

CRUISE SHIP TOURISM ON THE DANUBE RIVER. CASE STUDY: CAPITALIZATION OF DELTAIC TOURISM POTENTIAL

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Abstract: Over the past two decades, river cruise tourism has witnessed a strong development, being preferred by more tourists each year, to the detriment of other forms of tourism. The presence of a plethora of attractive resources, concentrated along the inland waterways represents a particular offer for tourism development, through proper planning. However, in Romania, river cruise tourism is still incipient, even though cruises on the Danube are available, on a regular basis, since the 1970s. This research focuses on cruise ship tourism on the Danube, in particularly on the deltaic sector; with the Romanian ship MS Delta Star as a case study. Following, a brief presentation of the evolution of this type of tourism on the Danube River and its peculiarities on the Romanian sector, especially in the Danube Delta, was made. The assessment framework of the tourism potential of the Danube Delta at the level of administrative-territorial units was developed by applying the methodology from the National Spatial Plan. After correlating the results of the assessment with the current capitalization of tourism potential of the delta by the cruise ship included in the study, it is highlighted the need for optimizing the structure of the offer for this tourism sector. Identifying the most valuable elements of the Danube Delta, in terms of touristical attractions,

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and including them to future itineraries for tourists on cruise ships guarantees a better capitalization of the tourism potential attracting therefore, a greater number of tourists.

Key words: MS Delta Star, Danube Delta, assessment of touristic potential

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INTRODUCTION

Along the rivers concentrates significant natural and anthropogenic resources that are increasingly capitalized for tourism purposes as well. Adequate planning ensures for certain, their efficient capitalization and an important flow of tourists. Cruise tourism has experienced significant growth lately (Dowling, 2006) and recent studies show that the development of this type of tourism will be even more significant in the future (Parker, 2013; Gogonea & Zaharia, 2013).

Worldwide cruise ship tourism on inland waterways is mainly focused on three centers: in Europe, in Africa, on the Nile River and in Asia on Yangtze River (Dragin et al., 2009). In Europe, the Danube is the river with the densest traffic of cruise ships, which increases year by year. Only in 2009, from the 209 cruise ships operating in Europe, 115 were traveling on the Danube (Market observation for Inland Navigation in Europe, 2010).

In Romania, a country that has 1075 km of the lower Danube and presents a high potential for cruise ship tourism development, this economic branch does not have the same success as in other European countries. Cruises on Danube are intended especially for foreign tourists although, lately, an attempt to launch it on the Romanian market was made.¹

The main cause remains the inadequate capitalization of the valuable and unique resources, such as those that can be found in the Danube Delta. Therefore, this paper focuses on analyzing the peculiarities of cruise tourism on the Danube, with a case study underlying the touristical offer of MS Delta Star cruise ship in the Danube Delta. Following the assessment of tourism potential of the Danube Delta we propose the improvement of the touristical offer structure, by identifying and incorporating the most valuable sources of attraction in the delta, to the proposed itineraries for tourists on cruise ships.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since the purpose of the paper is to identify the most valuable elements for touristic attraction throughout the delta and to include them to the proposed itineraries for the cruise ship tourists, an assessment of the tourism potential of the delta was made. Therefore, it is necessary to undertake a method for tourism potential assessment that allows us to estimate the value of tourism resources in the Danube Delta Region. Nevertheless, the assessment highlights the extent of the current capitalization of the touristic resources by MS Delta Star cruise ship passengers.

In the literature there are various methods to assess tourism potential (Șandru, 1970; Iordan & Nicolescu, 1971; Ciangă, 1998; Cocean, 1999; Ielenicz & Comănescu, 2006, 2009; Iașu & Bulai, 2011), that considers from a different perspective the criteria for assessment, but each of these methods presents difficulties when it comes to applying them (Ivana, 2012). In the same time, in recent years, a great number of studies focused on the assessment of touristic potential of a region or another, for different purposes (Bește & Bește, 2010; Cocean, 2010; Ciurea et al., 2011;

¹<http://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Turism/182911/turistii-romani-pot-calatori-in-premiera-in-croaziere-all-inclusive-de-7-nopti-pe-dunare.html>

Letos & Muntele, 2011; Boengiu, 2012; Ivana, 2012; Bâtea, 2014; Cocean, 2014) and several doctoral thesis focused their analysis on this concept as well. The methodology undertaken in the study is based on the National Spatial Plan (2007), drafted by the Ministry of Tourism and Public Works and represents an analysis of the tourism potential at country level, based on quantitative indicators. The items considered for tourist zoning of the national territory are natural tourism potential, anthropic tourism potential, general infrastructure and specific tourism infrastructure. The assessment was made at ATU level according to the methodology outlined in the National Spatial Plan.

Following this analysis, it was noted that this methodology has a more general character; in order to apply it properly for the studied area, some adjustments were made. Therefore, tourism potential was estimated by summing the values of natural tourism potential (40 points) and anthropic tourism potential (20 points) with specific tourism infrastructure (20 points) and technical infrastructure (20 points), after the method presented by Albu (2007). In the same time some items that were under analysis in the original methodology have undergone some adjustments as well. Within the *natural touristic resources*, for the *natural framework* a total of nine elements: topography, the existence in ATU of *natural attractions* - scientific reserves and nature's monuments, climate, hydrography, forests (and endemic flora), natural reserves, fauna, landscape were analysed. To all these was added an indicator on pollution (Boengiu, 2012). In assessing the anthropic potential, indicators of cultural-historic potential (architectural monuments, memorials, museums, cultural events, traditional gastronomy, traditional customs and festivals) were assessed. It is necessary to specify that for some of the indicators in this section the approach was based on the National Register of Historic Monuments.

The results of resource assessment were classified according to the score obtained by each component. A hierarchy of the administrative units in the Delta was distinguished, highlighting three classes of values, *medium potential* (25-50 points), *high potential* (50-75 points) and *very high or extraordinary potential* (75-100 points).

EVOLUTION OF CRUISE SHIP TOURISM ON THE DANUBE RIVER

The European rivers have always been transport corridors for economic or touristic purposes, and cruise ship tourism is nowadays the main form of tourism that takes place on rivers (Erfurt-Cooper, 2009). Forming the northern border of the Roman Empire and used for trade, transport and energy, Danube has kept its position of major economic corridor along the centuries (Erfurt-Cooper, 2009). The second longest river in Europe crosses, along the 2857 km, no less than 10 states, four capital cities, 19 European countries being tributaries of the Danube's basin. Hence, the interest in cruise tourism has grown each year, for example, the demand in cruises on the Danube increased by 20% between 2003 and 2004 (Dickinger & Zins, 2006). A 2010 report, *Market observation for Inland Navigation in Europe*, notes that the Danube and the Rhine are the most important rivers in the European cruise market, followed by Moselle, Main, Elbe, Rhone, Seine and Saone (Market observation for inland navigation in Europe, 2010). The same report mentions that, of the 209 cruise ships operating in Europe at that time 96% were found on these rivers, the remaining 4% were operating on rivers in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland and Sweden (Market observation for inland navigation in Europe, 2010).

Regular ship traffic on the Danube has been ongoing since 1696, the first route being Passau - Vienna (Skoff, 2010). In 1818 the first steamship sailed on the Danube (between Vienna and Linz), which led to the creation of the first package tour in 1830 (Danube Tourist Commission) and first „all inclusive” Danube cruise package in 1886 (Skoff, 2010). Thus began the era of river transportation for tourism purposes, facilitated by the first convention that guarantee the free movement along the river since 1838 (Reinalda, 2009). Inland waterway traffic has increased significantly in the last two decades, from 13 cruise ships in 1992 to 75 vessels and 140,000 passengers in 2003, reaching 115 cruise lines and 220,000 passengers in 2009 (Danube Tourist Commission; Skoff, 2010). Table 1 captures the annual evolution of passenger and cruise ships on the Danube River; in only 12 years the number doubled, reaching 155 ships and 300,000 passengers in 2014 (Buchmüller, 2015).

Following the construction of the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal in 1992, the number of cruises has grown each year, and the Danube has become navigable on more than 87% of its total length (Danube Region Strategy).

Table 1. Annual number of cabin cruises and passengers on Danube River between 2002 and 2014
(Data source: Skoff, 2010; Buchmüller, 2015) ²

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2014
Cabin cruisers	60	75	84	99	101	105	109	115	155
Passengers (thousands)	119	140	150	155	190	196	214	220	300

The first tourist packages for cruises on the Danube developed by a Romanian travel agency were launched only in 2000 (Gherțoiu, 2014), and the first Romanian vessel performing cruises on the Danube and on international waters after 1990 is the ship „Prince Constantin” (Mazilu, 2012), relaunched in 1991 under the name of *Delta Star*. Despite all this, the product has not been sold for the Romanian tourists, not until 2015 when is launched the first cruise intended to fill this gap, on the route Fetești - Mila 23 - Sulina. ³

On the Romanian sector of the Danube (on which are located 115 villages and 20 cities) cruise ships stop at the Iron Gates, in the Danube Gorge, at Giurgiu, where the passenger are transported to Bucharest (optional trip) and at Tulcea, Mila 35 and Sulina, where tours of varying lengths are organized in order to visit the Danube Delta.

MS DELTA STAR CRUISE SHIP

Danube Delta holds a great and diversified tourism potential. The unique landscape, mosaic of ecosystems, several archeological vestiges, historical and architectural monuments, ethnographic and cultural elements but also gastronomy, are only few of the landmarks that emphasizes the uniqueness of the Danube Delta and its relevance, as one of the most representative tourism area of our country. Moreover, it is one of the areas that recorded annually, a growing number of tourists, especially foreigners. Bucurescu (2011) illustrates the dynamics of tourism in the Danube Delta, noting that a

² www.icpdr.org

³ <http://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Turism/182911/turistii-romani-pot-calatori-in-premiera-in-croaziere-all-inclusive-de-7-nopti-pe-dunare.html>

number of indicators (number of tourist structures, the number of accommodation units, etc.) of tourism in the area doubled between 2001 and 2009 (Bucurescu, 2011).

The cruise ship MS Delta Star, along with MS Danube Star cruise ship is among the first Romanian ships performing cruises on the Danube River. The river cruise ships owned by „*Steaua Dunarii Turism International*” are the only Romanian passenger ships operating at this moment. MS Delta Star has a length of 107.3 m, width of 12.8 m and height above water reaches 7.3m. The vessel has an accommodation capacity of 170 passengers in 88 rooms, which are served by 50-54 crew members. Most tourists on MS Delta Star are from german-speaking countries, especially Germany, and 80% of the tourists are seniors, aged between 55 and 90 years old. River cruises are organized from early April to late October of each year. MS Danube Star cruises from Passau (Germany) / Engelhartzell (Austria), depending on water levels of the Danube in Passau, to Budapest and back through Melk - Vienna - Bratislava. The entire trip takes about a week. MS Delta Star cruises 2.227 kilometers on the Danube, from Passau / Engelhartzell to the Danube Delta and back, through Melk - Vienna - Bratislava - Budapest - Mohacs - Belgrade - Novi Sad – Iron Gates - Giurgiu (optional transfer to Bucharest for sightseeing) - Ruse and Mila 35 in the Danube Delta (15 days in total). Further, the passengers have the option go on trips with smaller ships in the Danube Delta, on two routes, route 1 (1-4 hrs), Sfântu Gheorghe Branch - Tulcea - North Sireasa and back, or on the 2nd route (1 - 5.3 hrs), Tulcea - Mila 35 - Sireasa - Trofilca - Nebunu Lake - Periteasca - Mila 35 and back to Tulcea.

ASSESSMENT OF TOURISM POTENTIAL IN THE DANUBE DELTA ASSESSMENT OF NATURAL TOURISTIC POTENTIAL

Danube Delta's outstanding and diverse natural landscape makes it one of the most important regions for the preservation of biodiversity in south-eastern Europe. The traditional deltaic landscape is a mosaic of different biotopes, continental levees, river sandbanks (fluvial and fluvial-marine levees), a complex network of river channels, lakes and swamps that create valuable habitats for a large number of fauna species. In addition, the vegetation has created an outstanding landscape, through its uniqueness, density and valuable plant communities (Gâștescu & Știucă, 2008). All of these features create a spectacular deltaic landscape, and its complexity is reflected by the synergy of all physical-geographical factors. The assessment of the touristic potential of the natural environment was undertaken according to the role that the analyzed components may have in fostering tourism development. After applying the methodology and carrying out the corresponding analysis, it was revealed that the administrative-territorial units of the Danube Delta present a great natural touristic potential. The values assigned slightly vary from one ATU to another, depending on certain factors, better represented in some administrative units than in others (table 2). According to the analysis, a high potential, close to the maximum was noted in the ATUs that benefit of the presence of scientific reserves and monuments of nature (the 11 strictly protected areas). Thus, the ATUs that stood out are Sfântu Gheorghe (39 points), Chilia (38.5 points) and C.A. Rosetti (38.5 points).

ASSESSMENT OF ANTHROPIC TOURISTIC POTENTIAL

Within the assessment of the tourism potential in the Danube Delta, the factors that determine the ranking of the ATUs are the anthropic resources and infrastructure assets, given the high value of the natural capital throughout the delta. In this regard Sulina, the only urban area in

the delta, stands out with a total of 17 points (table 2). This value is reflected in the diversity of architectural monuments (the Old Lighthouse, the Palace European Commission of the Danube etc.), commemorative monuments (multi-confessional cemetery - Muslim, Catholic, Hebrew, Orthodox and cosmopolite - notable figures for Sulina and of various nationalities) and cultural events.

ASSESSMENT OF SPECIFIC TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

Tourism infrastructure represents an indicator that expresses the extent to which the touristic potential of a territorial unit is capitalized. This indicator can also provide other information, especially about the social and economic components of the territorial unit and it is a key factor underlying the development of tourism activities (Cocean & Deszi, 2009).

From the analysis performed it was revealed that tourism infrastructure is relatively well represented in the Danube Delta, but there are significant differences between the basic territorial units. Thus, in the ATUs located in the northern part of the delta, the accommodation offer is very limited, lacking in almost all ATUs, except Chilia, where the obtained score is also very low (3.5 points) (table 2). In the southern part of the delta tourism infrastructure is well represented, the highest score was registered in Sulina (15.5 points) and Crisan (12.5 points). Thus, the predominant tourism infrastructures are the boarding houses (Chilia Veche) and three star hotels (Sulina and Crisan).

ASSESSMENT OF TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The lack of certain infrastructure elements (communication routes, public utilities, telecommunications) in the territory leads to the inhibition of local development in general, and the tourism industry in particular. The physical and geographical characteristics of the Danube Delta do not allow construction of major road infrastructure.

Table 2. Tourism potential at ATU level in Danube Delta
(Data source: author's calculation based on the National Spatial Plan methodology)

Danube Delta ATU	Natural touristic potential	Anthropic touristic potential	Specific tourism infrastructure	Technical infrastructure	Total
Ceatalchioi	30.5	2	0.5	3.5	36.5
Chilia Veche	38.5	2	3.5	4.6	48.7
Pardina	30.5	2	0.5	4	37
C.A. Rosetti	38.5	2	0.5	2.5	43.5
Crișan	38.5	3	12.5	5.8	59.8
Maliuc	36.5	2	9	5.2	52.7
Sf. Gheorghe	39	3	10.5	9.5	62
Sulina	35	17	15.5	12.5	80
Score	40	20	20	20	100

The communal roads inside the delta are inadequate and most of them become impracticable at certain times because they depend on water levels in the delta. The only existing roads connect, on the southern bank of Chlia eight villages (Pătlăgeanca, Sălceni, Ceatalchioi, Plauru, Pardina, Tatanir, Ostrovu Tătaru, Câșlița), in the eastern part of the delta, a road connecting four other villages (Periprava, Letea, CA Rosetti, Sfiștofca, Cardon) and one city

(Sulina), a communal road that connects Sulina - Sf. Gheorghe on the marine levee, and the shortest route in the delta linking two villages, Crișan and Caraorman. The assessment of this indicator assigned the highest score to Sulina due to its virtue as maritime and fluvial port, as well as for the urban and communication infrastructure which are satisfactory compared with other localities in the delta. The minimum score reveals the low potential of technical infrastructure particularly in the villages CA Rosetti (2.5 points), Ceatalchioi (3.5 points) Pardina (4 points), Chilia Veche (4.6 points) (table 2).

TOURISM POTENTIAL CAPITALIZED BY MS DELTA STAR CRUISE SHIP

Tourism resources and infrastructure analysis provides an overview of the tourism potential of the Danube Delta. The sum of the scores obtained from the evaluation of natural resources, anthropic resources, specific touristic infrastructure and technical infrastructure, emphasizes the potential for tourism development of the administrative-territorial units in the studied area. According to the performed assessment, a hierarchy of the ATUs was established, based on the potential for tourism development (figure 1). The administrative-territorial units of the Danube Delta falls into the following categories: ATUs with *very high or extraordinary potential* (Sulina), ATUs with *high potential* (Sf. Gheorghe Crisan, CA Rosetti, Maliuc, Chilia Veche) and ATUs with *medium potential* (Ceatalchioi, Pardina) (figure 1).

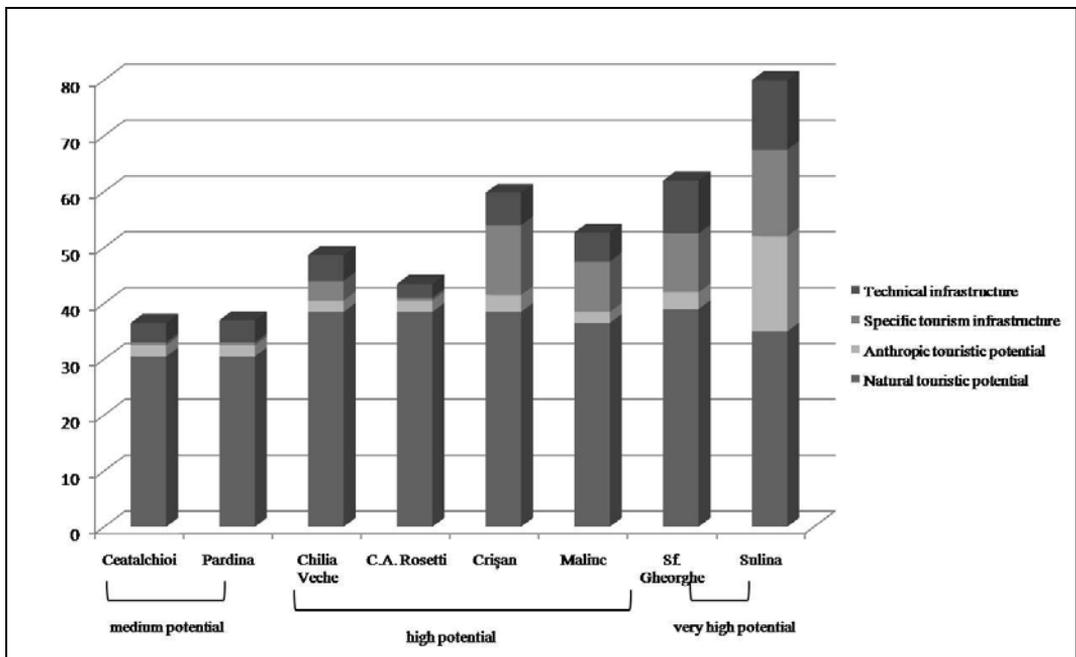


Figure 1. Tourism potential at ATU level in Danube Delta
(Data source: based on the table 1)

After eight days of navigating on the Danube, the ship MS Delta Star, ends its route at the entrance to the Danube Delta, at Mila 35, where starts back towards Passau/ Engelhartzell. The vessel cannot forward into the delta, mainly because of the low levels of Danube during the drought, but also due to some administrative aspects.

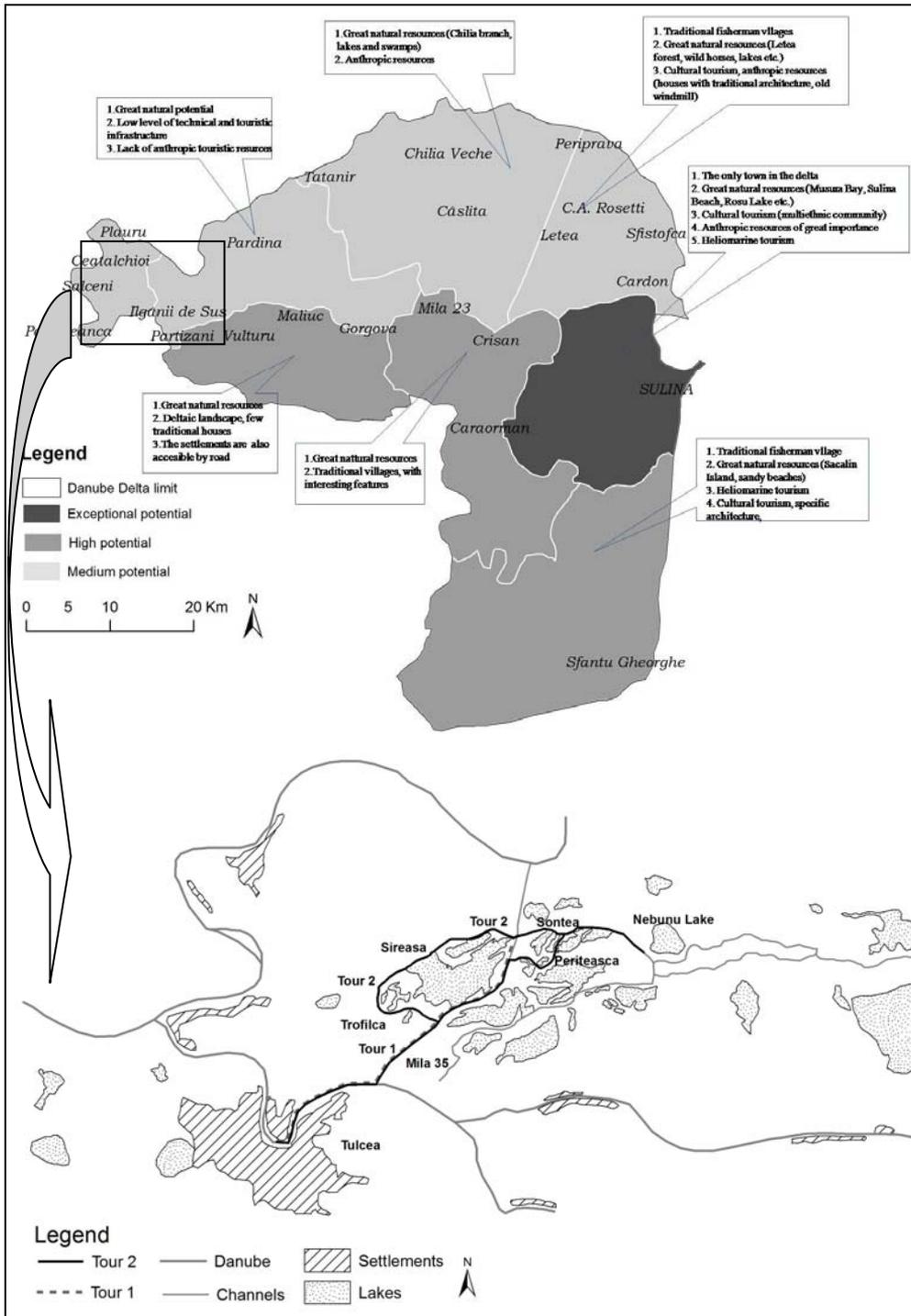


Figure 2. Tours in the Danube Delta available for the MS Delta Star passengers (Data source: PATZ Danube Delta and Ortofoto 2010)⁴

⁴ <http://geoportal.ancpi.ro/geoportal/viewer/index.html>

Accessing the package that includes the incursion into the Danube Delta is made by passengers before and during the cruise. In general, even if they are elderly persons the passengers are interested in visiting the delta, hoping to observe, besides the wonderful landscapes the typical deltaic fauna as well. The organized tours have a length of 1-4 hours (1st tour) and 1-5 hours (2nd tour). The route is Tulcea – Sf Gheorghe branch – Sireasa- Tulcea and Tulcea- Sf. Gheorghe branch - Mila 35 – Trofilca - Sireasa - Suntea - Nebunu Lake- Periteasca - Lunca - Mila 35 and Tulcea (figure 2).

The routes available for the MS Delta Star passengers are illustrated above (figure 2) and it is clear that the two routes include only to some extent attractions of great value in the delta. The current capitalization of tourism potential is carried out on a relatively negligible area, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The current routes take place within an ATU with remarkable natural potential, but the experience in the delta of the passengers on the ship MS Delta Star doesn't include any anthropic resources. The crossed path does not cover any traditional deltaic settlement and presents very low levels of infrastructure (both technical and touristic). Processing such an assessment of the tourist attractions enables an optimal selection and new itineraries might emerge. In order to properly capitalize the touristic resources the following are suggested: extending the time spent in the delta, to at least one or two days, for some of the most attractive resources to be visited; the development of alternative itineraries, preferably thematic itineraries, that will include the most valuable touristic attractions, revealed by the results of the assessments carried out; promoting the Danube Delta among the passengers and offering them adequate information during their journey to ensure appropriate route choice; development of tour packages that provide the possibility for constructing custom routes.

CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays, inland waterway cruise tourism has witnessed a strong development, not that much in Romania, where it is still incipient due to improper capitalization of valuable and unique tourism resources, such as those found in the Danube Delta. Danube cruises are organized from early April to late October of each year. The cruise ships MS Delta Star and MS Danube Star are the only Romanian cabin cruise ships on the Danube, navigating from Passau (Germany) / Engelhartszell (Austria) to the Danube Delta.

The current capitalization of the tourist potential of the Danube Delta through the optional trip in the delta is performed on a relatively negligible perimeter, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The tours available for the MS Delta Star ship passengers have a length of 1-4 hours (1st tour) and 1-5 hours (2nd tour). The route is Tulcea - Sf. Gheorghe branch - Sireasa - Tulcea and Tulcea - Sf. Gheorghe branch - Mila 35 - Trofilca - Sireasa - Suntea - Nebunu Lake - Periteasca-Lunca - Mila 35 and Tulcea (figure 2).

The analysis presented emphasizes that there is a poor correlation between the exceptional tourism potential of the Danube Delta and an adequate capitalization through the optional trips organised by MS Delta Star. The superficial capitalization of tourism resources in the delta does not provide outstanding experiences, to meet the expectations of tourists.

To identify the most valuable attractions of touristic interest in the Delta and including them to the itineraries proposed for the tourists on cruise ships, an assessment of the tourism potential of the Danube Delta was processed, at ATU level, according to the methodology outlined in the National Spatial Plan. Following the application of the methodology described above and

the related analysis was emphasized that the administrative-territorial unit of Danube Delta that has the greatest potential is Sulina, which this is not currently included in the organized tours. In order to properly capitalize the touristic resources, the ranking of tourist attractions enables their optimal selection and the inclusion in future itineraries for the cruise ships tourists.

By identifying and including the most valuable resources of touristic attraction in the itineraries for river cruise ship tourists is facilitated the construction of a proper structure of the touristic offer in this industry.

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