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THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATION SECTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEMED TOURISM PRODUCTS IN THE TOWN OF VELENJE

Abstract: *The conference article argues the role of cooperation between the Velenje School Centre and the local tourist organizations. The role of the school in the development of tourism supply is reflected in the conceptual design and initiatives for the marketing realisations of three themed local tourism products.*

The concept of alternative guided tours was developed for the purpose of education of students. The tourism product The Historical Loop is aiming to present various historical periods of the town to visitors through an interactive experience. The Velenje Socialism Experience is an ambitious project developed by a group of local institutions and individuals. The project is aim-

ing at exploiting the tourism potential of "the most modern town in Yugoslavia".

Through their cooperation in the projects, the students gain the competences of planning, designing and implementation of various tourism products. The support of the local population and local government and the cooperation between the main tourism institutions in the local environment are of crucial importance for the realisation of the projects.

Keywords: *tourism education, themed tourism products, guided tours, entertainment, Velenje School Centre*

Introduction

With its 25 high-school and 6 short-cycle higher education programmes, 1800 high-school students, 400 higher-education students and 200 teachers, the Velenje School Centre is one of the largest educational institutions in Slovenia. We have high-school and higher education programmes for professions in tourism and catering. The school cooperates with tourist institutions in practical training of students, informal education, competitions, preparation and implementation of projects and the development of tourism products. Through their cooperation in the projects the students gain the competences of planning, designing and implementation of themed products.

This article discusses the impact and role of school in the development of three themed tourism products, one of which is especially significant to the development of tourism in Velenje.

Gaining experience through modern approaches to guided tours

For youth, one of the most attractive areas of work in tourism are guided tours. This area has seen rapid changes. Conventional tours are meeting new challenges due to numerous innovations in using new approaches and technologies (Koerts and Smith, 2013, p. 4). Weiler (2013, p. 14) claims that in the recent decades, guided tour partici-

pants are becoming more involved, animated and inspired. Alternative tours are based on a more spontaneous interaction with the participants, and their experiences tend to be non-verbal, as opposed to the traditional tours (Lounder, 2013, p. 67). In addition to the commercial tours, free tours are becoming increasingly popular. Usually the tours are given to young people by young people. Tours can also be given by homeless people as they can be a part of an interactive art project etc. (Koerts and Smith, 2013, p. 5). The concept and techniques of alternative guided tours comprise a very broad spectre, from town tours on foot, on roofs, to deserted industrial, military and other facilities, to the use of various means of transport. The range of services is wide; some tours are based on unusual events and persons from either recent or distant past, or even on unpleasant events from the past (Lounder, 2013, pp. 65-71; Waddington, 2013, p. 59). The role of tourist guides is different in alternative tours – they have to combine a number of facts, legends, myths and rumours when passing information to the participants (Smith, 2010, p. 115).

In the Velenje School Centre we started to develop the concept of alternative guided tours in 2010 for the purpose of educating our students. Alternative guided tours were a new proposal for a tourism product in the tourist offer for youths in Velenje. The main purpose of the project was to educate the students on the modern trends, concepts and techniques of guided tours and offer them the opportunity to give tours in practice. The participants gained the competences of designing a tourism product, making an itinerary, public performance, verbal communication in the Slovene and English language and the implementation of a guided tour. A unique feature of this was that the group was not guided by a single guide but a group of students in the Slovene and English language. A unique competitive advantage of this product compared to the

standard guided tours were the students as young guides, who presented the multi-layered character and life of the town with their youthful energy in a sincere way, the way they experienced it.

Although the concept included the “classical” sights of Velenje, the emphasis was on the peculiarities and local legends. The proposed alternative guided tour covered the following areas: industrial heritage, youth infrastructure, urban stories that involve the infamous arsonist, architectural highlights and recreation, sport, culture and education. The tour in the form of a relaxed interaction between the guides and the participants included an entertainment point that was based on a local story, popular among the Slovenian youngsters.

The students that participated in the project varied throughout the years. The groups of participants of guided tours were pupils from local elementary schools, our high school students, high-school exchange students from abroad and the volunteers from the European Voluntary Service – EVS. The high school students posted their impressions from the guided tours at the Velenje Alter Tours Facebook page. In cooperation with the local tourist and information centre and youth hostel we filmed a promotion video which is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l18OIVt71bc>.

Alternative tours were developed in cooperation with the Velenje Youth Hostel. The head of the Velenje Youth Hostel Metka Ruprecht states that they included the alternative guided tours of Velenje in their offer “... because alternative tours are the most appropriate for the target groups that decide to stay at the Velenje Youth Hostel. We should introduce the town in an interesting, dynamic, non-classical way to these groups of young people in order to get their attention. The groups often have a very busy schedule and a limited amount of time. They want the tours to be interesting and not too long. They are looking forward to alternative

tours.” (M. Ruprecht, personal communication, 2014). The guided tours would be appropriate especially for organised groups, especially younger ones. In 2010 – 2012, organised groups of youngsters represented 60 % of all guests of the youth hostel.

Between October 2012 and February 2013 we carried out a quantitative survey among the guests of the Velenje Youth Hostel. The main purpose of the survey was to find out if the guests of the youth hostel are ready to take part in an alternative guided tour of Velenje. We used the results in the further development of the tourism product. The turning point in the development of the project was the inclusion of the tours in the tourist package of the Velenje Youth Hostel, intended for school groups and other organised groups. This represented new challenges for the school. Later – also due to the lack of promotional activities – the marketing realisation of the product did not happen. However, we are still providing alternative tours on different occasions, especially for the school's partners.

By cooperating in the project, the school guides developed several skills and were given new opportunities. In 2014, three of the “alternative guides” successfully obtained a licence for a local tourist guide.

Educational but ideologically problematic tourism product

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the liberalization of migration facilitated the marketing of the post-war period heritage of the former Warsaw pact countries. There is no doubt that the socialist heritage has a strong tourist potential. Tourists are visiting the surviving material remnants from the period of socialism, walking the tourist paths and enjoying themselves in theme parks.

Tourism products based on the heritage of socialism in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe differ in contents. In many

products that come from private business initiatives, the economic interest is stressed, and the contents are adapted to the taste of the tourists, who are most frequently searching for the experience. On the other hand, the products that come from state institutions prioritize the educational role: to present the anti-democratic nature of the former system and to warn the young people who did not experience that period themselves. In the countries that arose on the territory of former Yugoslavia, evocations of memories and traditions of the “Tito period” are also strongly present and highly popular among specific segments of population. The House of Flowers (Tito's resting place) is one of the most visited tourist attractions in Belgrade. On each anniversary of the former Day of the Youth on 25th of May, the birth house of Josip Broz Tito is visited by thousands of *Yugo-nostalgics*.

Despite its marketing potential, the Slovenian tourism market does not yet know a specific product, dedicated exclusively to the heritage of the socialist or Yugoslav period. An obstacle in the development of such themed products is the fact that many are considered as ideologically problematic in Slovenia. 70 years after the end of World War 2, Slovenians are still ideologically divided. Branko Šuštar (2011, p. 24) from the Slovenian School Museum points out that today (again) the museum presentation of school tradition from the socialist times is under the ideological influence. In 2001, within the framework of the permanent exhibition of educational history, the School museum presented an “accurate and professionally immaculate lesson from the socialist period, which, according to the evaluation from the ideological point of view, became so distracting for the new and different ideological order that it had to disappear from the museum programme in 2006” (Šuštar, 2009, p. 13).

As an educational institution in the field of tourism we could not ignore the fact

that our hometown lacks a comprehensive tourism product that would connect the elements of the heritage from the recent history, despite a rich heritage from the Yugoslav era. Velenje as the youngest town in Slovenia and a typical example of a socialist town with its modernist architecture and post-war period monuments represents a strong tourist potential. In terms of the very essence of heritage phenomena, it confirms the widely accepted opinion that heritage is being constructed by people, in accordance with our current needs. Thus the heritage of the socialist period could not be actualized without a real demand in society.

When Velenje is mentioned, many residents of Slovenia first think of an industrial city that was established only after World War 2 – in the period of socialism and rapid industrialization. In the decade before the bloody breakdown of Yugoslavia, the town was named after the first president of the Yugoslav federation, Josip Broz – Tito. In the first years after the World War 2, Velenje was only a small market town. When, after the year 1950, the demand for coal increased, Velenje started to develop rapidly, and the problem of the lack of residential buildings became central. Once a local project, it now became a national one: with the help of voluntary “high impact” work the “ideal town” of the new social order was built (Kljajič, 1999, pp. 378–384). The town centre, dimensioned for the scale of the whole region, symbolized the new peoples’ authority. Already during its construction, Velenje became the showpiece of modern architecture and urbanism of socialist Yugoslavia, which was admired by masses of school students and domestic tourists (Poles, 1999, p. 451). The socialist »miracle« town of Velenje was proudly presented to world leaders. Among the most influential political figures who visited Velenje, besides Tito, were former Soviet leaders Brezhnev and Khrushchev, Romanian leader Ceausescu and president of the Polish labour party Gierek.

In 2012 we prepared a conceptual design for a themed tourism product for the festival organised by the National Tourist Association. The product was entitled *Lepo (bilo) je v naši domovini biti mlad* (*It is (was) wonderful to be young in our homeland*), a modified title of a children’s song with an ideological character from the era of Yugoslavia. The short video, in which the Yugoslav iconography is stereotyped, which is available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIO-Na7RB0I>, was made in cooperation with local tourism authorities.

At the festival *Več znanja za več turizma* (*More knowledge for more tourism*) in Ljubljana we set up a stand equipped with the coat of arms, souvenirs, the flag of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the music from the era of Yugoslavia. We showed the visitors a simulation of voluntary “high-impact” work in building the modern Velenje, a simulation of the action “Nothing can surprise us” (in the former system this was an obligatory preparation to a potential military intervention by foreign forces) and a Pioneers initiation ceremony with the solemn oath, which was received with a lot of nostalgia and emotions by the older generation. The original and convincing presentation of selected elements of iconography of the Yugoslav era convinced the experts’ jury which honoured our team with the golden award for the best presentation. In the same school year also we received a silver award for a research work discussing the same theme. Both of these awards also gave us an expert approval of the adequacy of the proposed tourism product.

As strong support from local tourism authorities and local public existed, a group of local key partners from the fields of tourism under the coordination of Town Municipality – Tourist Information Centre was soon created (Podvratnik, 2013). We defined the purpose and target groups of the project. As the curriculums of elementary and secondary schools barely touch upon the era of

Yugoslavia, we believe that the product has great potential in the form of one-day field trips for higher grade elementary-school pupils and high-school students. The school groups would learn about the construction of a modern post-war town, the modernist architecture, public monuments and recent history. The product would also appeal to the inhabitants of the former Yugoslav countries, as Velenje is a famous multi-cultural and multi-national town, to various elderly associations, the Yugo-nostalgics and foreign tourists interested in the Socialist heritage (B. Pavšek, personal communication, 2013). Velenje is well-known for its urban planning and architecture, which is why the product would also be interesting for the Slovene expert public. Local experts agree that such a tourism product would enrich the tourist offer of Velenje and make it stand out from the offer of other towns. Because of the extremely different attitudes of various social groups towards the Yugoslav period heritage, we had to create different tourism products for different target groups. A group of older people may feel nostalgic towards the period of Yugoslavia, while for the youth, this period is completely alien.

The principal challenge in creating the tourism product named "Velenje Socialism Experience" was the interpretation of the complex heritage of the Yugoslav period. The themed product, still being in the phase of development, consists of a guided tour and simulation of a school lesson that includes the Pioneers initiation ceremony.

The guided city tour is based on the heritage of a single town – Velenje, but nevertheless includes the necessary elements of iconography of the Yugoslav period. The guided tour explains why and how the town arose, defines the design of the town that is typical for the socialist period, and refers to the specific characteristics of the period that is presented in detail afterwards.

The biggest challenge was the creation of the materials for the school lesson from the

period of Yugoslavia. The purpose of the lesson is "edutainment" of (mostly young) attendants. The lesson was constructed based on the key elements of the Yugoslav socio-economic system that would try to present the positive values of the former system and government, such as "voluntary work" and "fraternity between nations" to the young people who did not live in the socialist period themselves. The lesson also includes elements of irony, which is a very common part of the interpretation of the Socialist period in general, as well as elements of criticism. The culmination of the lesson is the Pioneers initiation ceremony, which is, because of its very emotional and nostalgic nature, a very important element of the whole product, especially for the older participants from the former states of the Federation. The lesson was tested on the representatives of local tourist organisations and several grades of high-school students. The feedback was very positive. On the other hand, when the product was tested on a group of high-school teachers, the lesson received some constructive criticism. Based on this criticism we improved the lesson's content and implementation with the help of history experts from a local museum.

When designing the tourism product the teachers (in the 21st century in democratic Europe) were faced with (self-) censorship of the project based on the tourist potential of the Socialist heritage. On 25th May 2012 (the anniversary of the former "Day of the Youth" – in Yugoslavia this was the celebration of Tito's birthday with all the socialist iconography) all the educational institutions in the Republic of Slovenia received a memo from the Ministry of Education that any "worship of the communist totalitarian regime is unconstitutional" (MIZKŠ, 2012). As the memo states, the worship of the totalitarian regime is especially unacceptable in schools, which must educate children in the spirit of respecting human rights and democratic freedoms. At our school we are

teaching the children about the tourist potential of the (especially local) environment, which is why this memo was a negative surprise. It was also quite ironic, as the concept design for a tourism product from the field of the heritage of the Yugoslav era received a gold award at a competition of high schools and higher education facilities. As a consequence of the memo and unsolved ideological debates regarding the post-war era, the school is no longer a partner in the “The Velenje Socialism experience” product. The question arises, to what extent, if any, can politics interfere in teaching students in the field of tourism?

Besides its marketing potential and emotional nostalgic elements, the presented tourism product also carries an (unplanned) media and political charge. The product, in case of realization, would probably cause a negative response in a certain segment of Slovenian and of Velenje residents. It is necessary to state that the tourism product does not aim at praising the role of socialism, Yugoslavia or leaders of the former system. At the same time the project is not aiming at ridiculing this historical period or political-economic system. The proposed product would make use of the tourist potential of the heritage of the period that had such a drastic impact on the development of the fifth largest town in Slovenia. As a result, the preparation of the product is taking place with a certain distance and respect towards this typical example of dissonant heritage (Gams and Gaberšek, 2013, p. 189).

Interactive stroll through the history of Velenje

Since 2014 our school has been developing a tourism product entitled “Historical Loop” which connects all the important historical eras of Velenje. The project is a synthesis of partial projects that we have implemented in the past years. The work and

traditions of miners (as Velenje is an important mining town) was demonstrated at the 2007 national tourist festival and received a golden award for the best presentation. In 2009 we cooperated with the Municipality of Velenje and the Velenje Museum in an international project entitled CUSTODES, where we demonstrated a night at a castle with a feast. The life of gentry in the era of bourgeoisie was demonstrated in 2012 in cooperation with the Tourist and Information Centre. The theme of the construction of Velenje was developed in the “Velenje Socialism Experience” product that we have already presented.

Historical Loop is a proposal for an innovative tourism product that would take the participants through the history of Velenje in an innovative way. The main purpose of the product is to teach the participants (especially younger ones) about the characteristics of a certain era and animate them while doing so. High school students in the roles of tourist guides at specific points present the characteristics of individual historical eras. Then, students in special period costumes act out a typical example of life or work in an era. The participants are asked to be actively involved in the demonstrations, as this is how they acquire a “ticket” for the next demonstration, story and historical era. By cooperating in the product, the students would be training for the role of tourist guides, informers and animators. The product would be intended especially for school groups, which would learn about the town’s history in an attractive way. With the support of key local tourist and cultural institutions, we have made a promotion video of the project, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPkJOE3fz70>, which involved about 100 high-school students over the course of five shooting days.

Based on an analysis of the results of a survey performed among the target group of students we have come up with a shorter (one-hour) version of the product which

takes place on a single location – the new town promenade. The participants use an outline map to look for four objects that represent individual historical eras. When they find an object, a character from the period appears and a guide gives a presentation of the historical period.

Conclusion

By cooperating in the tourism projects the students and high-school students gain various competences, from the planning of tourism projects to public performance. Based on a theme they have studied, they prepare a script and a schedule of activities, distribute roles and make props. This way they can learn about all the phases of the project. When the project is evaluated, the challenges are taken into consideration and improvements are proposed.

The article discusses examples of good practice of cooperation of school with tourist institutions in projects that are based on heritage in the local environment and represent an unexploited tourist potential. The participants learn that there is a gap between the opportunity and business idea on one hand and the actual realisation of the project on the other. This gap can be bridged only by connecting and cooperating with key providers in the local environment. The school as an educational institution does not market tourist products. However, it can contribute ideas, knowledge and youthful energy for new projects in the field of tourism. The school's next challenge in the field of tourism will be to establish a learning centre in the renovated camp at the Velenje Lake, which could present an added value in gaining competences for the education of participants.

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