

# The development potential of Czech rural areas and rural tourism

## *Rozvojový potenciál českého venkova a venkovský cestovní ruch*

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**Abstract:** In spite of the official goals of support for rural tourism promulgated by governmental bodies, rural tourism remains a marginal phenomenon. This lack of confidence in rural tourism has relatively deep roots. The basis for this is almost of an ontological nature and consists in opposition, although subconscious, against “commodified authenticity”. Another source of this lack of confidence lies in the fact that rurality, the main attractive feature of tourism, has been substantially impaired as a result of trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A third reason follows from the combination of rural tourism and mass recreation, as well as inadequate response by governmental bodies and authorities to the risks for regional stability, based on unmanaged mass tourism.

**Key words:** rural tourism, commodification, commodified authenticity, rurality, mass recreation

**Abstrakt:** Navzdory oficiálně proklamovaným cílům o podpoře venkovského cestovního ruchu ze strany státních orgánů je stále venkovský cestovní ruch považován za okrajový fenomén. Tato nedůvěra vůči venkovskému cestovnímu ruchu je relativně hluboce zakořeněna. Její základ má téměř ontologický charakter a tvoří jej odpor, i když nereflektovaný, vůči „komodifikované autenticitě“. Dalším zdrojem nedůvěry je to, že ruralita, hlavní atraktivita cestovního ruchu, je díky jeho vývoji ve 20. století výrazně narušena. Za třetí je důvodem směřování venkovské turistiky s masovou rekreací a dosud nedostatečná reflexe rizik, a to ze strany státních orgánů a autorit, které plynou z neřízeného masového cestovního ruchu pro regionální stabilitu.

**Klíčová slova:** venkovský cestovní ruch, komodifikace, komodifikovaná autenticita, ruralita, masová rekreace

## INTRODUCTION

The best initial illustration of this subject can be provided by description of a very significant product of rural tourism, entitled “The Heritage Trails”.

Let us quote the promotion leaflet:

“The tourist product entitled ‘The Heritage Trails’ is a verified marketing concept for the development of rural areas through sound rural tourism. The product ‘The Heritage Trails’ has been developed in accordance with the highest professional requirements. ‘The Heritage Trails’ are created, serviced and maintained in the long term by local teams. ‘The Heritage Trails’ thus constitute a permanent link between local communities and both the Czech and international markets, and improve the local economy on a permanent basis.”

When the thus-formulated product of rural tourism is subjected to reflection from the standpoint of environmental “benefits”, it must be admitted that it improves the self-sufficiency of local communities, non-didactically strengthens the relation of people and communities to nature, provides a mental basis for communities and is generally capable of forming the local community as the basic source of democratic opinions. It can effectively provide an alternative to life in a city. This product not only deals with individual environmental problems, but can also contribute to remedying the fundamental para-

digm of consuming urbanised man dealing with unstable global market relations.

It is probably inevitable that the basic conceptual documents concerning development of tourism contain statements supporting this aspect. This is also true of the “State Conception of Tourism Policy” of 1999. In the framework of a SWOT analysis of opportunities, the Conception notes the necessity of “development of new, modern products of tourism (rural tourism and generally environmental tourism, congress tourism, incentive tourism, cultural tourism, bicycle tourism) including supplementary programs, taking into account the specific features and needs of the region” (see [www.mmr.cz](http://www.mmr.cz)).

In connection with the results of the analysis of trends in tourism, the Conception proposes a set of measures, from which we choose the following:

- 1) Draw up a methodology for regional tourism strategy in the Czech Republic, as a basis for creation of developmental strategies for individual regions (based on the fact that, while over 80% of the territory of the Czech Republic is suitable for tourism, no comprehensive conception for the development of tourism existed in 1999).
- 2) The provision of breakfast in connection with private accommodation with a capacity of up to 10 beds should no longer be included amongst bound business activities and should be classified amongst free business

activities, without any requirements for qualification (it has been found that the requirements for professional qualification in the provision of boarding services are a burden for development of rural tourism and agricultural tourism).

- 3) Implement recommendation standards for accommodation services in practice and provide for their control (this is significant in relation to rural tourism which is often characterised by private accommodation) (see [www.mmr.cz](http://www.mmr.cz)).

Support for rural tourism is also declared by the updated "State Conception of Tourism Policy for the 2002–2003 Period". Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of practical measures, the situation is not favourable. The state program of support for tourism, which is practically the only instrument for financial support for tourism, contains plans to concentrate its subsidies on rural tourism in further years. It is apparent from the following text that the necessary standards of accommodation and boarding services in the framework of tourism, characterised by private accommodation, have also not been adopted. Why is the current situation unfavourable?

In the following text, I would like to indicate some of the possible answers, without trying to provide a comprehensive summary.

## RESISTANCE TO "COMMODIFIED AUTHENTICITY"

From the hierarchical standpoint of generality (and not from the standpoint of the weight of causality), the antipathy to rural tourism can be based on overall antipathy towards its basic characteristic. This consists in creating a scenario of living in a rural environment, which can be termed "staged authenticity". This is an expression of the overall commodification of spaces and values in times of globalisation.

Seen in general terms, the era is very favourable for rural tourism as a relatively very modern form of tourism (although it did, in fact, have predecessors, e.g. in the framework of the rural seats of the aristocracy, termed *villegiatur*). At the beginning of the 80's, tourism was explained in terms of the "theory of escape". "Tourism was interpreted as a major movement of escape from daily life, which was felt to be an unfriendly environment" (Müller, Thiem, Bern in Hahn, Kagelmann 1993).

Nonetheless, the transition from an industrial and agrarian society to an information society is primarily felt as a threat to our identity. In this connection, the "holiday culture" gains a new function in discovering identity. Holidays are no longer the basic motivation for tourism, amongst which are also included recreation, learning and communication. It gains the function of compensation in relation to the absolute lack of myths, rituals and utopia in the present-day societies. The motivation for a holiday is a search for and experiencing of authenticity, i.e. existential authenticity.

Myths and rituals remain strong in rural culture. However, rural tourism is tourism provided as a commodity

(even though it is not "mass recreation" and represents a minor, decentralised form of tourism). Whether or not commodified rural myths and rituals tend to repulse or attract tourists, certainly changes from region to region and is regionally variable. This reaction can range from a certain acceptance of the paradox of "commodified authenticity" to resistance to commodification of even the existential parameters of human existence. The tourist can be of the opinion that there should be something within the framework of the branches of tourism that cannot be bought or sold. This approach is encouraging for rural tourism, because it employs the ideal of a non-market idyllic utopia. I would like to put forward the hypothesis that a certain mistrust towards commodification of myths, rituals and utopia can be encountered in the historical Czech lands, in particular because of the long period of time spent outside of the global market system.

This ontological aspect (a description of which would merit an original study and is not the subject of this work) is nonetheless based on some spiritual tendencies that formed the aspect of Czech culture, in particular the strictly moralistic and ascetic tendencies of the Czech reformation, including the activities of the *Unitas Fratrum*. Nonetheless, "Czech" Catholicism, affected, e.g., at the time of the pre-White Mountain Spanish influences, was characterised by a strictly moralistic and ascetic approach to the world.

Indirect proof of the above "basal mistrust" can be found in the practice of the contemporary Czech care for memorials that, in contrast to countries with a long-term uninterrupted development of a market environment, places excessive emphasis on requirements on authenticity of memorials in relation to their renewal. Authenticity is made absolute. In this, certain features of the "national character" can be found.

In addition, consumerism in the Czech lands has not yet attained the stage where it would gain the aspects of "green consumerism", which can be satisfied by rural tourism.

## THE MAIN ATTRACTIVE FEATURES OF RURAL TOURISM HAVE BEEN DESTROYED

The main attractive feature of rural tourism and its basic identification characteristic lies in its "rurality". Three aspects predominate in the broad debate on the concept of rurality: a) the population density and the size of settlements, b) the utilisation of the land primarily for agriculture and forestry, c) the traditional structure of society and aspects of identity.

Rurality, or experiencing of rural areas as a motivation for rural tourism, consists in the following characteristics: a) rural areas are characterised by low population densities and small settlements that are quite far apart, b) these are areas where less than 10–20% of the area is built-up, and c) these areas are characterised by the following features of rural society (according to Frankenberg):

- 1) the concept of the community
- 2) the social area characterising people with only a few, very varied roles
- 3) one person fulfils several social roles
- 4) a simple economy
- 5) little division of labour
- 6) assigned positions (in contrast to achieved positions in urban society)
- 7) education according to the position achieved (in contrast to position derived from education in urban society)
- 8) acceptance of a person's role in society (in contrast to activities to achieve a role in society)
- 9) a compact network of relationships
- 10) non-cosmopolitan society
- 11) economic categories are one of several types of categories, but not the most important
- 12) cohesion of society
- 13) integration of the working environment (Mikula, Stříbrná 2002).

This concept is undoubtedly only one of the "variations of this subject". We would like to add that peasantry is a sort of basic attitude that can be described as preserved progressiveness. "Progressiveness follows from the parallel nature of peasantry and effectiveness of teaching, statistically determined quantities that describe the effectiveness of education" (Millendorfer 1992).

Rural tourism is thus characterised by the following features connected with the concept of rurality:

- it is located in a rural environment;
- it is functionally rural, built on the special features of the rural world (small-scale production, open space, contact with nature, with a heritage from the past, traditional customs and habits);
- it is rural in its scale, i.e. small buildings, small settlements, etc.;
- it is traditional in its character, i.e. it grows slowly and organically in connection with the local families. It is often established at a local level and developed in an attempt to ensure local development in the particular area;
- it is sustainable in the sense that its development should preserve the special rural character of the given area and should not destroy, but should rather stabilise local development. Rural tourism must be seen as a potential instrument for protection of nature and the landscape in accord with development in human needs (in this sense, the activities of Hector Ceballos-Lascurain in protection of American flamingoes, who has become a founding legend of eco-tourism, is illustrative) (Page, Dowling 2002);
- it is necessarily composed of a great many products that enable assimilation of the overall image of the rural environment, economy and history.

However, rurality is losing its cohesiveness.

Evidence for the extent of attempts to destroy rurality in the Czech lands and destruction of the preconditions for development of rural tourism is provided, e.g., by the

work of the authors Miroslav Lapka and Miroslav Gotlieb.

The final stage of collectivisation ... "The main assault was now directed against the entire system of rural culture. There was enormous collectivisation of the land beyond the capacity relations of the Czech landscape, which is very varied in its composition and ecosystem distribution. Simultaneously, centralisation occurred of the traditional 800-year-old structure of settlements in the Czech landscape. All the services, schools, and cultural events were concentrated in a limited number of central municipalities. The other municipalities gradually became empty, with only older inhabitants with low social status and education" (Lapka, Gotlieb 2000).

A similar process as in the countries of the Communist block also occurred in the countries of the future European Communities, although it was less extensive. In the period between the Wars, French agriculture was highly archaic, with a low use of machinery; this changed with the adoption of the Common Agricultural Policy, which was introduced with the purpose of increasing the food security in Europe. Policies of adaptation changes soon followed: the communal reform that was carried out in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1965–1975 "ended the political independence of most of the villages in the Federal Republic" (Henkel 1992). This led to a democratic deficit, loss of democratic participation by citizens in municipal administration. This factor also creates the atmosphere of rurality.

## **RURAL TOURISM SACRIFICED TO MISTRUST TOWARDS MASS FORMS OF TOURISM**

Official sources have stated that the benefit gained from tourism for the gross domestic product is 9–11% (the State Conception of Tourism Policy 1999 – see [www.mmr.cz](http://www.mmr.cz)).

Professionals in tourism have suggested that the actual value is several percent higher. However, the lack of a satellite account prevents verification of this widely accepted hypothesis.

Nonetheless, in relation to the extent of subsidies provided for tourism, the overall underestimation of the services sector seems to be a probable fact. Overall underestimation of the branch of tourism could undoubtedly be in the interests of the political and lobby interests of the classical industrial sphere and industrial agriculture.

The fact that these pressures are to a certain degree successful, and tourism, as well as the sector of services, are not sufficiently supported by the state, means that these pressures bear up the public opinion that tourism, as well as the sector of services, cannot provide sufficient stability to rural regions.

Where are the roots of these opinions? Why are they so broadly accepted? It seems that they are derived from a critical attitude to mass tourism. Unless this is carefully guided, the outcome of tourism could cause an economic, demographic and social revolution. The high degree

of fluctuation and lability of interests in tourism are seen as a great drawback. This is all magnified by the fact that the theory and practice of tourism in this country ignores and, in fact, suppresses the principles of cyclic development of destination. And the concerned circles are certainly not looking for preventative mechanisms.

In Czech eyes, the crowds in front of St. Vitus Cathedral also discredit rural tourism and professionals in tourism do little to explain the difference between mass urban tourism and rural tourism – to explain that there can be a basic difference in principle.

In 1999, the State Conception of Tourism Policy introduced the requirement of standardisation of accommodation services. Although, e.g., the Federation of Businessmen in the CR had a favourable attitude towards targets in rural tourism and agro-tourism and began standardisation and certification on its own initiative, the work has ended – for the moment in a blind alley. This, however, sends out the signal that only mass urban tourism is the real tourism and wherever the authorities or politician speak of tourism, they mean this kind.

## CONCLUSIONS

The opinion predominates that rural tourism must be bound to other productive rural activities: The programme SAPARD (measure 1.2, 2.1, 2.2) has been created in such a matter. Therefore, it has a chance to succeed in transforming the Czech countryside.

These activities can consist in environmentally sound agriculture, operated according to the law. This is gradually becoming competitive, so that it is considered to be realistic that 20% of cultivated agricultural land would be managed in this manner (Environmental Priorities for the Elections 2002).

Development of environmentally sound agriculture, together with the order introduced into labelling agricultural products, could form a focal point for development of rural tourism. It remains necessary to bear in mind that a good-quality product in rural tourism, especially agro-tourism, depends both on the quality of private accommodation and on the variety of accompanying programs.

However, subsidies from the state are required here and, in fact, constitute a precondition for appreciation of the tertiary sphere and also of the branch related to tourism.

The growth of rural tourism seems to have a good chance, nevertheless there are two obstacles to overcome: both of nearly fundamental, even metaphysical substance. Does Czech population (influenced by the Evangelical church) reconcile with the commodified authenticity, when the rural tourism declares itself as primarily authentic, but the offered and purchased commodity cannot be such?

And are there any real, or only virtual differences between the rural tourism on one hand and the mass forms of tourism on the other? Will rural tourism be inevitably sacrificed to the mistrust of the mass forms of tourism?

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