

NEW CHALLENGES REGARDING THE ROMANIAN TOURISM SERVICES' QUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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Abstract

The economy of services represents in modern economy a reality in the developed countries. The enterprises offer similar services, but the consumers perceive differently the services value. So, the quality represents a big problem for the most enterprises in services sector.

In the Romanian tourism sector, the quality represents an important factor for competitiveness. In the context of European integration, the quality of products and services and the competitiveness become essential conditions for ensure the development of this sector. Unfortunately, the last news regarding the Romanian tourism quality are not very promising, there are still many shortcomings in this field.

Our paper has as main purpose to underline the conceptual frame in the context of the recent theoretical evolution, specifying the characteristics and typologies of tourism services. In the same context, the aspects of quality and the quality perception of consumers are briefly presented.

The applicative side is realized by a SWOT analysis of the Romanian tourism which reveals the main causes of an inefficient tourism: the low qualification of the staff; the lack of the financial motivation for the employees; the non-observance of the standards regarding the comfort category for the tourism unit; the lack of quality standards in the tourism field; the inefficient management and the infrastructure problems. Starting from these weak points we tried to point out the necessity of adopting the best practices for Romanian tourism quality which are the followings: a high management knowledge; a quality management system; authorities involvement in promoting the Romanian products and the investment stimulation; a Q mark - certify system for the hotels' quality.

Key words: Tourism Services, Services Quality, Consumer Expectations, Quality in Tourism

1. Introduction

In the context of European integration, Romania can beneficiate of many opportunities regarding the tourism sector but, in the same time, it has to face a lot of challenges related to the increased competition and competitiveness of the tourism products and services. Thus, the quality represents a problem for the majority of the firms from the services sector. In the Romanian tourist's sector, the quality represents a major factor for maintaining the competitiveness.

In an economy based on knowledge, under the conditions of economic development and the competition increasing, the tourist services suppliers are constrained to take into consideration the needs, the requirements and the consumer's expectations regarding the quality and the tariff of the performed services. Consumers are better informed and exigent, wishing to acquire services with a maximum quality and at minimum price. In consequence, the managers and the employers of the firms belonging to the tourism industry (tourism agencies, hotels, restaurants etc.) should offer

the qualitative services to keep their clients and to attract new ones, for the purpose of a continuous increasing of the turnover, profit and the market share.

The reality shows that the quality of the services performed by tourist units from Romania is unsatisfactory for many foreign tourists and the maintenance of the image for a qualitative tourism represents for them a matter of survival. So, the offer of the tourism packages for agro-tourism has poor services offered to the tourists and the insufficient promotion for this sector. The poor quality of the tourism services from Romania, the poor promotion of the village's destinations and also the negative image which the Romanian tourism has in present could persuade the tourism agencies to give up to the internal offers in more or less closer future.

It seems the biggest problem of the Romanian tourism is related to the infrastructure, the bad quality of the roads, garbage and pollution. It was also noticed the level too increased of prices reported to the quality of the offered services, the low professional training of the specialized personnel in tourism and the lack of seriousness of the Romanian business partners.

2. Tourism Services

2.1. Tourism Services - Theoretical approaches

Although until now there was not a "perfect" definition of the services, most of the definitions are stating one or more characteristics of the services which make them different from the tangible products. Generally speaking, the services represent a human activity with a specialized content, having as a result useful effects, non-materials and intangible which are designed to satisfy a social need [Ioncica, 2003]

The standard SR EN ISO 9004-2:1994 define the service as representing "the results of the activities carried out on the interchange between supplier-client and of the internal activities of the supplier in order to satisfy the client demands". According to the above standard four general categories of products are delimited: hardware (components, subassemblies etc), software (program-products, procedures, information etc), processed materials, services (banking, insurance, transport tourism etc). As an ISO application, the following types of services are resulting:

- Welcome services: restaurants, tourism services, shows, hotel, radio, TV;
- Scientific: Research, development, studies;
- Maintenance: electricity, auto-mechanic, heating systems, informatics, constructions, climate systems;
- Health service: hospital services, ambulance, medically analyses laboratories, dentists;
- Public services: cleaning, water supply, green spaces maintenance, gas supply, electricity, police;
- Trading: en gross, en detail, stocking, distribution, packaging;
- Communications: airports, airline companies, transports, network, postal service, informatics;
- Finance: banks, insurances, retail, renting agencies, accounting;
- Professions: architects, lawyers, security services, training and education, engineering, project management;
- Technical: consulting, photography, metrology, tests laboratories;

- Administration: personal services, informatics services, administration services and others.

The concept and the content of the services have suffered different approaches in the context of a permanent change of the environment. Thus, the evolutions during the last decades in the global economic framework lead to increasing of the services importance in human's life, the savings of the developed countries being characterized as: "services economies". This new type of saving already represents a reality in these countries where the third sector hold the main share in the increasing of the Gross National Product and in the employment of the population. As a constitutive part of this sector, the tourism appears as a distinct field, but in continuous changing. This may be regarded as a tourist services succession in order to satisfy the persons' needs appeared with the occasion and during the travels (the organizing of a journey, transport, rest, recreation etc). Their purpose is to create conditions for body recovering after effort, but after their consuming to bring a plus of knowledge.

Being a part of the third sector, the services present a series of general or common features with the third sector such as: immateriality, simultaneity of the production with consuming, inseparability from the performing person, the high weight of the expenses with human resource intangibility. The services have also a series of specific features such as: personalization, dynamism, seasoning fluctuation, complexity, heterogeneity and diversity.

No matter to whom they are addressed, the tourism services are registering a diversification process. The ways and directions of diversification are numerous, as an effect resulting their complexity and quality which are important means for maintaining the competition on the internal and external market. If for the basic services the perfection and diversification is much in regard with qualitative side and the adaptation with the tourism characteristics, the category of supplementary services constitutes the prolific ground for the appearance of new facilities and arrangements.

2.2. The services quality

Although the benefits for performing qualitative services are obvious and unanimous recognized both by the consumers and the producers, the quality represents a problem for most of the firms within the services sector. While the competitor firms are offering similar services from the view of the service's content, of the material base and facilities, the consumers perceive differently their quality. In consequence, they will choose the services of the firms which offer valuable services in their personal opinion.

Generally, the quality of a product is defined as "its ability to satisfy the needs of clients" [Minciu, 2004]. In the services sector, the quality may be defined as the result of the comparison between the desired service by the consumer and the received service. The main causes which make the objective of evaluation of service's quality a very complex one are the following: the simultaneity of the services production and consuming, the client's participation to the process of performing, the relation established between the contacting personnel of the performing firm and the clients, the links realized between the services consumers, in generally.

The quality of the service is determined in an essential measure by the performer's qualities but also by the client which take part of the service performing. Thus, there are two major approaches of the quality:

A) *The conformity with the specifications* - from the producer's point of view. In order to evaluate the quality of services, the conformity with the specifications does not represent an adequate approach because the services performing requires, most of the times, a high degree of human direct involvement. Not always the standards are compatible with the rules and the objectives of human dignity, most of the times being difficult to be realized the specific standards because these do not lead directly to the achievement of a trustful climate and a relevant control for special situations.

B) *The fulfillment and overriding the client's expectations.* The client/consumer can issue a judgment regarding the degree of fulfillment by the product/service of his expectations. These represent a subjective critical factor, difficult to be quantified during the process of quality evaluation. The organizations which are capable to transpose in a higher measure the subjective factors into specifications are gaining a considerable advantage comparing with the organizations which are trying to establish some standards based on value judgment of the management. Therefore, in order to appreciate the quality of a service the consumer compares what they expect from that service with the experience during the performance. When their expectations are satisfied, even if there are of an objective or subjective nature, they appreciate the quality of the performance as being good.

In appreciation of quality of the tourism services, the clients use the followings: the impressions, the circumstances, the past experience during the consuming of a tourism product, verbally communications, personally exigencies of the consumers and tourism advertising.

Adopting the Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry model [Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985] regarding the dimension of services quality it results five criteria in order to appreciate the tourism services by the clients:

- 1 *tangibility* - appearance of physical facilities, location, equipment, personnel and communication materials;
- 2 *reliability* - ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;
- 3 *responsiveness* - willingness to help customers and provide prompt services;
- 4 *assurance* - knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence;
- 5 *empathy* - the individual attention manifested by the performer of tourism services regardless to the clients.

Therefore, in a full of uncertainties field as the services one, one thing is for sure: consumer appreciates the quality. The consumer is not using too many rational criteria of appreciation because usually he is not familiarized with these criteria, but most of the times, he applies satisfaction criteria. For the case of common transportation service, for example, there can be deduced the following qualitative characteristics: *regarding the organization* - number of transported passengers, the waiting interval, medium speed, distance between two stations, and *regarding the mean of transportation* - temperature, lightning, the high of the bars, number of doors, cleaning etc.

The firms performing tourism services, in order to appreciate the fulfillment of the qualitative performances established, may adopt several methods, such as:

- *the method of critical incident* - is based on gathering the information through individuals interviews, which allow to identify in a short period of time the difficulties faced by the clients during the performing process;
- *the method of evidence and administration of complaints* - consists in registering the complaints made by clients, classification and identifying of exact solutions;
- *the method of mysterious client* - involves nominating of a firm's employer who will check certain services provided by the firm and analyzes the real conditions in which the clients are served;
- *the method of satisfaction investigations* - allows firms positioning reported to the main competitors, regarding the quality perception, identifying the clients difficulties, determining the causes of client's dissatisfactions, testing the program's efficiency for quality improvement etc.

From theoretical point of view, in marketing's vision, the services quality problem consists in equalizing the perceived level of service with consumer's expectations. However in practice, after evaluating the services quality it may result the following alternatives: "satisfactory service", "acceptable service", "very good service", or "over expectations service".

Regarding all the reasons mentioned above we can appreciate that quality ensuring, respectively the efficient administration of the quality in the services sector assumes considering of three key factors:

- *relation between the performer-client* - reflected in personnel's behavior and his professionalism;
- *organizing and control of the performing process* - respectively, the proper allocation of the material and human resources,
- *responsibility of the management regarding the quality* - focused on the consumer's satisfaction.

3. The quality in Romanian tourism

3.1. SWOT analysis of the quality of Romanian tourism

The quality in tourism has many dimensions, being determined by the persons who require "tourism products" having the best ratio quality-price. The main reasons for a good systematized management of the quality in tourism are: increasing of competition, lack of willingness to provide a service, increasing of products standardization, the unfavorable ratio between price-performance etc.

The complexity of the quality phenomenon in tourism is referring to three aspects:

- the quality of the equipments: facility, functioning, esthetically aspects;
- the quality of the environment: view, adverse effects/pollution;
- the quality of hospitality: services, information, kindness, amiability;
- the quality of human resource.

In present, the problems of the Romanian tourism are being solved mostly through a lower approach, based only on the experience and practically sense, which means through common practices with a low performance. But it must recognize that, during the last years, there is an ascendant trend which shows the fact that the young manager's generation has learned the

lesson. As any economic activity, the tourism, by offering qualitative services, has as main goal to satisfy the consumers and to obtain profit.

The last statistics are reflecting the lack of quality in Romanian tourism. After a SWOT analyses regarding the Romanian tourism, the following causes of an inefficient Romanian tourism have resulted:

- lack of qualified employees in this field due an inefficient program for training;
- lack of the human resource motivation due to the small remuneration;
- not respecting the standards regarding the comfort category required for the hosting or food unity;
- lack of qualitative standard in the tourism field;
- poor management, the lack of an efficient policy;
- unadevate promotion and marketing for tourism services;
- lack of the all-inclusive system and Internet services in the 2 and 3 stars hotels;
- infrastructure problems.

Considering all above, the following practices would be useful for improving of the tourism services quality:

1) *Solid knowledge of management*. There is the need for the quality problem of tourism services to become a problem of modern management, which means a problem of vision, values, objectives and strategies, a problem of good practice conduct, standards and excellence models, solid knowledge of management, knowledge regarding the quality and the quality management and also for coherent performing and sustained using this knowledge. The approach in this manner of the tourism services supposes to sensibly the interested and involved persons, and then a general informing, and finally forming them as performing managers, specialists in the quality field, which possess adequate competences and solid skills. Only in this way can be realized the transition from the empirical approach of the practitioner in the field - based on good sense and experience - to what is called scientific approach, which adds to the good sense and experience a multitude of knowledge regarding: concepts, principles and laws, methods and techniques, instruments, models, standards, good practices in the domain of tourism.

2) *Implementation and complying with the quality management system*. In order to trade qualitative services, managers and employers of the firms must desire, to be able and to know how to make the quality, to evaluate and permanent improve it. To subscribe for these mentioned standards, they must implement a quality management system, according to the standards ISO 9000, in the tourism companies which they are managing, system which suppose planning, control, insuring and improving the quality of tourism services. For this, they have to perform the following steps:

- general informing of the entire personnel regarding the quality problems, meaning what is the quality and how is it made, especially the quality management, and why they need it. The manager should start by presenting a large vision, correct and to the point, a profitable framework for activity which can allow, based on the values showed in his declaration, to elaborate the policy and to establish in a feasible and profitable manner the goals and the objectives on short, medium and long term;
- the selection from his own personnel those who will study this information, transposing it into knowledge, skills and activity models, personnel who collaborating with specialists from the exterior of the company (experts, consultants, auditors), will have as their mission and

attributions designing, implementation, and certification of a quality management system in accordance with certain references such as standards and excellence models. To specialize themselves, the selected personnel should join different programs for training and formation in the quality field;

- the designing and the implementation of the quality management system in the tourism company. First, this means to realize the working instruments - establishing the references (rules and normative, standards, models), elaborating the documentation (quality book, procedures and instructions, questionings, forms, files, registers, or informatics applications), informing the entire personnel and the training of the personnel involved in the work with these instruments. This step is closing with the final examination, through an internal audit, regarding the system functioning and the imposing the needed corrective measures;
- the certification of the system conformity with the reference adopted by the company as a model of good practice, usually with a standard. This action should be done through an external audit, which is a third party, and it should be performed by an certification institution and is completed by issuing a conformity certificate, accompanied by a conformity certification mark.

3) *The implication of the authorities in promoting the local product and stimulation of the investments.* The responsible authorities should take actions regarding the followings: highlight and communicate the strategic importance of tourism; ensure that quality statistics and information feed into policy and decision-making processes; empower national travel&tourism institutions to drive forward development of the industry; co-ordinate infrastructure development which supports travel&tourism; create a competitive business environment that encourages investment; balance economics with environment, people and cultures; develop the human capital required for travel&tourism growth; promote product diversification that spreads demand; bring new funding and co-ordination into promotion and marketing; favor technological advancement.

4) *Q Mark - the certification system of the quality level for hotels services* should be applied in the hotels units. Q Mark has no connection with the number of stars, but with the efficiency at a recognized and certified level within the European Union, regarding the quality/price ratio. This supposes the diversification of the services and the hospitality's emphasizes. Its implementation means credibility and profit for the hotel and for the client means safety and satisfaction.

3.2. Evolutions and trends in Romanian tourism

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has registered an impressive increase in the travel and tourism sector starting with the 90's, leading to a healthy growth of tourism revenues. Travel and tourism encompasses transport, accommodation, catering, recreation and other visitor-related services.

While in terms of the number of foreign visitors Romania fares well in comparison to other countries in the region like Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia, when it comes to revenues, Romania is still playing catch-up, as reflected in the figure 1.

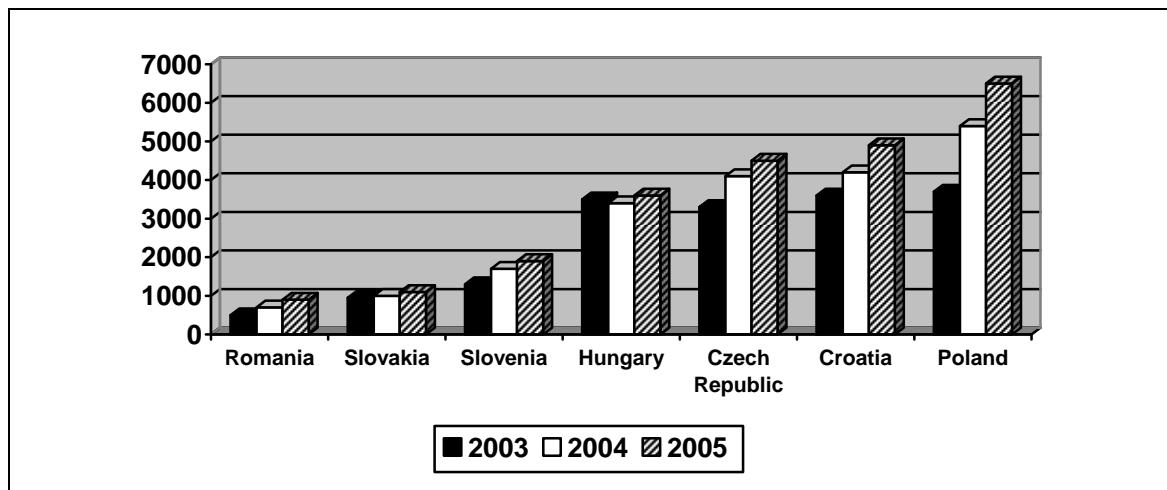


Figure 1. Revenues from foreign tourists (USD mn)

Source: World Travel&Tourism Council,

http://www.wttc.travel/bin/pdf/original_pdf_file/romania2006.pdf

The most significant factor keeping Eastern European tourism from realizing its full potential is the inadequate state of tourism-related infrastructure and accommodations that, in many cases, are below the level requested by western tourists. Being aware of the state of facts, most countries in the region are fast-tracking ambitious investment plans for the short and medium term, in order to close the comfort and convenience gap to more developed regions.

In the past decade, Romania has been portrayed in the international media mostly as a country of utter poverty and environmental degradation than as a land of beautiful countryside, ancient monasteries and citadels and rich history and culture. However, as international perceptions about Romania are gradually changing, it is imperative that the country create a strong and positive image to be portrayed through a strong brand backed by a quality tourist product.

Since 2000, Romania posted a strong growth in terms of tourism demand and has been part of the sector's growth trend in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2005, the total number of tourists accommodated in Romania amounted to 5.8 mn USD, out of which 75.4% were Romanian and 24.6% were foreign. In 2006, foreign arrivals in Romania have increased 3.4%, with 94.2% of all foreign visitors coming from Europe. On the other hand, Romanian tourists' departures abroad have increased 24.7%, most of them leaving Romania by car (83.3%) [W TTC, 2006].

Last year, total arrivals in Romania have amounted to 6.21 mn, representing a 7.1% increase compared to the same period in 2005. On the accommodation side, the most notable increases in the number of tourists have been posted by hostels (+55.5%), inns (+34.7%) and rural boarding houses (+27.5%). The occupancy rate at end-November 2006 has been of 33.6%, in line with the level registered a year earlier [NIS].

In 2005, 89% of foreign tourists chose to stay at hotels, almost three quarters of which preferred a minimum three star comfort level, thus increasing the number of tourists using this lodging category. In comparison, only 73% of Romanian tourists stayed at hotels, with just above half of them choosing two-star comfort or below. The data leads us to believe that there is good development potential in two directions of the sector:

- the medium and superior hotels segment (three stars and above) that would continue to cater mainly to foreign tourists with higher expectations;
- the economy segment (two stars and below), addressing lower budget customers that, according to statistics, are mostly local tourists.

Looking at the tourist allocation around the country, Bucharest and other large cities are the main destinations (48%), followed by mountain and seaside resorts.

The number of foreign tourists has posted a significant increase in the last years, becoming an important source of income for companies offering tourist services. In 2005, most of the tourists came from Europe. The majority of them came from Italy (14%) and Germany (13%). The main destinations were Bucharest and other county capitals, while the preferred accommodation option was three-star hotels, suitable for business trips.

At the end of 2005, the total number of tourism accommodation facilities in the country was 2,606 with a total capacity of over 60,000 rooms. Hotels hold by far the largest part (72%) of the total capacity, while other lodging types (boarding houses, motels, camping sites) each amount to less than 10%.

The present concentration of lodging capacity suggests that investors have been focusing their attention on leisure destinations like the mountains and the seaside, while business tourism demand remains unsuitably covered. In recent years, most of the investments in lodging facilities have been done by local business people, independent of major hotel chains or affiliations. Such investments were generally not done due to a specific focus on the hotel industry, but rather as part of an asset accumulation drive or to strengthen the owner's standing in the local business community. As a result, counties with higher economic development have benefited from most investments in the accommodation sector, thus contributing to the present breakdown of lodging capacities (seen in the chart above). Given the recent EU membership and the sustained economic growth, we believe that business travel is a sector of great potential.

In terms of comfort level of the existing accommodation facilities, two-star hotels hold the largest weight of the offer, representing approximately 45% of the total capacity. The three-star category follows, accounting for approximately 23% of the total offer, which increased as compared to the previous year, when the weight of three-star facilities was only 15%. The facilities distribution by level is still mainly driven by domestic tourism and by the average income of Romanian tourists, four and five-star hotels holding below 10% of the offer (figure 2).

While noteworthy steps have been made in recent years to improve the quality of services in the tourism sector, there are still visible discrepancies between accommodation facilities of similar category, thus leading tourists to show less trust in the system as a whole.

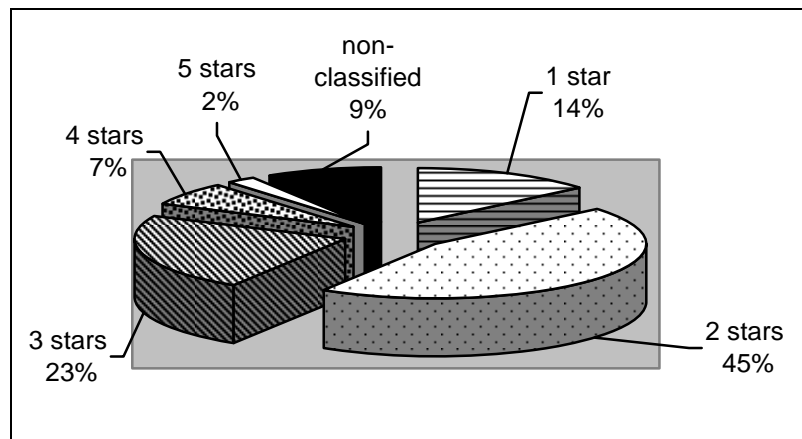


Figure 2. Romania - Lodging capacity by comfort level (2005)

Source: National Institute of Statistics

<http://www.insse.ro/cms/rw/pages/index.en.do>

4. Conclusions

Increasing of the global competition, but also the national one, imposes to those who are offering tourism services to take measures in order to re-adapt, decisive in order to maintain their specific market share through diversification and correlation with the price of the tourism product.

The SWOT analysis of the Romanian tourism reveals the main causes of an inefficient tourism: the low qualification of the staff; the lack of the financial motivation for the employees; the non-observance of the standards regarding the comfort category for the tourism unit; the lack of quality standards in the tourism field; the inefficient management and the infrastructure problems.

It is the moment for the professionals belonging to the tourism industry to understand the new tendencies for the international tourism development and to realize the fact that the exigencies higher and higher of the clients are obliging them to appeal to new management instruments. More than that, it is important that all those who are involved to put into practice this ideas and instruments.

Therefore it is essential to be adopted the best practices for Romanian tourism quality such as: high management knowledge; a quality management system; authorities' involvement in promoting the Romanian products and the investment stimulation; a Q mark - certification system of the quality level for hotels' services.

The financial support is also essential in order de ensure high quality services in tourism. Therefore, in the period 2006-2008, the Romanian government will allocate 325 mn EUR for tourism investment projects, such as: rehabilitation of ski areas and slopes with potential, development of spas and health resorts, development of seaside and Danube Delta, development of mountain and tourist areas. Moreover, with Romania entering the EU starting January this year, the tourism sector will benefit from structural funds of approximately EUR 3 bn during 2007-2013 [NDP]

As the improvement of comfort continues for every accommodation category, a migration of business customers from four and above stars hotels to three and below stars is expected. This will also lead to more stable tariff

policies driven mainly by competition, thus resulting in fair quality-price ratios.

The entry of large European tourism groups onto the Romanian market is expected to have positive consequences as well, with increased competition closing the gap to European standards. Under these circumstances, a significant growth in the number of foreign visitors to Romania is expected as well as an increase in the flow of business tourism generated by meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE). Also a great potential have the mountain tourism (skiing in winter and hiking in summer), heritage tourism (using gateway sites), rural tourism (development of routes: wine, monasteries and promotion of festivals), spa tourism.

In 2006, there were about 485,000 travel&tourism economy jobs in Romania (which represented 5.8 per cent of the total workforce), around 265,000 jobs directly within the industry and a further 220,000 jobs in sectors linked to travel&tourism, such as real estate, construction and retail. By 2016, travel&tourism economy employment is expected to increase by 85,000 jobs in Romania to 6.9 per cent of total employment [WTTC, 2006]

Over the next 10 years, tourism revenues are forecasted to grow by an average of 7.9% per year due in part to an expected steady growth in the number of foreign visitors to Romania. In the future Romania needs to concentrate on capitalizing in optimal conditions on its tourism potential by diversifying, modernizing and permanently adapting the offer to the level of international requests.

The specific objective in development of tourism concerns the raising of competitiveness for the tourism products and services in Romania, mainly by developing tourism support infrastructure. The aim of this strategy is a rise in tourism revenue and of tourism importance in GDP by stimulating the diversification of quality tourism offer.

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