trans-European tourist route E-3, which crosses the Pyrenees Mts, Ardennes Mts, Eifel Mt, Erzgebirge Mt, Decinski Snezhnik Mt, Mala Fatra Mt, Tatras Mts, Carpathians Mts, and Stara planina Mt and connects the Atlantic Ocean and the Black Sea. On the territory of Bulgaria, the E-3 route is well organized despite the neglect of a large part of the tourist infrastructure in the 90^s years. Recently, there has been a growing interest in this transition and restoration of sites' marking along it.

During its thousand-year existence, the "most Bulgarian" mountain has different names, each of which is related to its majestic appearance. The Thracians called it Hemus, the Slavs-Matorni Gori, and the Ottomans-Kodzhabalkan or simply Balkan. The name Stara planina was first mentioned at the beginning of

the 16th century and was gradually established, even though the massif belongs to the young folded mountain formations. It is built mainly of granites, but limestones, gneisses and slates are also found. Unlike Rila and Pirin, here glaciation has covered very little of the highest parts of the mountain.

The Stara planina Mt is the most windy and foggy Bulgarian mountain. The average annual wind speed on its peaks reaches 10 m/s. The meteorological station at the highest of them - Mount Botev (2,375.9 m) - claims it is the windiest place in the country.

The Western, the Middle (Central) and the Eastern Stara planina Mt are the three main divisions of the mountain. Each of them, in turn, is divided into subdivisions, which are usually named after nearby settlements. The highest and most visited is the Sredna Stara planina Mt. The lowest and with the best transport accessibility is the eastern section. The mountain system is well provided with huts (their number approaches 90), but many of them (especially in the western and eastern parts) are not kept up. They take care of the summer and winter tourist markings.

The Pre-Balkan is considered as a foothill territory, an extension of the Stara planina Mt to the north. In this way, the Stara planina nature-geographic region was formed. The Pre-Balkan itself is composed of numerous mountain ridges, plateaus, hilly areas and river valleys and valley expansions cut into them, the height of which decreases from south to north. It covers an area of 14,389.8 km². It stretches for a length of 460 km and its width varies from 20 to 45 km. Its average altitude is 364 m. Hilly and low-mountain topography prevails, which greatly facilitates accessibility. The highest is the Vasiliev Peak (1,490 m a.s.l.) in the mountain of the same name.

The Pre-Balkan is also divided into 3 parts. The western one stretches between Timok River and Vit River. The most visited tourist places in it are Belogradchik rocks, Magura Cave, Rabish Lake, Iskar gorge. There are 5 huts used. Near the village of Karlukovo is the National Cave House.

The Middle Pre-Balkan is located between the rivers Vit and Stara Reka (right tributary of the Yantra River). It is the most extensive and has the highest average altitude (420 m). Interesting sites for tourists in this part are the Krushun Waterfalls, the Kakri Inn, the cities of Lovech and Veliko Tarnovo, the caves Devetashka Cave, Saeva Dupka Cave, and Bacho Kiro Cave, numerous monasteries (Dryanovski, Glozhenski, Troyanski, Kapinovski, etc.). Picturesque gorges shape the valleys of Vit, Osam, Yantra and Rositsa rivers. The accommodation here is the best developed with numerous guest houses (Elena, Dryanovo, Bozhentsi, Kostenkovtsi, etc.), as well as a large number of hotels. There are 6 existing huts and they are of secondary importance.

The Eastern Pre-Balkan is located between Stara Reka and the Black Sea. It has the smallest area (about 1/5 of the total area of Predbalakan) and the lowest average altitude (296 m). Here, the grid-like river network, typical of the mountainous territory, is best expressed by Kamchia River and its tributaries. Favorite

places to visit are Tsonevo Dam and the rock phenomenon Chudnite skali, Sherba and Preslav hunting farms. There are seven huts in operation. Guest houses are already functioning in many of the surrounding villages (Dalgopol, Asparuhovo, Grozdevo, etc.).

Forests are of the greatest importance for the development of recreation and tourism. They are an extremely suitable environment not only for recreation but also for strengthening human health. Bogdanov summarizes that they are carriers of restorative, healing, sports-tourist and cognitive goods for people, which can be united under the general name of recreational goods [3]. The same author notes that forests also have an aesthetic-emotional functional value, which is also an important prerequisite for their tourist appeal (author's addition). The largest broad-leaved forest massifs in Bulgaria are located in the region of the Stara planina. Predominant species are beech, oak, hornbeam, etc. A number of afforestation actions have been carried out, but the planting of atypical representatives changes the ecological balance. Forests are not just wood. They are an invaluable component of the natural environment and an important resource not only for recreation and tourism. They are also a source of oxygen, resin, tree bark, tanning substances, dyes, etc. Oak forests are a source of acorns for grazing pigs. Today, the forests with economic purpose are 70% of the forest fund of the country. The remaining 30% are recreational and protected forests.

In the territories with an altitude of more than 1000 m a.s.l., the climate is mountainous, characterized by a gradual temperature decrease in height and an increase in precipitation. The mountain climate has a particularly favorable effect on the body. One of its most important features is the low atmospheric pressure and correspondingly lower oxygen content in the inhaled air. This stimulates breathing and blood circulation and increases hemoglobin in the blood. The drier air stimulates evaporation through the mucous membranes of the respiratory tract and has a healing effect. The intensity of direct solar radiation, as well as ultraviolet radiation, is significant. The snow cover lasts significantly longer, which further enriches the space with sunlight, and this leads to pigmentation of the skin. However, the body loses a lot of heat through radiation. These features favor a number of physiological processes in the body and are well reflected in the cardiovascular and metabolic diseases. Characteristic of the northern slopes of the Stara planina Mt is the local wind. It has a beneficial and healing effect on bronchial asthma, hypertension, neuroses, etc. The mid-mountain and high-mountain climate are characterized by great air purity. Plant and household allergens, typical of cities and a number of flat areas, are missing. This circumstance is particularly important for the treatment of a number of allergies. The forest microclimate is characterized by the presence of a number of volatile substances and phytoncides in the air, which have an antibacterial effect while simultaneously stimulating the body [4].

Survey results

From the point of view of tourism, the towns of Chiprovtsi and Varshets Monastery, Klisurski Monastery, and Chiprovski Monastery, Kom Peak, Midzhur Peak, Vratsa and the Ledenika Cave, Murgash Peak, Cherepish Monastery, Sedemte prestola Monastery, Kutyn pyramids, Lakatnik, Skaklya waterfall, etc. are the most popular in the Western Stara planina Mt. Starting points for mountain tourism are the cities of Vratsa, Sofia, Botevgrad, Berkovitsa, Chiprovtsi. The only lift, Zgorigrad-Ledenika, has not functioned since 1989. Large huts are Kom, Varvara, Malina, Murgana, Murgash. Currently, the territory of the Western Stara planina Mt is almost entirely covered by two overlapping Natura 2000 protected areas - under the Birds Directive (147 thousand ha) and under the Habitats Directive (220 thousand ha). Along the ridge of the mountain passes the border with Serbia, where it is possible to create a cross-border the Stara planina Nature Park [5]. The most famous places to visit in the Middle Stara planina Mt and its foothills are Mount Vezhen, Mount Yumruka, the Etropol Monastery, the Varovites waterfall, the Vidim Splash, the Botev Peak, the Paradise Splash, Byala Reka eco-path near Kalofer, Kalofer Monastery, Shipka and Buzludzha the cities of Elena, Troyat, Teteven, Apriltsi, Tryavna, Gabrovo, Mount Triglav, etc. Important starting points are also the cities of Karlovo, Sopot, Kazanlak, etc. There is a lift near Sopot to Dobrila hut. It is the longest passenger seat line in the country. The second part next to Nezabravka hut is under reconstruction. Big huts are Vezhen, Vidima, Dermenka, Momina Polyana.

In the Eastern Stara planina Mt, tourist interest is directed to Kotel, Zheravna, Medven, Chudnite skali, the Karandila area, the villages of Kozicheno, Dyulino, Katunishte, etc. They are also starting points for the mountain, as well as the cities of Sliven and Varbitsa. An elevator operates from Sliven to the area of Karandila. Large huts are Varbishki Prohod and Karandila.

Ski tourism can be practiced in the western and central parts of the Stara planina Mt: in the areas of Uzana and Lyuljatsi near Gabrovo, near Apriltsi, on Beklemeto, Ribaritsa, etc. A disadvantage in this regard is the lower altitude of the Stara planina Mt compared to Rila Mt and Pirin Mt, which adversely affects the thickness and duration of snow cover. A more northerly location is an advantage. The ski base in the Chumerna holiday village, which is located under Chumerna Peak (1,536 m a.s.l.), has been renewed. The surroundings offer excellent opportunities for tourism, including ski tourism, snowboarding, cross-country skiing and ski orienteering. There is a ski track with a ski lift. Beklemeto is the highest point of the Troyan – Karnare Pass (1,590 m a.s.l.). The best tracks for biathlon and cross-country skiing are located there.

The three tracks have lifts and meet the standards for alpine skiing disciplines. In Berkina mogila area near Ribaritsa there is a ski slope with a length of 1 km. Skiing and snowboarding can also be practiced in the surroundings of Benkovsky hut. It can be reached from the Ribaritsa resort.

The Stara planina Mt covers one national and two nature parks (Central Balkan National Park, Vrachanski Balkan Nature park, and Bulgarka Nature park), as well as a large number (14) of reserves and protected reserves, 83 protected areas and 67 natural attractions [6]. This requires compliance of tourist activities with the nature protection status. Bulgarian national parks are one of the largest and highly valued in Europe, which is why they are known in international environmental circles. They are relatively well used for tourist purposes - mountain trekking (trekking), bicycle tourism, horse riding, wildlife watching, photo hunting, ecotourism, nature-knowledge tourism, etc.

Valorization of natural tourist resources

Each of the separate areas of the Stara planina tourist region has its own distinctive natural resources. On the one hand, they mark the main accents in the relevant tourist offers and, on the other hand, mark the directions for sustainable development of the territory.

From **Vidin region**, only one municipality (Chuprene) is included in the considered area. In the development plans of the municipality, attention is drawn to the caves Levi and Desni Dry Pech in the area of the village of Dolni Lom. They are characterized by numerous formations of marmites, sinter lakes, caves, bat colonies. Traces of prehistoric humans and cave bears have been found, as well as pottery and coins from the Roman Empire. They are easily accessible by visitors and do not require special equipment. In 1972, a medical experiment was conducted in Desni Suhi Pech with people staying in an isolated environment. For 62 days people were kept there without contact with the outside world. A geophysical laboratory was built and equipped in Levi Suhi Pech in 1985, where geodynamic measurements of the earth's crust were carried out.

The village of Chuprene is the starting point of four of the ten eco-trails in the area. Their end points are the beautiful areas at an altitude of 1,300 m a.s.l.: Bekinska Shochata and Martinov Kamak. In the summer, you can see the Danube River from Mount Popovitsa (1,500 m a.s.l.) without binoculars.

The eponymous reserve "Chuprene" is located on the land of the village - one of the largest biosphere reserves in Bulgaria. In 1977, UNESCO included it in the list of protected natural areas as an integral part of the international network of biosphere reserves. Its forest plantations occupy nearly 90% of its territory. Part of the forests contain spruce-fir and beech-spruce-fir. The largest are the spruce forests which are over a century old. They are important for studying this kind of forests in the country. Norway maple, common sycamore, aspen, mountain alder, mountain sycamore and black elder grow there. The diversity of the animal world in the reserve is rich. This is the only Bulgarian reserve permanently inhabited by wolves. The only grouse population has been preserved here.

In the immediate vicinity of the Chuprene Reserve, the Groski rai hut is located (1,450 m a.s.l.). It has 38 beds, indoor bathrooms, kitchen, bar, canteen, hot water, power unit. It also offers full board for groups and

family celebrations. In the center of the village of Chuprene there is a tourist dormitory with 15 overnight beds, a hall for celebrations, a dining room, a conference room, internet connection and cable TV. The building also houses the Tourist Information Center with exhaustive information about the municipality and the region [7].

The **Montana region** falls with 6 of its 11 municipalities within the Stara planina tourist region (Berkovitsa, Varshets, Georgi Damyanovo, Montana, Chiprovtsi).

High rounded peaks, steep ridges and valleys, massifs of deciduous and coniferous forests, as well as a rich animal world - various types of birds, wild boars, wolves, foxes, roe deer, wild cats - are characteristic of the Berkovo Balkan. From a "bird's eye" view, the Berkovo Balkan has the shape of a wide horseshoe, in the center of which is the pretty town of Berkovica. Among the many mountain peaks, Kom Peak stands out here, which is also the starting point of the above-mentioned longest mountain tourist route Kom - Emine, part of the international trans-European tourist route E-3. To the southeast rises Sreden Kom Peak with Gornata Koria Reserve and the emblematic for the region Hajdushki waterfalls, hidden deep in the mountain, in the valley of Golyama reka River. From the next peak - Malak Kom - there are beautiful panoramic views of Shtarkovitsa Peak, Berkovsko field, Petrohan Pass, Koznitsa ridge with Todorini Kukli Peak. In the distance to the east, the silhouette of Vrachanski Balkan can be seen [8]. Gornata Koria Reserve is located at 1,500 m a.s.l. On its total area of 161 ha, it preserves the natural spruce and spruce-fir-beech dendrocenoses, which are rare for the Stara planina Mt. It is the habitat of single specimens of deer and roe deer, as well as protected species of the flora. Its biological diversity is not sufficiently studied.

The natural landmark Hajdushki waterfalls have a drop of over 5-6 m. They are formed by the confluence of Tsenkova bara and Slivashka rivers. Their name is related to the legend of haidouk gathering and bivouac in the wilds of the Stara planina Mt. The site is visited by tourists all year round and is a favorite place for relaxation in the picturesque area. The locality is part of the Kom - Emine tourist route (Haidushki waterfalls - Tuzlata Mt - Golyam Kom Peak).

Other protected areas in this region are: Uruchnik (on the land of Burzia village, Berkovitsa municipality) with over 150-year-old forests of natural spruce, spruce-beech and beech) and Kaletu (protecting vulnerable and rare plant species, preserving landscape components and providing opportunities for tourism development).

In the municipalities of Georgi Damyanovo, Montana and Chiprovtsi, protected areas and natural attractions are:

- Kopren - Ravno buche - Deyanitsa - Kalimanitsa - with a total area of 536.4 ha of forests, uniting four picturesque areas in the Kopilov part of the Western Stara planina Mt. The diverse landscape, including centuries-old deciduous and coniferous forests, colorful meadows dotted with many protected and rare

representatives of the flora, rock teeth and crystal-clear spring streams and rivers makes the view unique and attracts hundreds of tourists and wildlife lovers all year round. With the permission of the Ministry of Environment and Water, the Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecological Tourism has made two eco-trails. Within the boundaries of the protected territory there are two of the most beautiful waterfalls in Northwestern Bulgaria - Durshin and Vodniy skok, appointed as natural attractions. Their water fall is over 15 m and over 10 m, respectively, and they represent a majestic sight against the background of the picturesque landscape.

- Usketo protected area is located in the Dalgidel section of the Western Stara planina Mt, at 1,550 m a.s.l. and is a natural age-old spruce forest, a remnant of the conifer forests that once existed here. The biodiversity here has not been studied;

- Kitkata protected area in the territory of the village of Virove protects a vulnerable century-old summer oak forest;

- In Sto ovtsi Protected area, there is a curious rock formation, the Split Stone. The protruding fragmented rock with a height of 95 m rises on the ridge between the village of Smolyanovtsi on the international road E79 and the valley of Ogosta River near the village of Prevala. Its base is at an altitude of 800 m a.s.l. It was formed about 270 million years ago. It was evaluated as a geological phenomenon of regional value in 2003 during the development of the Register and cadastre of geological phenomena in Bulgaria.

The still unexplored natural features of Marmorna Cave (next to the town of Berkovitsa) are preserved from destruction and looting. It's got marble formations, underground galleries and cave fauna. The Mishin kamak cave in the land of the village of Gorna Luka, in the Chiprov Region of the Stara planina Region is another example with its numerous white crystalline formations and underground ponds. Forest parks with good opportunities for recreation and tourism spread about both sites.

The presence of all these natural resources is a potential for the development of specialized forms of eco and rural tourism with an educational and cognitive purpose under increased control and training by trained specialists.

The Ogosta Dam is located on the territory of Montana Municipality. It was built on Ogosta River as part of an irrigation system that is not functioning today. The dam is the largest in Bulgaria with an earth embankment wall and with a water capacity of 500 million cubic meters. It creates conditions for fishing, etc. types of tourism.

The territory of the Varshets Municipality is characterized by a large number of natural attractions, which are a very good resource for the development of various forms of domestic and international tourism. The city forest park is one of the greatest treasures of Varshets, preserved over the years. It was created at the beginning of the 20th century (1911-1912) with the voluntary work of local people. The park covers an area of

800 decares and is the second largest man-made park in Bulgaria after the Boris Garden in Sofia [9]. The boulevard of the plane trees is part of the pedestrian zone of the town of Varshets, about 2 km long. The trees are almost 100 years old and their large crowns form a green tunnel. The Sun Garden in the center of the town was built in 1934. The name of the garden comes from its avenues, arranged in the form of rays of a special stone that reflects sunlight. In the middle of the main pedestrian area rises the evergreen redwood Gigantea. The tree is 23 meters high, and the circumference of its trunk is 3 meters. It was appointed a natural landmark in 1971.

At the beginning of the 20th century, dance parties and youth festivities were organized at the highest point in the park - Ivanchova Polyana. With the development of the resort as a balneology center, the meadow becomes part of the established "Path of Health" and a place for gymnastics in nature. Even today people believe that washing their faces with Ivanchova Polyana's morning dew before sunrise is healing.

The areas of Vodopada (3 km from Banite) and Byala voda (with the eponymous hut at the foot of Koznitsa hill) are preferred for walks through beech and conifer groves, extensive meadows and clear streams and for camping trips.

One of the symbols of Varshets is Todorini Kukli Peak (1785 m - the highest in the Koznitsa ridge). It is a group of peaks which, when viewed together, resemble a reclining female figure. The legend tells that during the slavery at the foot of the mountain, Turks brutally killed six monks from the nearby Klisur Monastery and the maiden Todora who escaped with them. The peak that witnessed this atrocity today bears the name Todorini kukli Peak.

Among the greatest treasures of the municipality of Varshets are the abundant mineral springs, which have been used for more than 2000 years. The land of the city is characterized by mineral springs, which for more than 160 years have been a prerequisite for spa activities and treatment. The mineral waters from the springs near the town of Varshets (flow rate 15 l/sec.) and the village of Spanchevtsi (flow rate 5.4 l/sec.) have a similar chemical composition. They are hyperthermal (37-38°C), weakly mineralized, with sodium bicarbonate sulfate, without signs of chemical pollution. The mineral water has a moderate alkaline reaction; it is clear, colorless, with a weak smell of hydrogen sulfide and has a pleasant drinking taste. The total mineralization of the water is 196.6 mg/l. Some of the mineral water is bottled and sold on the market due to its good taste. The healing waters gradually established the municipal center as a balneotherapeutic and climatic resort with year-round use, where cardiovascular diseases and functional diseases of the central nervous system, endocrine diseases and diseases of the gastrointestinal tract, conditions for recovery after a stroke are successfully treated. Physiotherapy and kinesitherapy are also offered.

The Vratsa region also falls fragmentarily within the outline of the Stara planina tourist region - with 4 of its 10 municipalities (Vratsa, Krivodol, Mezdra, and Roman).

Natural resources in individual municipalities are valorized to varying degrees and are still insufficiently well integrated into tourism activities with high added value [10]. A significant part of the tourist sites in the district are in an unsatisfactory condition, and the tourist infrastructure is inaccessible or overused, which, on the one hand, creates disproportions in the offer of tourist products and ensuring access to them, and on the other hand, it is an obstacle to the development of an integrated and sustainable tourism.

The Vratsa region is characterized by a wealth of protected natural sites. At the moment, within the boundaries of the Stara planina tourist region are the protected territories Vrachanski Balkan Natural Park and the Vrachanski Karst Reserve, together with many protected areas and natural attractions, information about which is posted on the pages of the Executive Agency for the Environment and the Regional Inspection of Environment and Waters - Vratsa [11].

With its area (30,129.9 ha) the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park ranks second in size among the nature parks of Bulgaria. It was appointed as a protected area in 1989, and since 1997 it has been a protected site of international importance. Its territory covers the Vrachan mountain and the massif of Lakatnish rocks. The geographical location, the karst character and the low degree of urbanization of the territory determine the presence of a unique biological and landscape diversity. Within its borders are some of the most interesting caves and chasms - over 500 in number.

78 tree and shrub and 36 herbaceous associations and groups have been established on the territory of the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park. 56 species are included in the Red Book of Bulgaria, with 48 species in the "Rare" category, and 8 species in the "Endangered" category. The vegetation is divided into two vertical belts of oaks and beeches. The fauna is represented by 166 species of birds, 27 species of them are included in the Red Book of Bulgaria, and 150 species are of European nature conservation importance.

The protected area is of great importance for the protection of the cave fauna. To date, 112 species of cave organisms have been identified, most of which are local endemics. On the territory of the park are some of the most remarkable bat caves, in which 19 species of bats out of a total of 29 in Bulgaria have been found.

The great floristic, faunal and habitat diversity determine the high conservation importance of the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park on a national and European scale. Along with this, the park has a rich cultural and historical heritage - ancient fortresses, churches and monasteries. The territory offers excellent conditions for tourism - rural, ecological, mountain, cultural, etc.

The park infrastructure includes an Information Center in the city of Vratsa; Prilepa Visitor Center - Ledenika Cave; Interpretation centers: "Ritlite" in the village of Lyutibrod and "Gorski dom" in Gorski dom area. Cognitive and educational routes are provided, including "Vrachan Eco-Trail", "Forest Trail of Tales", "In the World of Ecology", "Karst and Biodiversity".

One of the most visited sites and main tourist attractions are the natural attractions: Ledenika Cave, Vrattsata pass, Skaklya and Borov Kamak waterfalls, the karst phenomenon Boji Most, Vrachanski Karst Reserve, Ritlite Geotope, etc.

The Ledenika Cave is one of the most beautiful in the country and is open for visits throughout the year. It was appointed as a natural landmark back in 1960, and the first tourists entered it in 1961. It is located 16 km from Vratsa. An asphalt road leads to it, which passes through Vrattsata pass, meanders along the rocks and forest massifs of the Vratsa Balkan and reaches the very entrance (at an altitude of 830 m a.s.l.). The cave is 320 m long and has 10 halls. In the first hall, the temperature drops to -20°C and a huge ice column form, as well as impressive ice stalagmites, stalactites and stalactons, which gave the cave its name. This is an exceptional phenomenon, as the temperature inside is constantly around $+8^{\circ}\text{C} - +16^{\circ}\text{C}$. Air humidity is 92%. The cave was formed over about 1.8 million years. It is a complex labyrinth of galleries, meanders, alternating with leveled sections and verticals. It has a sinter lake and a passing underground stream, which ends with a siphon, where its waters are lost [12]. Here is the longest sword-shaped stalactite found in Bulgaria - 4.5 m. Underground cave concerts are held annually in the "Concert Hall". The tourist infrastructure in Ledenika Cave was completely renewed in 2005, and in 2014, an entertainment park "Ledenika" was established right next to the cave due to an European project. With this, the unique place becomes a modern attraction with a visitors' center, 5D cinema, rope garden, climbing wall, amphitheater and alley of fairy-tale characters, daily sports games and competitions for all ages, artistic events, quizzes, carnivals, photo booths, team building and lots of other fun activities. A variety of attractions related to the natural features of the Vrachanski Balkan Natural Park are offered [13]. This proves the existence of a well-developed overall tourist product.

The Vrattsata Pass is a very beautiful and imposing rock massif, located southwest of the town of Vratsa. It is a symbol of the city. It is a karst gorge of Leva River with a width of up to 50 m. Its walls are built of vertical Mesozoic limestone layers, rising to a height of up to 150 m above the river. It was declared a natural landmark in 1966, in 1980 it was appointed as a historical place, and in 1989 it was included in the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park. The sheer cliffs of Vrattsata are the highest on the Balkan Peninsula (over 400 m) and are the most popular alpine site in Bulgaria. Over 140 alpine routes with different degrees of difficulty have been traced along them, some of which are emblematic of Bulgarian mountaineering. The existing excellent conditions are a prerequisite for the development of a center of international importance related to this sport. Remains of the medieval fortress Vratitsa (10th - 12th centuries) have been preserved in the gorge.

The Skaklya waterfall is defined as the highest, but not constantly flowing waterfall in Bulgaria. Its waters fall from an imposing cliff from a height of 141 m and can be seen from afar (when available). The best times to visit are spring time and after heavy rains.

The Borov kamak waterfall is located above the village of Zgorigrad. It is 63 meters high and can be reached by one of the most picturesque, interesting and extreme Zgorigradska Eco-Trails. The waterfall is considered one of the most beautiful in Bulgaria.

The Bridge of God is a beautiful karst phenomenon, representing a rock bridge with a height of 20 m and a width of 25 m. The thickness of the arch is from 9 to 12 m. Along the axis of the riverbed, it is 125 meters long. The Bridge of God is about 12 km away. north of Vratsa. The natural landmark can be reached on the road to the village of Chiren.

The Vrachanski karst is a reserve in the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park. It occupies an area of 1409 ha. It was appointed as such in 1983. The reserve covers a karst massif with a length of 10 km, which consists of numerous caves, chasms, sheer rock walls reaching up to 450 m. Many relict, endemic and endangered plant species grow there. There are snowdrops, wild tulips, and forest pines. A typical representative is the Bulgarian endemic Kellerer's centranthus. Among the animal species, common ravens, Egyptian vultures, black storks, yellow-billed jackdaws, and alpine swifts are widespread.

The Ritlite natural phenomenon includes beautiful rock formations located on both banks of Iskar River, near the village of Lyuti Brod. Some of them are arranged parallel to each other. They rise up to 80 meters above the level of Iskar River. Their dimensions are also impressive - length from 200 to 400 meters, and the thickness of the rock mass in some places reaches up to 7 meters. The estimated age of the "Ritlite" is 120 million years. This is the first protected geological phenomenon in Bulgaria - back in 1938. The fact that in Antiquity these lands were inhabited by the Romans, who used the rocks for natural fortifications, is also interesting. During archaeological excavations at this place, Roman ruins and later churches and building foundations from the early Middle Ages were discovered, which is proof that, according to legends, a town existed by the river called Koritengrad.

Near Ritlite natural phenomenon is the area of Rashov dol, where in the spring of 1876, 12 people from Botev's squad died in a battle. For more than 30 years, near the Mezden village of Lyuti Brod, in the area of Rashov Dol, a reenactment of the last battles of the surviving rebels from Hristo Botev's squad has been organized.

The Okolchitsa Peak (1,048 m a.s.l.) is located in Vratsa Balkan, not far from the village of Chelopek about 20 km from Vratsa. At the top a monument was built in honor of the legendary Bulgarian revolutionary and poet Hristo Botev and his squad who died in 1876 for the Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule.

Almost the entire Lovech region (7 out of a total of 8 municipalities: Apriltsi, Lovech, Lukovit, Teteven, Troyan, Ugarchin, and Yablanitsa) falls within the borders of the considered tourist region.

On the territory of the district is the largest part of Central Balkan National Park, which is the second largest national park in Bulgaria with a total area of about 72 thousand ha. The park was developed for the

protection of unique, self-regulating mountain ecosystems with specific species diversity. It is among the most valuable and largest territories in Europe of category II on the scale of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). It has been declared an ornithologically important site of world significance because of the nesting, migrating and wintering birds here. It is home to 16 species of diurnal birds of prey, including Golden and Imperial eagle.

The Central Balkan National Park is certified as part of the PAN Parks network of European parks [14] – the only one in the country with this prestigious certificate. It is also included in the UN list of national parks and protected areas.

Five of the reserves in the park are located on the territory of Apriltsi, Troyan and Teteven municipalities. These are: Boatin, Tsarichina, Kozia Stena, Steneto, and Severen Jendem with a total area of 28,827.5 ha. The protected areas compared to the total area of the district is 7.17%. After the designation of the protected areas from the Natura 2000 ecological network, 7 areas under the Birds Directive and 6 under the Habitats Directive have been designated on the territory of Lovech region. For the effective use of this resource, it is necessary to develop programs for activities such as the cultivation of herbs, mushrooms and berries, as well as the development of hunting and ecotourism [15].

On the territory of Lovech district there are many natural attractions. In close proximity to the town of Apriltsi, and in particular to the Vidima hydroelectric power plant, on the slopes of Severen Jendem reserve in the Central Balkan National Park, Vidimsko praskalo waterfall flows. Its height is over 80 m, making it the second highest in Bulgaria (after the Paradise Splash/Rayskoto praskalo near Kalofer). The water falls all seasons, but the water stream is relatively weak. It is a formation of three separate streams that merge into one. They spring from Yurushka hill. The water flows in such a way that the foot has turned into a natural pool, suitable for recreation and relaxation. Nature has sculpted many alpine rocks and meadows around the waterfall, which make the region attractive for tourism. The Vidimsko Praskalo Eco-Trail follows a route which is particularly picturesque and reveals a huge part of the beauty of the Stara planina Mt. The eco-path is about 16 km long. A wide variety of flora and fauna, beautiful landscapes and natural attractions can be seen here. In its remaining part, the area of the Vidimsko Praskalo is almost impenetrable. It is characterized by sheer cliffs, dizzying chasms and deep ravines. A good place to look at it from a distance is the end point of the Vidimsko Praskalo Eco-Trail. Reaching from this point to the waterfall itself is recommended only for experienced and well-prepared climbers.

The Devetash karst Plateau contains one of the largest cave complexes in Bulgaria and almost all other types of karst formations. Devetashka Cave with a length of 2,440 meters and a total area of 20,400 m² is one of the largest caves in the country. It is located on the right bank of the Osam River, 18 km northeast of the town of Lovech. It has one of the largest cave entrance halls ("Altar"), yet easily accessible to visitors. Its

entrance is 35 m wide and over 30 m high. Inside the height reaches 100 m in places. It is one of the most attractive places for bungee jumping in the country. Apart from its size, the cave is also unique with its seven different size openings in the ceiling, through which the central hall is naturally lit.

The Devetashka Cave is also remarkable for its great biological diversity. More than 2 km along the existing creek there is reserved territory for over 45 species of cave animals, including 12 species of protected amphibians and 9 species of bats. The site is included in the list of subterranean habitats of European and global importance to the Agreement for the Conservation of European Bat Species (EUROBATS). Here is one of the three most important bat refuges in Europe. In winter, their colony reaches over 35 thousand specimens. In June and July, the cave is closed for visitors because of the bat breeding season.

Due to its easy accessibility, the site was inhabited during almost all prehistoric eras. The earliest traces date back to the Paleolithic (70 thousand BC). Several cultural layers have been discovered, which testify that it was most used during the Stone-Copper Age. In the 20th century, Devetashka Cave stored food from the state reserve, and then it was a military site (fuel storage). This significantly changes its natural appearance. In 2011, the Hollywood production "Invincibles 2" was filmed here, which caused numerous complaints from the environmental organization "Green Balkans" and the European Speleology Federation due to the violation of the natural outlook of the cave, as well as the prohibition of disturbing, injuring, killing and banishing the bats that inhabit it. The loud noise made by the large groups of people, the special effects film scenes, the strong lighting and the equipment needed for the filming process - trucks and sets - caused huge damage to the bat populations during their hibernation, as a consequence many specimens died or were permanently banished from this habitat.

The Devetashka Cave is the only cave in Bulgaria that has a 10-year management plan that aims at its sustainable management.

Next to the village of Brestnitsa (municipality of Yablanitsa), 120 km from Sofia, is Saeva Dupka cave, which is a national tourist site. It is thought to have been formed about 3.5 million years ago. Its length is 400 m, and its height is from 5 m to 17 m. The unique cave formations - stalactites, stalagmites and stalactons, turn it into a real underground palace. It was appointed as a natural landmark in 1962. In 1967 it was landscaped and opened to visitors. Today it is secured and very well lit. With skill and taste, the designers and builders have achieved this without compromising its inherent romance and mystery. Animal bones, pottery and coins from the time of the Roman Empire were found in it. The cave is interesting with its rock formations and the size of its 5 halls: "Kupena", "Srutishteto", "Harmana", "White Castle" and the highest one - "Cosmos". The magical world inside them, created by stalactites, stalagmites and stalactons of various shapes and sizes, painted in all possible shades of color, fully justifies the nickname of this cave, the "underground pearl" of Bulgaria. The "Harmana" hall is distinguished by very good acoustics and is used for

concerts. The cave is inhabited by bats that do not hibernate. The capacity is 900 people per day, but during the active tourist season, the number of visitors reaches 1800. Its popularity is due to its proximity to the main road Sofia - Varna. Glozhensky Monastery is not far away.

In the vicinity of the town of Lukovit are the beautiful canyon of Zlatna Panega river, unique rock formations in Karlukovo karst plateau, etc. The river originates from the karst spring Glava Panega. Its flow varies between 700 l/s to 5000 l/s, which is why it is considered the largest single spring in Bulgaria. Its water temperature varies between 8.4°C and 15.4°C. The color of the water in its two lakes is remarkable - due to the dissolved calcium carbonate, it has acquired a gentle blue-green color. That is why the local people call the Siniloto spring (The Blue spring).

A total of 240 caves have been explored in the Karluk Karst region (one of the largest in the country), which are the subject of research by the Bulgarian Speleology Federation and the World Speleological Community. To ensure accessibility to the natural attractions, newly built eco-paths lead to them. Here, many of the sites are used for rock climbing, bungee jumping, etc.

Emblematic of the region is the Prohodna Cave. This is the longest cave tunnel in Bulgaria with a length of 365 m and a height of the vaults of 56 m. It was formed at the end of the Cretaceous period 66-68 million years ago. As a result of the denudation processes and the erosion caused by seeping waters, "The Windows" phenomenon ("The Chimneys") has formed in the ceiling - two huge, almost identical in size, elliptical openings, popularly called the "Eyes of God". Viewed from below or from above, they really do look very much like eyes that seem to stare at visitors. The effect of the light entering through them to the interior of the cave is impressive. Further on, away from the "eyes", the cave seems to grow. Its height increases, and at the other end, which the locals call the "big entrance", it reaches 45 meters (the highest cave vault in Bulgaria). It has a unique twisted shape, again a result of the erosive force of water. If you go out, a canyon unfolds in front of the visitor, at the deep foot of which the noise of Iskar River can be heard. The unusual gallery layout of the cave makes it the only place in the world where you can practice bungee jumping from a cave vault. The area also has excellent natural conditions for sport climbing, speleology, and even fishing [16].

In addition to God's Eyes Eco-Trail and Iskar-Panega Eco-Trail, a tourist attraction in the Lukovit area is also the National Cave House. The massive five-story building was constructed in 1981 on a limestone rock in Kaleto area, 12 km from Lukovit, high above the river. It is unique in its location – it is built in a gap in the rock, and when viewed from above it resembles a bat. The natural rock is part of the walls. The inhabitants of the lodge feel as if they are among the clouds. After a major renovation in 2012, the Cave House became a preferred place for recreation and relaxation [17].

One of the oldest and most famous resorts in Bulgaria - Shipkovski mineral baths - is located in the Trojan Balkan. It became a resort in 1946. The favorable climatic conditions, combined with the healing mineral waters, the natural characteristics, the surrounding peacefulness, the rich cultural and historical heritage and the various types of tourism that can be practiced around it, make it a preferred place for recreation. It includes three mineral springs and several boreholes. The mineral water is from the sulfate-calcium-magnesium group, with a temperature varying from 18°C to 35°C. It is useful for people with liver, kidney, stomach, joint, nervous system diseases, etc. [18].

The existing natural features (along with anthropogenic resources) on the territory of Lovech region create prerequisites for the successful development of tourism. The presence of mineral springs, hunting farms, nature reserves, caves, historical and cultural sites determine the diversification of the offered tourist services and the development of alternative types of tourism - spa, hunting, adventure, eco, etc. As a result of the cooperation and initiative of business and non-governmental organizations, the expansion of the offered tourist products and services in all the municipalities of the district is a fact. With the efforts of local and central authorities, access to tourist sites, technical infrastructure and communications has been improved [19].

The part of **Veliko Tarnovo region** (6 out of a total of 10 municipalities: Veliko Tarnovo, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Elena, Zlataritsa, Lyaskovets, and Strazhitsa), falling within the borders of the considered tourist region, is distinguished by a strong tourist potential, but the natural resources in general cannot be considered unique and in their utilization the district has serious competition.

The White Cow Reserve (in the Deer Balkan) and the managed Savcov Chair and Hajdushki Chukar Reserves were appointed as protected areas in 1968 in order to preserve the pristine character of a centuries-old beech forest with over 200-year-old trees. All human activities are prohibited there, with the exception of security guards, visits for scientific purposes and regulated passage along certain paths.

More famous protected areas in the region are: the forests around the monasteries: Preobrazhensky, Dryanovsky, Sokolsky, and Batoshevsky; Peony meadow, near Gorna Oryahovitsa; Veselina River, close to the villages of Kapinovo and Mindya, Veliko Tarnovo Municipality, etc.

Among the natural attractions are the Momin skok waterfalls (Emen village, Veliko Tarnovo municipality), Kaya bunar/Hotnishki waterfall (Hotnitsa village, Veliko Tarnovo Municipality), Hristovski waterfall on the Miykovska river (Elena town), caves, gorges, rocky formations, etc. Full information about the protected areas in the regions of Veliko Tarnovo and Gabrovo is published on the website of the Regional Inspectorate for Environmental and Water Protection [20].

Mineral waters are a significant asset for the region. The village of Voneshta voda (28 km from Veliko Tarnovo) is famous for its spring, the mineral composition of which is unique in Bulgaria. The water

has a strong smell of hydrogen sulphide, hence the name of the resort. This set of favorable climatic factors, the impact and charm of the picturesque nature of the Stara planina Mt and the availability of healing mineral water are invaluable resources for developing medical, balneotherapy and climate tourism here with the aim of general relaxation, toning and strengthening of the body, improvement and normalization of metabolic processes and functions of almost all systems of the human body. The water springs at a temperature of +13°C, and in the local hotel complexes and pools it is heated up to 40°C. It is mainly recommended for the treatment of skin diseases, metabolic diseases and diseases of the upper respiratory tract. It is used for baths and for drinking. The mineral composition of the springs is very close to that of world-famous spa resorts in the Swiss Alps and France.

Among the strategic priorities for the development of Veliko Tarnovo region, a special place has been assigned to sustainable tourism. The basic task is binding individual natural and cultural landmarks into a single spatial and informational system. In this regard, numerous measures have been formulated for the development of a tourist network of natural and historical roads connecting different sites and resources and combining the efforts of municipalities. Activities are planned for their research, socialization and preservation [21].

The Gabrovo district is the only one that falls entirely within the Stara planina tourist region with all 4 municipalities (Gabrovo, Dryanovo, Sevlievo, and Tryavna). It is characterized by a diverse semi-mountainous and mountainous relief. It falls within the scope of both Pre-Balkan and the Stara planina Mt.

Tourism in the district is not one of the leading branches of the local economy, but it is of particular importance in view of the sustainable management of tourism resources and in terms of environmental impact and potential contribution of social benefits to the local community. There is a clear trend towards the positioning of the branch in areas with places suitable for ecological and rural tourism [22].

An important place as a resource and component of the tourist offer of the region is occupied by the area of Uzana, which is located 22 km. southwest of Gabrovo at the foot of Mount Ispolin (1524 m a.s.l.), amidst a beautiful natural environment and characteristic relief. It is located at the transition between the Central Balkans and the Eastern Stara planina Mt, in a strategic location in the geographical center of Bulgaria, measured in 1991. Since 2009, the Uzana area has the status of a resort complex. A detailed development plan was also adopted. As of 2021, 10 accommodation places with a total capacity of 444 beds are registered here.

The resort offers excellent opportunities for relaxation throughout the year and interesting activities during the day and evening. Hotels and villa complexes provide the most diverse and interesting opportunities for rest. For those who practice winter sports, there is a well-built infrastructure and facilities - 8 towpaths and

8 ski tracks of varying difficulty with a total length of about 3 km. Access to the ski area is easy. The average altitude of most ski slopes is 1,300 m - 1,400 m, the maximum elevation difference is 256 m.

The resort complex is part of the territory of Bulgarka Nature Park. The forest fund is over 80% of its total area. An additional advantage for the tourist attractiveness of the protected area is that only about 20 km. away, on its western border, is located one of the three Bulgarian national parks - Central Balkan National Park. The part of the European tourist route E3 (Kom - Emine) passes along the southern border of the nature park (Uzana area - Shipka Peak – the huts Buzludzha, Bulgarka, Krastets, Gramadliva and Predela - Prohoda na Republikata). In the area of the park there are many and varied pedestrian, educational and exploring routes, reaching various natural and cultural-historical attractions. Information, visitor and interpretive infrastructure has been built, but in recent years, due to a lack of maintenance (especially of the information facilities - signs, maps), its condition is unsatisfactory. The main reason is the low funding for the park [22].

Ecotourism activities are among the few that have the potential to achieve economic benefits without damaging the protected areas included in the territory of the district. Uzana Polyana Fest is one of the first ecological festivals in Bulgaria. It is held annually in the month of July, and its duration is 2-3 days. The first edition of the festival was in 2011. The diverse program, the various ecological challenges, the many eco-exhibitors and the bazaar organic products provoke increased interest from different audiences - people dedicated to the "green" way of life, mountaineers, environmentalists, representatives of institutions, people looking for emotion in nature, fans of the musicians, participating in the concerts, shopping, etc. Over the years, the festival had good attendance, both from the country and from abroad. For 2021, the data shows that the participants, exhibitors and speakers are more than 150 people, and the visitors about 10,000 people.

The list of the Regional Inspectorate for the Protection of the Environment and Forests of Gabrovo region comprises 15 protected areas (Bozhentsi - Tryavna Municipality, Studeniyat Kladenets and Lgut - Sevlievo Municipality, the lands around Dryanovsky Monastery, Sokol Monastery, Batoshevsky Monastery, etc.) and 4 natural sights (Bacho Kiro Cave - Dryanovo Municipality, Vikanata skala and Skalniy Venets - Tryavna Municipality, Bilyakovets Lake - Gabrovo Municipality) [23].

The Bacho Kiro Cave is located in the immediate vicinity of Dryanovsky Monastery. It is a complex four-story labyrinth of cave galleries and branches with a total length of about 3,600 m. A well laid out part of 700 m has been made for visitors. It is formed in three main directions - east, northeast and southeast - by underground rivers flowing in strong organic limestones. Geomorphological studies give reasons to assume that its formation lasted 1.8 million years. There are 6 cave halls. This is the first refined cave in Bulgaria (1937). Spectacular lighting today offers visitors the opportunity to see the whimsical formations of nature, named after what they resemble: Rain Hall, Stone Flower, Poplars, Lake of Happiness, Jellyfish, Bear Slide, Bear Meadow, Elephant, Cave Ear, Purgatory, Throne, Cave Eagle and others. The tourist site "Destination

Dryanovo" calls the cave "home of the first intelligent people in Europe" because some of the oldest traces of Homo sapiens on the old continent have been found here, dating to the transition years between the Middle and Late Paleolithic. In 1962 it was appointed as a natural landmark, and in 2002 the paths and lighting were renewed.

The Gabrovo region is also widely known for its climate-healing mountain resorts - Dryanovo, Tryavna, Plachkovtsi, Tsareva livada and Lyuljatsi, which have a beneficial effect on diseases of the respiratory and cardiovascular systems, on the musculoskeletal system, etc.

Two of the total 5 municipalities of the **Targovishte district**: Antonovo and Omurtag, fall within the boundaries of the Stara planina tourist region.

The preserved nature, mild winter and clean river waters in the municipality of Antonovo are a good prerequisite for the development of rural, ecological and hunting tourism. An attractive area for short-term recreation is the coast of the Yastrebino Dam, with its comfortable beaches and the opportunities it offers for fishing and water sports. Prerequisites for the development of ecotourism are the two eco-trails in the municipality. Along the route of Stara Reka Eco-Trail with a length of about 11 km. there are a number of natural attractions, including the "Garbava Cheshma" rock formation. Golyama Reka Eco-Trail has many places for relaxation, barbecues, fireplaces, etc. A peculiar attraction for tourists is the natural landmark Vodopada in the area of the village of Pirinets. In the vicinity of the village there are picturesque areas and two beautiful waterfalls [24].

The territory of the municipality of Omurtag has preserved pure nature, beautiful and intact corners with valuable, but unknown and undeveloped natural sights. The rivers passing through the territory of the municipality swarm with mullet, barbel, bream, redfin, and in the artificially built reservoirs you can find carp, pikeperch and perch. In the forest massifs, oak, cer, hornbeam, maple and hemlock grow. Yellow and red St. John's wort, mint, thyme, yarrow, etc. grow on the pastures and meadows. In the forests there are good conditions for the development of fauna. The municipality has rich game reserves represented by red deer, roe deer, rabbits, wild boars. The presence of favorable natural conditions and clean air creates conditions for the successful development of rural, hunting and fishing tourism. However, there is still no developed assessment of the tourist resources and a plan for the development of tourism in the municipality. The main problems awaiting a solution are related to the lack of a clearly formulated tourist product; poor conditions and limited access to natural and cultural heritage sites; the underdeveloped network of tourism service and supply companies; limited accommodation capacity; insufficiently qualified personnel in the field of tourist services [25].

The districts of Shumen, Sliven and Burgas are included with only one municipality each in the scope of the Stara planina tourist region, respectively Varbitsa, Kotel and Sungurlare.

On the territory of the municipality of Varbitsa is the Momin Grad Maintained Reserve with an area of 6.6 ha - an elite beech forest with a height of most trees 28 m and a diameter of 52 cm, average age 160 years. The protected area of red peony on an area of 11.5 ha is also impressive. The mountainous part of the municipality provides opportunities for eco, adventure tourism and hunting. Part of the national tourist route from Kom to Emine passes there, marked with tourist signs. Ticha Dam is located within the borders of the municipality, the banks of which offer good conditions for recreation, combined with clean mountain air, rural, sports tourism, fishing, etc.

In the resort complex "Varbitsa" (5 km from the city) there are two mineral springs with proven healing properties for gastrointestinal and eye diseases. There are a total of 3 water sources with mineral water in the region, which determine the development of health, balneological and spa tourism, but at the moment they are not exploited in accordance with the current legislation. A series of activities are needed to build facilities for the waters so that their healing properties can be invested in the development of balneological, health and spa tourism [26].

The nature of Kotel Municipality is a combination of mountains, hilly areas, valleys, rivers and river valleys. The area has a significant karst character, which makes it very interesting and beautiful for its geographic features and natural landscapes. Numerous caves, preserved nature, waterfalls and karst springs are situated there, which contributes to the attractiveness of Kotel Municipality as a tourist site. Beautiful nature-protected sites are "Kaleto" and "Borinata" near the town of Kotel, "Khersovgrad" and "Saiganitsa" near the village of Kipilovo. Natural attractions are the following sites: Zlosten karst area, northeast of the town of Kotel with eleven caves, the most famous of which are Glacier Cave, appointed as a national site 1,111 m long and 242 m deep; Rakovski's Cave, where in 1854 the Bulgarian revolutionary and revivalist began to write his book "Gorski patnik/Forest Traveler". Other interesting cave formations, tunnels and chasms are Prikazna (with bizarre stalagmites and stalactites), Maglyavata, Forty Troughs, Subata, Maarata, etc. Two nature reserves have been developed: Orlitsa Reserve and Kersenlika Reserve, which cover an area of centuries-old forests of Mysian beech and natural white fir, respectively. Several eco-trails leading to attractive nature sites have also been made. Red deer, roe deer, wild boars live in the area of Kotel State Forestry, all with valuable trophy qualities and contributing to the development of international hunting tourism.

The development of the tourism sector is among the main priorities defined at the regional and municipal level, with the emphasis placed on natural, cultural, hiking, rural, wine and hunting tourism. Despite all this, there is a need to increase the tourist attractiveness of the territory through the implementation of measures and activities aimed at providing a complete product, offering opportunities to practice different types of tourism, combined with the provision of quality services for tourists [27].

On the territory of Sungurlare Municipality, there are many natural sites, favoring the development of nature (ecotourism) and recreation. Among them are 6 protected areas: 2 protected localities (Urumovo tulip site in Lalikoto locality, Terziysko village and Orlitsite, Kamchia village); 4 natural attractions (Koriyat – an ancient oak forest, Vezenkovo village; blackberry bushes, Sadovo village; Pobitiya Kamak limestone mushroom formations in Beronovo village and rock formations in Chiflikova Niva area, Pchelin village). Several waterfalls (Kara Su, Siniyat vir, Strumnitsa and Krumov waterfall), three small caves and the area "Ichmyata", near Sungurlare, with a recreation park where children's areas and a small zoo are situated, have the potential to attract tourist interest.

In this municipality, too, there are a number of favorable factors for the development of nature (ecotourism) and specialized alternative types of tourism, but here, too, the existing opportunities are insufficiently utilized.

Among the alternative types of tourism, which has the greatest potential for development, wine tourism stands out. In the area of the municipal center of the town of Sungurlare and the village of Slavyantsi, various varieties of vines are grown and famous brands of wine are produced. Recreational activities and fishing tourism are benefited by the river flowing through the territory - Luda Kamchia Mochuritsa (left tributary of the Tundzha River), as well as by the Kamchia Dam located in the municipality. The opportunities for the development of hunting tourism are related to the presence of various types of game (red deer, roe deer, wild boars, etc.) in the hunting and farming areas within the scope of activity of State Forestry "Karnobat" [28]. The application of an integrated approach, broad partnership and territorial cooperation are the key tools to ensure a positive impact on tourism in this municipality as well.

Current state of tourism and guidelines for sustainable development

The development of the Stara planina Region as a destination with its own brand for mountain, ecological, wine and creative tourism based on traditions in viticulture and winemaking, attractive and preserved nature, history, personal creativity, the culture of society, the architectural environment, the attitude towards health, the sense of regional identity and belonging is set as a strategic goal in the National Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria for the period 2014-2030 [29]. The role of natural tourism resources in achieving this goal is fundamental and this is reflected in the guidelines for the development of the area and the exemplary activities set out in the same document. Among them are:

- building routes for mountain hiking and recreational tourism in the Stara planina Mt;
- development of adventure and ecotourism in the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park, Bulgarka Nature Park;

- development of mountain ski tourism for the domestic market in the area of Kom - Berkovitsa, Beklemeto and Uzana.

The rest of the perspectives presented in the National Strategy are also related to the mountainous part of the region and its natural features: development of rural tourism in the region of Tryavna, Elena, Troyan, Teteven, Kotel, etc.; development of religious and pilgrimage tourism based on the monasteries in the region of Berkovitsa, Teteven, Troyan, Gabrovo, Dryanovo, V. Tarnovo, etc.

The highlights and guidelines for the sustainable development of tourism in the Stara planina Region reflect and require additional strategic priorities and support the work of local authorities and interested communities in the development of a set of measures, means and actions for their achievement. The area offers a variety of opportunities for active recreation, attractive activities and outdoor experiences for people with a wide range of interests and needs.

The tourism in the Stara planina Region is an important complementary sector in the local economy.

Effective utilization of available opportunities contributes to job creation and development of local supply chains. The geographical location of the areas with tourist potential, as well as the cultural and historical landmarks, create conditions for the beneficial influence of the development of tourism on the depopulation of the territories.

The main problems and limitations stem from insufficient and unsatisfactory baseline information and lack of data on:

- tourist resources and sights on the territory of many municipalities;
- service providers and the quality of the tourist offer;
- the number of visitors who are tourists.

Such deficits hinder research studies and the preparation of in-depth analyses. A serious limiting factor is the absence of traditions in the field of tourism and purposeful development of the sector in a number of municipalities.

As of the beginning of 2021, there are no open European programs in Bulgaria that are thematically aimed at supporting the tourism development of local communities [30]. The only potential opportunity to apply is through the Local Initiative Group "Western Stara planina - Kopren - Midzhur" for projects under the Program for the Development of Rural Areas. This opportunity can be used to implement small demonstration projects to support tourism outside the municipal center; trainings and accumulation of knowledge on sustainable alternative tourism; tourism utilization of the existing natural resources and protected areas in compliance with the necessary regulatory requirements; development of markets; improve small family businesses; the quality of service, etc. All this is an effective way to motivate local people [30].

In the Central Stara planina Region (Trojan Municipality, Bulgarka Nature Park, Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park, Central Balkan National Park) and the Western Stara planina Region (Svoje, Godech, Berkovitsa, G. Damyanovo, Chiprovtsi, and Chuprene municipalities) the "For the Balkans and the People" project was implemented. Its official name is "To connect nature conservation with sustainable development of rural areas" and it covers 9 areas of the Natura 2000 network. It is financed by the Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Program through the Fund for Reforms with the Participation of Civil Society in the period 2012-2017. The project combines the efforts of 10 partner organizations: four Swiss organizations (SAVE Foundation, Pro Natura/Friends of the Earth, REDD - Network for Exchange and Sustainable Development and Swiss League for the Protection of Birds/BirdLife Switzerland) and several Bulgarian organizations (Foundation for Biological agriculture "Bioselena", Association of Parks in Bulgaria, Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation, WWF, Danube-Carpathian Program "Bulgaria", Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds, Executive Agency for Selection and Reproduction in Animal Husbandry). The main goal of the project is to demonstrate how local development and nature conservation can coexist without conflict and contribute to increasing incomes and the quality of life in Bulgaria's rural areas, which are in a difficult socio-economic situation. The interdependence between the conservation of biodiversity, on the one hand, and the economic development of areas of high natural value, on the other, is being expanded and deepened on the basis of sustainable market mechanisms and enhanced public participation to ensure efficient, long-term and sustainable use of natural resources. One of the main advantages of the project is that it works directly with farmers and small businesses that generate their income using natural resources and are particularly interested in their long-term preservation.

Both at the national and at the European level, it is planned to promote the creation of the so-called biodistricts where tourists will be able to learn more about organic farming. Organic farming and other local activities can make some areas that are not traditional tourist destinations attractive for tourists. Such type of tourism is particularly applicable to the larger protected areas, including meadows and pastures, forest areas, arable lands, rivers, etc., where tourist activities can be developed in compliance with the regimes of the protected areas, at the same time offering access to the natural features of these sites, as well as to the local bioproducts.

In the Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria until 2030, a special place is allocated for all forms of alternative tourism – eco-, rural-, balneo-, ethnic-, bio-, SPA-, gourmet-, wine-, etc., which can successfully bring to the fore the rich natural resources of the Stara planina tourist region in order to turn them into a competitive product, even on international markets.

The alternative tourism is gaining more and more popularity and attracts significant tourist flows due to its diversity, personal attitude towards the tourist and rich opportunities for diverse experiences. The Stara

planina tourist region has potential for the development of quite a few types of alternative tourism: adventure, rural and ecotourism, caving, hunting, photo safaris, etc. The creation and offering of diverse and specialized tourist products aimed at these types of tourism requires activating the resources of the municipalities and building an adequate infrastructure for the needs of the attractions - defining, shaping and marking tourist (eco-) paths and health paths, paths for climbing, riding and cycling, off-road routes, picnic areas, signposts, information centers, etc. For their promotion, there is a need for creative marketing and advertising activities, as well as for the integration of the tourism offer, in order to be able to cover specific market niches and contribute to the improvement of income in the local economy. At the same time, an increased care is necessary for:

- sustainable use and protection of natural resources and environment and improvement of their effective management;
- increasing tourist culture and awareness;
- improving connectivity, mobility and access;
- creation of common tourist products and marketing activities;
- digitization of tourist services, etc.

The state of the general infrastructure is among the most serious obstacles to the utilization of the existing opportunities for tourism development. Its regional and municipal part is most often poorly built and unmaintained, the water supply network is outdated, the sewage network in small settlements is insufficient, there are no purification facilities, garbage collection and processing of household waste is inefficient, transport is inaccessible to some of the places for tourism [31].

In the time of the global covid crisis, the Stara planina tourist region reveals its potential. Covid-19 is having an extraordinary effect on domestic tourism – on the interest and growing popularity of the area. According to NSI data, the total number of overnight stays for 2021 in Gabrovo region (the only one of the 10 regions that falls entirely within its scope) is more than 147,000 (8,000 of them by foreigners). Revenues are over BGN 5 million (including foreigners - nearly BGN 440,000) [32]. The growth of overnight stays compared to the previous year was 24.6%, and of revenues - 30.7%.

Maintaining this trend requires serious and intense activities not only to promote the area, but also to ensure the possibility of a longer stay - offering additional attractions and creating new routes, information and communication and last but not least - ensuring access to the tourist sites, on the one hand, and their preservation, on the other. These are the key elements that can guarantee the development of local entrepreneurship in the field of tourism and employment in small towns and villages.

Conclusion

The Stara planina tourist region has great potential, as it combines natural sights and diversity with a rich cultural-historical and architectural heritage, unique Bulgarian traditions, customs, crafts, folk holidays, national and international festivals. The rich potential of natural and anthropogenic tourism resources of high quality suggests that these resources should be "composed and packaged" into unique and attractive tourism products. However, their creation, growth and imposition on the market requires professional and competent communication and marketing activities.

The development of tourism is a prerequisite to preserve, keep and further develop the existing potential of natural tourist resources, as well as to ensure the development of economy, increase in employment and income, to create conditions for recreation and recovery, not only for tourists, but also for local residents. Considering the experienced situation with the COVID pandemic, it is very likely that there will be a change in tourist flow - from mass tourism to individual tourism. Based on the assumption that individual tourists are interested in less urbanized and unpopular destinations offering clean and preserved nature, local cuisine, adventures, etc. Opportunities should be created for tourism to become a livelihood for the local population and to develop alternative tourist offers aimed at developing specialized types of tourism, in accordance with the characteristic features and tourist capacity of the area.

In order to achieve better economic results, it is necessary to direct efforts towards full and year-round use of accommodation, to improve the variety and quality of services, to increase the qualification of the staff and to do targeted marketing.

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