

TOURISM IN THE BÂLEA VALLEY: THE TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVE – OPPORTUNITIES OF DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

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Abstract: In the Bâlea Valley of the Făgăraș Mountain – Southern Carpathians tourism was limited to the summer-season's traditional practice of mountaineering. The present paper is the result of a survey conducted in March 2010 during a free-ride competition with the aim to identify the tourist's typology, consumer behavior with respect to the existing facilities and amenities for winter and summer activities, and their perspectives on a possible development of the area into a proper ski resort. The results offer valuable information for the local actors as much as for future investments.

Key words: winter-sports, summer mountain-based activities, off-piste skiing/snowboarding, resort development, pristine landscape

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INTRODUCTION

The Bâlea Valley, together with its southern counter part – Capra, is the only valley which is crossed by an altitude road – the Transfăgărașan, which is also the only road crossing the Făgăraș ridge from north to south. Since its construction in 1974, it played an important role in the development of tourism in this area. The main forms of tourism have been hiking and climbing, but also pleasure driving and sightseeing provided by the mountain landscape.

In the last decade, due to emergence of sport-tourism and adventure-tourism (Hudson, 2003, Pomfret, 2006, Swabrooke *et al.*, 2003) some activities have been “imported” here as well, both for the summer and the winter season. If during summer one can see a few paragliders soaring around peaks, during winter the new-era tourists turn to free-ride or off-piste skiing and snowboarding. The largest density of riders (we will use the term for skiers and snowboarders alike) are to be found here at the competition called *Inferno*, which reached its 4th edition this year (2010) which has also been “imported” from Austria. At the first edition less than 20 riders participated (http://www.inferno.ws/ro/arhiva_2007.php) and at this year's edition just about 100 riders entered the competition. This is a clear mark of the growth trend regarding the number of practitioners of this type of adventure-based tourism and is a clear premise for developers. The exiting infrastructure – transportation, accommodation and dinning is already insufficient at the time of the competition. It is clear that new measures need to be undertaken for the future, which would bring benefits to the local actors, but also to

the local communities at the foot of the mountain. These measures need to be structured into sustainable development plans. On the other hand the measures need to be customer-oriented in order to achieve the best value for the investment costs. Therefore in order to understand the needs of this emerging target group of tourists we have decided to run a survey and gather as much information as possible so that in the future the responsible stakeholders could act so that these needs would be met. Also by profiling the consumers, marketing strategies could be better oriented in order to promote other features or services of the area which are now overlooked by the general public. Furthermore such precise data are very helpful when submitting a project proposal requesting financial aid for a development whose features were tackled in the survey.

In Romania such surveys are still scarce, but are quite common in the Alps where they have been conducted either on summer tourists to underline that mountaineering is still the basic activity in alpine regions (Muhar et al., 2007), to evaluate the satisfaction of the tourists with the services provided in winter resorts (Weiermair, Fuchs, 1999), or on tourists who chose protected areas as their destinations (Blazejczyk, 2002; Küpfer, 2000).

By creating the profile of the tourists present at the time of the competition one could understand to what extent these tourists would want the area to be planned and developed and what would determine them to come back in the winter but also in the summer season.

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

The Bâlea Valley is located on the northern slope of the Făgăraș ridge (figure 1). The Făgăraș Mountains bare the highest altitudes of the Romanian Carpathians, reaching 2,552 m at Moldoveanu peak. The relief is characterized by glacial land formations as the Bâlea Valley itself is a glacial one. In the upper part of the valley, where the lake lies today, there is the glacial cirque with steep walls that reach the highest altitudes of around 2,300 m.

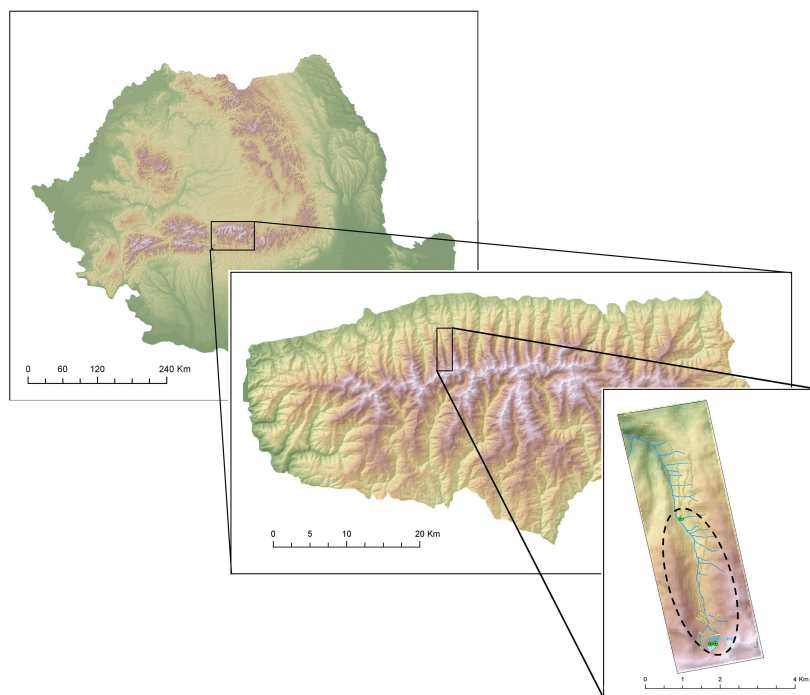


Figure 1. Location of the Bâlea Valley with the area where the competition took place (bottom – right) within the Făgăraș Mountains and their location in the Southern Carpathians of Romania (Data Source: Digital Elevation Model derived from ASTER Satellite Images with a resolution of 30 m)

The valley keeps its characteristic “U” shape until the altitude of 1300 m, where the Bâlea Waterfall can be found, which flows over a structural-glacial step. Beyond this altitude the valley is shaped by the pluvial- denudational elements.

The competition usually has the starting point in one of the saddles found in the upper part off the Bâlea cirque (Capra or Bâlea), but this year (2010), due to safety measures (there was an Orange code for avalanches) the starting point was set just under the first glacial-step, where the end-point of the cable car is located; the finish line is always at the Bâlea Waterfall Chalet at 1234 m altitude.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Survey by questionnaires

Tourist surveys are usually done to assess the quality of products and services (Verde Valley Tourism Survey, 2008), to assess the evolution of tourist flows (The UK Tourist, 2009) or as market research in order to understand what kind of developments would suit best the needs of the possible consumers (as our survey is) or to identify target markets for already planned developments or for more specific reasons as it was shown in the introduction section of this article.

Our questionnaire wanted to grasp the profile of the participants’ as much as of the other tourists present. Therefore it had to be relatively short in order to receive as little refusal as possible bearing in mind that they were filled outdoors, in the cold before or after the competition. We have prepared Romanian and English versions as well. The number of questionnaires was done in relation to the last year’s number of participants (they were 47 in all); so that we had decided on 60 questionnaires in Romanian and 20 in English.

Target group

As target group we wanted to include both the participants and the non-participants to understand the needs and drivers for mountain tourism of both categories. We particularly wanted to include foreigner’s opinions as well, since they would have other terms of comparison.

Data processing

The data was processed using SPSS 1.6 software –Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. This software enabled us to perform simple queries, but also cross-tabulations and to visualize the results under the form of charts. Due to the poor quality of the charts (when exported into Microsoft Office Word), we had redone the charts using Microsoft Office Excel.

RESULTS

The results were derived from the 78 valid questionnaires received back (of the 80 prepared). They were applied in the course of three days: the evening before the competition, the actual day of the competition (when more than 80 % of the questionnaires were filled out) and the day after the competition – the weekend of 12-14 March 2010. The number of respondents was almost halfway divided between the participants and the non-participants at the competition (49 to 51 % respectively).

Demographics

First categories to be analyzed were age and gender. 95 % of the total respondents answered the question regarding age. The mean age of the responders was 28.24, the maximum 45 and the minimum 15. The mean age drops to 26.33 when it comes to the participants, the maximum age to 41 and the minimum remains 15 (of the questioned, for the youngest of the participants was 5 years old). The age groups: 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34

all have the same amount of persons: 19, which accounts for 25 % for each group, leaving the other three age groups totalize the rest of the 25 % (figure 2 – left).

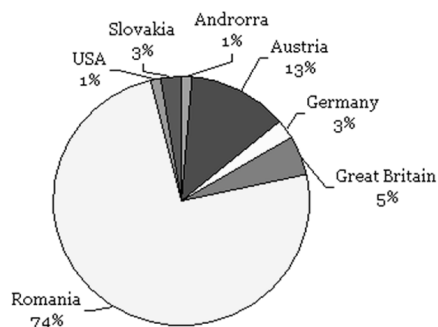
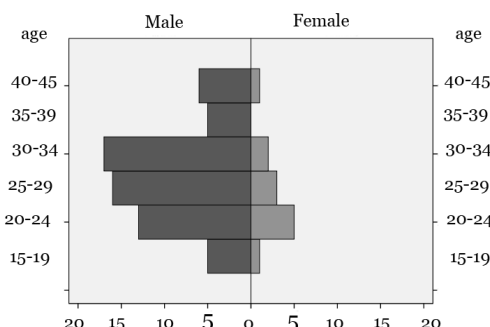


Figure 2. Gender and age distribution of the tourists (left) and nationality of the tourists (right)
(Source: On site survey)

As far as the gender of the total respondents is concerned, 5 % did not state their sex, 85 % were men and 15 % women, and if we refer to the participants, only 7.8 % of them were women. From this we can conclude that the competition was dominated by male participants; having in view that this is an extreme sport, the tendency is to have more males than females engaged in such endeavors, one reason being higher-than-average risk of injuries (BÄSSLER 1997). In terms of the gender of the visitors – the reduced number of females might be related to the lack of alternative facilities for past-times. The only other attractions during winter at Bălea are the Ice Hotel and the Ice Church (figure 3. a) and b)) and the accommodation facilities do not have wellness centers.

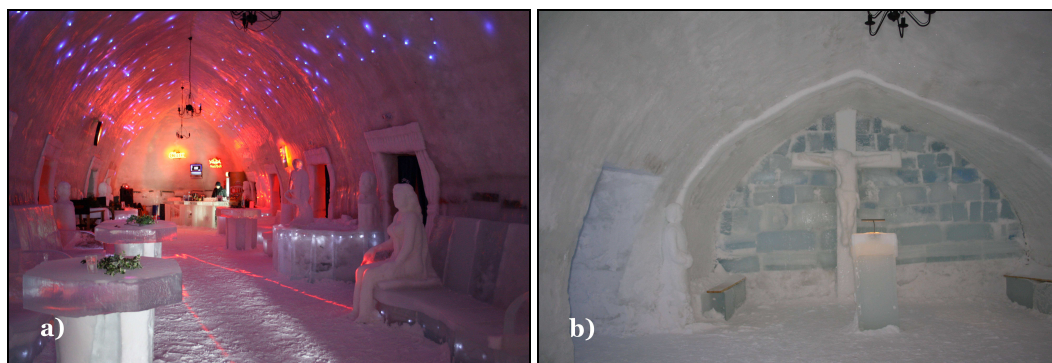


Figure 3. a) Reception hallway of the Ice-Hotel and b) the inside of the Ice-Church
(Source: Popescu, 2010)

As far as place of residence is concerned, we shall distinguish between Romanians and foreigners: 75 % of the respondents were Romanian, coming from 14 different cities, with the highest density coming from the capital city, Bucharest (21.8 %) and from the close-by city of Sibiu (15.4 %). Of the 25 % foreigners, half were from Austria, a quarter from Great Britain and Germany, Slovakia, Andorra and the United States of America had one or two representatives each (see figure 2-right). In terms of the participants, only one of them was a foreigner, the rest were from Romania, with the highest density coming from Sibiu and Bucharest, followed by the Transylvanian cities of Cluj and Mediaș.

One of the most interesting facts is related to their occupations (table 1), meaning that technical jobs account more than 21 % (engineers and IT/programmers) and another

11.6 % involved in economy and finance, close to 20 % students and college –goers and the rest distributed between other highly-educated jobs: professors, doctors, lawyers with an insignificant percentage dedicated to those jobs which do not require higher education.

Table 1. Occupation of the participants
(Data source: On site survey)

	Frequency	Percent
Salesman	1	1.3
Architect	1	1.3
Lawyer	1	1.3
Bank clerk	3	3.9
Doctor	3	3.9
PhD researcher	1	1.3
Economist	5	6.4
Editor	1	1.3
Students & college goers	14	18
Finance	1	1.3
Photographer	1	1.3
Clerk	1	1.3
Mountain guide	3	3.8
Designer	1	1.3
Engineer	11	14.1
Plumber	1	1.3
Self-employee	1	1.3
Journalist	1	1.3
Manager	2	2.6
Professor	4	5.1
IT	6	7.7
Labor control	1	1.3
Reviewer	1	1.3
Event manager	1	1.3
Officer	1	1.3
Total	67	85.9
No response	11	14.1
Total	78	100.0

Concluding their demographic profile, one can understand that the average age for the interrogated tourists is rather small, dominant were male visitors all are city residents, coming from different parts of Romania (as far as 500 km away – the city of Constanța), almost all being highly educated.

Motivations and traveling patterns for winter and summer vacations

When asked about the reasons of traveling, the participants answered they came to Bâlea for the competition, the other had various reasons: almost 7 % came to watch the competition, 27.4 % to spend a weekend in the mountains and a little over 15 % had other reasons (figure 4), for heliskiing (the Austrians), taking pictures for an extreme-sports magazine (Germans), for a bachelor's party (the British).

When asked if they had visited other landmarks on the way or on site almost 46 % responded negatively while the rest 54 % affirmatively. The negative responses are almost consistent with the participants' percentage. This means that most of the participants are not necessarily interested in other forms of tourism especially when an important percentage lives in the close-by Sibiu. On the other hand answers regarding their frequency in the Bâlea area during winter (figure 5, left) were not as consistent with the number of participants.

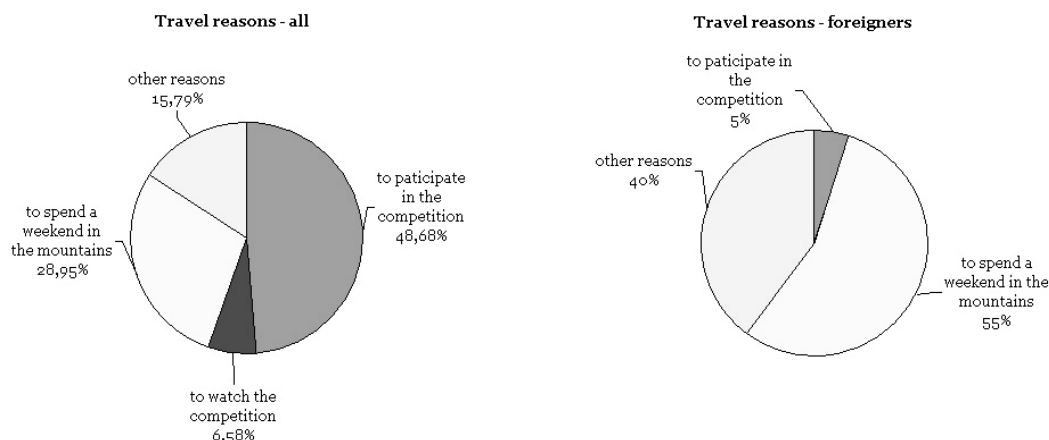


Figure 4. Travel reasons of the all respondents (left) and of the foreigners (right)
(Source: On site survey)

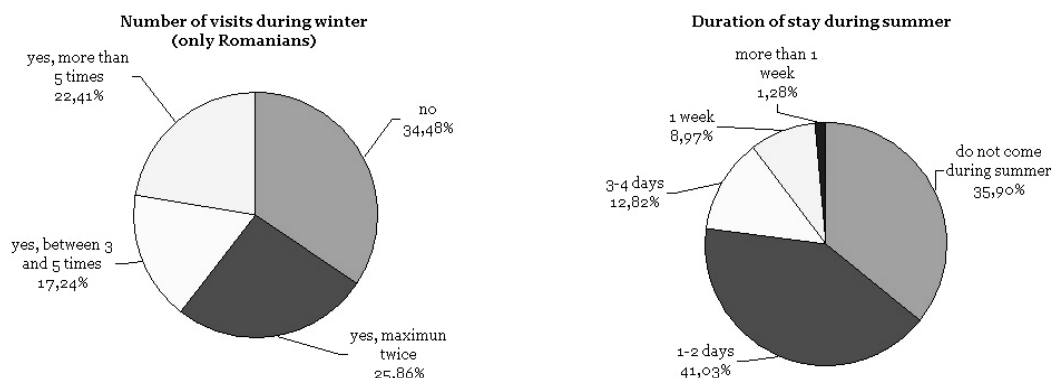


Figure 5. Other visits during winter (left) and time spent during summer (right) in the Bălea Valley
(Source: On site survey)

We considered only the Romanian's answers to be relevant here, due to the fact the foreigners' where mostly absent. Only 22.41 % mentioned coming here more than 5 times a winter and over 34 % stated that they do not come to Bălea during winter on other occasions. As far as the number of days spent during winter 56.9 % mentioned they were only there for 1 or 2 days, 10.3 % for 3-4 days and 27.6 % did not answer this question. The rest of the percentage was distributed between the persons who spent one week or two weeks. In terms of summer visits to the Bălea area, 36 % answered negatively, 41 % spend 1 or 2 days here, almost 13 % spend 3-4 days and 9 % one week (figure 5, right).

Activities undertaken by the respondents within mountain areas

Most common winter-activities within mountain areas are skiing and snowboarding, so that our inquiry focused on the two (figure 6, left). As far as men are concerned almost half practice snowboard and a third skiing and the just a small 8 % practice both or other sports. For other winter-sports we could add skating, cross-country or back-country skiing, ski-touring (Muhar, 2007), snow-hang-gliding (Popescu *et al*, 2009). On the other hand, for the women respondents, the distribution between the three categories is equilibrated. As far as experience, the overall percentage rated the highest for the advanced riders 42,6 %. As far as gender distribution is concerned the highest percentage for men is still held for the advanced, whilst the largest percentage of women

consider themselves medium riders, still the distribution between categories (except for expert) is rather equilibrated (figure 6, right).

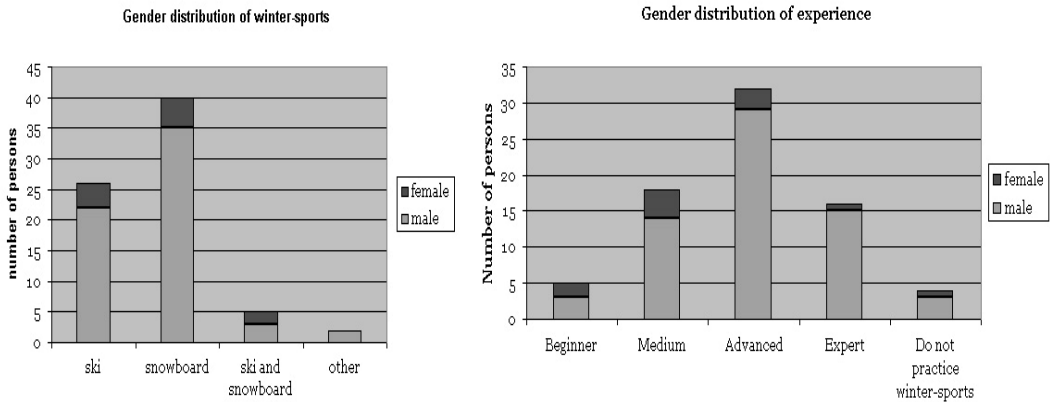


Figure 6. Gender distribution of practiced winters-ports (left) and self-apreciation of the riders' experience (right)
(Source: On site survey)

When asked how long they have performed winter-sport activities, the answers varied between 2 months and 39 years. The largest number of men in one category was the one practicing winter sports for 5 years –13.6 %, followed by the ones practicing winter-sports for 20 years – 10 % and 25 years 9 %. There were not two women practicing winter-sports for the same amount of time, mostly condensed until 6 years, 31 years being the highest values for their category. The mean value is 12.77 years, which means, overall, that quite experienced riders were present. Taking this into consideration we were interested what kind of skiing or snowboarding they preferred: on or off-piste.

Off-piste riders are more experienced riders for whom the groomed pistes do not present any challenges so they go outside piste boundaries in search of more difficult descents and of the perfect “powder” (fresh, un-groomed snow) which represents their ultimate thrill. For this category, perfectly prepared pistes could represent a major turn-off and impede them to come to proper resorts.

The riders present stated in a large percentage – almost 67 % that they preferred off-piste skiing or snowboarding (figure 7). The ones who are bound to proper ski pistes were only 20 % of the respondents which did not take part in the competition; and the rest are a flexible group being comfortable as much on the proper pistes as off them.

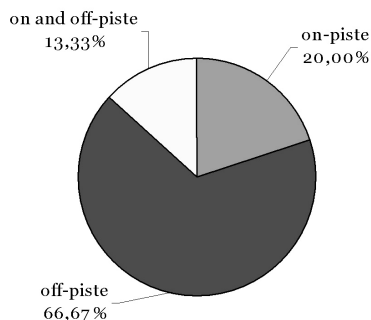


Figure 7. Preferred terrain for the winter sports
(Source: On site survey)

When asked about where else in Romania they go off piste skiing or snowboarding the most answers were consistent with Sinaia (52 % of the persons who responded to this question), where only a small part of the domain is groomed and there were other random answers which included the resorts of Poiana Braşov, Parâng, Straja. On the other hand when asked about mountain areas abroad where they go off-piste riding 68 % (of the persons who responded to this question) named resorts in Austria: Ischgl- most frequent, Kaprun, Stubai, St. Anton, but also a few mentioned resorts in France, Switzerland and even Slovakia and Bulgaria. Therefore we can conclude that this tourist market is not a market deprived of financial resources – needed for the trip or for the equipment, nor an ignorant one regarding their experience with off-piste riding as much in Romania as abroad.

Usually, for a resort to have a good economic efficiency, it has to function all year-round (Popescu *et al*, 2009) having the regular two peaks during the summer and the winter seasons; therefore we inquired the tourists about their visits to the Bălea area during summer (figure 5) and about their summer out-door activities (figure 8).

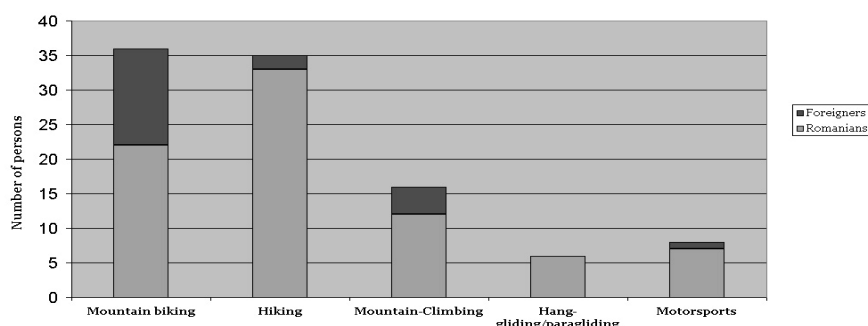


Figure 8. Summer activities practiced by the respondents
(Source: On site survey)

Unfortunately summer activities do not seem as popular as the winter ones among our respondents. The highest ranked mountain-biking, which is practiced only by half of the persons who responded to this question (there were 7.7 % missing). Of the respondents more than 30 % are Romanians and the other 20 % practicing them are the foreigners, but if we take foreigners as a separate category, 82.35 % responded affirmatively. As far as hiking is concerned we were very surprised to find out that only 10 % of the present foreigners practiced hiking, when mountaineering is presented to be one of the most important pastimes within the Alps (Muhar, 2007). On the other hand 60 % of the Romanians who answered this question practice hiking. In terms of more extreme hiking – mountain-climbing, the percentage of the foreigners went up to 20 %, and the Romanians' ranked the same. None of the interviewed foreigners practice hang-gliding or paragliding, whilst a small percentage - 10.9 % of the Romanians who answered this question does. In terms of motor-sports 5 % of the foreigners and 12.8 % of the Romanians practice them. For the possible developers of the area this suggests that in order to attract domestic and international tourists during the summer season, they should offer some downhill facilities for the mountain-biking lovers (though the terrain is rather rough (Popescu, 2009)). As far as hiking or mountain climbing there is not much investment needed but in accommodation facilities. For hang-gliders and paragliders, the scene is already set: the amazing background – pristine landscape, and as far as motor-sports are concerned, it would not be a good idea to invest in developing these activities, since the Bălea Valley is a natural reserve.

Analyzing the above one could easily come to an understanding regarding the activities practiced by the respondents and what course of action can be taken in the perspective of a possible development, but not omitting the fact the Bălea Valley is a protected area.

Accommodation

The Bălea Valley itself is not too generous regarding the accommodation facilities. The most important are located at the Bălea Lake (2,034 m altitude) totalizing 140 accommodation places (adding 16-20 places during winter at the Ice-Hotel) and at Bălea Waterfall Chalet (1,234 m altitude) 67 places. The other accommodation facilities, though much more generous in the number of places (364) are located under 600 m altitude on the road connecting the Bălea Area (national 7C) with the European Road E86 (*Accommodation in the Făgăraș Mountains, 2009*) in the area called Vama Cucului, but also in the village of Cârțișoara. Figure 9 shows the distribution of tourists among the 3.

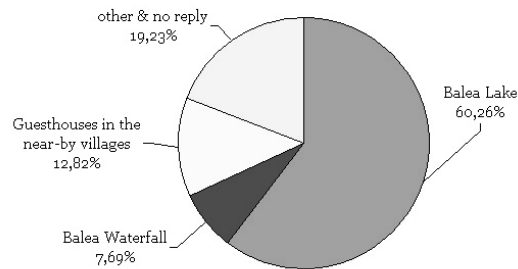


Figure 9. Accommodation chosen in the Bălea Area
(Source: On site survey)

Most of the respondents chose to stay at Bălea Lake (see figure 9), in the two chalets there: Bălea Lake and Paltinu, a small percentage chose the chalet at Bălea Waterfall, and a percentage of almost 13 % chose the accommodation down the 7C road, where there are numerous and less expensive facilities. The other almost 20 % did not respond to this question because they did not spend the night there.

Strengths, weaknesses and the perspective of development

The majority of respondents found that the area's strongest point is its natural environment, even if they have chosen different words for it, descriptive at times: pristine or undisturbed natural landscape, scenery, and wilderness. Other strengths were considered to be the high altitude, duration and depth of the snow layer, difficulty of trails, location and even remoteness.

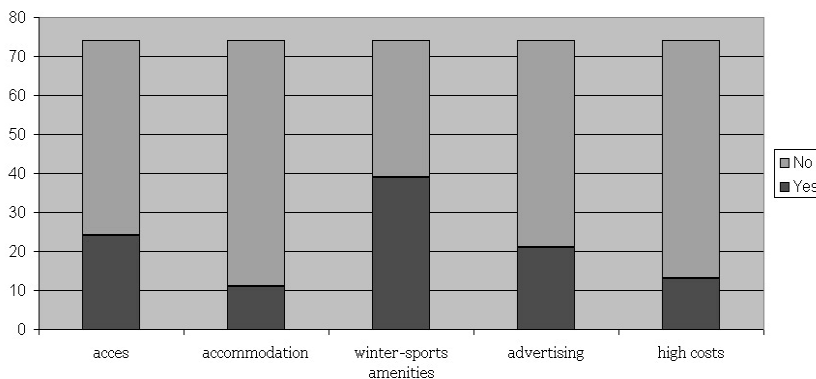


Figure 10. Weak points of the Bălea Area
Source: On site survey

On the other hand, regarding the weak points of the area, where the answers were preset, the most respondents checked the lack of winter-sports amenities and facilities, accounting for 50 % of the persons who responded to this question (figure 10). Following the other weak points were the access, checked by 30.8 % of the respondents, advertising 27 %, accommodation facilities 14.1 % and the high costs of the existing accommodation in the upper part of the valley by 13 %.

The most interesting question was if they thought it would be suited for the Bâlea area to become part of a large development plan turning it into the largest ski area in Romania. More than half 61.54 % answered affirmatively (figure 11, left).

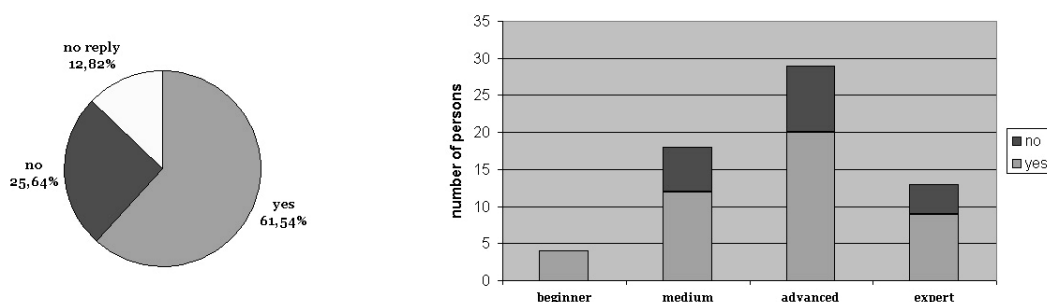


Figure 11. For and against the development of the Bâlea ski area (left) and the repartition of the mentioned answers on the types of riders (right)

Source: On site survey

They motivated that it has great potential or that the amenities are need in order to embetter the skiing/snowboarding experience or that there was no place in Romania like this one. We received more that 25 % negative answers accompanied by reasons such as: *it will ruin the place's spirit, it will become too crowded, the pollution rate will go up, most of the free-ride area will disappear, it will destroy the landscape (it is a natural reserve).*

On the other hand we have correlated the answers with the type of riders and their answers regarding the development of the area (figure 11 – right). As it was expected all the beginners present voted for development so that they could take practice these sports as well. We had expected that the experts would mostly vote negatively, but as we can see only 30 % of the expert do not want that the Bâlea area develop into a large ski resort. On the same level are the advanced and the medium riders, with a percentage around 30 % (of their respective categories) who do not want the development to take place.

For both negative and positive answers we requested reasons, so if there were a development to take place, the stakeholders should pay attention to limit as much as possible the negative impacts foreseen by the respondents and to focus on the strengths of the area and on the reasons they voted for the development.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is quite clear that the Bâlea Valley is no longer only a summer season tourist area and that such sport-adventure winter activities, can add another whole tourist season to its economic efficiency plan-the winter one; when the revenues are higher than during summer. The tourist target-market for the winter season is based on the adventure-sports practitioners, mainly advanced and expert skiers and snowboarders. Based on our results, the tourist profile entails young age (between the ages of 20 and 34), three quarts males and one females, city residents, well educated, with static and technical jobs which drive them towards compensatory nature and adventure-based pastimes; conversely, their income does not go under the average, enabling them to pursue their hobbies and go on related holidays. On average, the Romanian respondents seemed to be more interested in

the nature and adventure –based tourism for the summer season than their foreign counterparts. These results are relatively opposite than the ones of a previous study performed in the Alps (Muhar, 2007), which concluded that the image of the adventure-based tourism is boosted by media and brand equipment manufacturers and that the majority of tourists going in the Alps during summer are there for mountaineering activities, whereas in our study the foreigner inclination towards hiking was relatively low.

On the other hand we need to take into consideration the small group of the people questioned in relation to other similar studies. To add substance to this study, such questionnaires need to be applied at the next editions of the competition, than make additional visits in the area during winter, but also apply questionnaires to tourists during the summer-season.

Nonetheless the information obtained from this survey is highly valuable, offering an insight into the drivers of the tourist flow here – differentiated between the two large categories: Romanians, whom were mostly present due to the competition and foreigners, which had come here to spend a weekend in a pristine mountain landscape or to go helisking. We obtained information related to their summer activities as well, which could lead to additional management strategies in order to round-up the revenues from the summer season.

As far as the most delicate subject regarding weather to or not to turn Bâlea into a large winter-resort had its justified pros and cons. More than 60 % were for the development, but an important percentage of 26 % was against. What should be carefully considered are their motivations invoked by the respondents rather than their blunt answers. Even the expert and the advanced riders inclined towards development, but these categories definitely referred mostly to means of cable transportation so they could explore new ground and perhaps more avalanche-prevention measures, as on the other hand the beginners and the medium would have in mind smoothly groomed pistes, carefully delineated, equipment renting huts, ski-instructor services and a handful of rest areas.

Due to its rough terrain (Popescu, 2009), this will never become a resort destined to beginner skiers, but on the other hand there are several places, usually close to the accommodation facilities, where there are smoother surfaces suitable for such kind of pistes. Furthermore, development in the sense of more cable transportation facilities would extend the play-ground of the free-riders to the connected valleys: Capra, Doamnei and even Văiuga. Also these transportation facilities can be used during summer to carry the bicycles up the mountain – since we received quite a number of favorable responses for this activity so this will help quicken the return of investment. Cable transportation could also reduce car traffic and therefore reduce the pollution generated by the large number of cars using the Trasfăgărășan altitude road during summer

To conclude: at this point development is inevitable! Therefore the investors and the local stakeholders should beget plans that respond to the consumers' needs depicted from such market research strategies which should help acknowledge the present consumers and slowly expand the target market in order not to loose the present tourists until it reaches a state of sustainable equilibrium of all three major components: environmental, economic and social.

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