

Estimating the quality of tourist destination in Tarnava Mare Area

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a research conducted in the Tarnava Mare Region by setting up an original tool based on QUALITEST and SERVQUAL methods, having as main objective to determine the quality of the region as a tourist destination. The working method used was a social survey based on questionnaire. Research carried out revealed that tourist services in general and of the tourist guesthouses, in particular, are difficult to quantify in terms of quality, being based mainly on emotional impressions. Because of that, a continuous adaptation of research instruments is needed in order to determine the most valuable future directions for the development of the region in terms of tourism.

Keywords: QUALITOOL, customer satisfaction, rural tourism quality

INTRODUCTION

During the last years tourism has encountered a significant increase, mainly due to the availability to travel, based on the increase of incomes and spare time, and on desire to relax and discover new places and experiences at the destination.

If in its first stages tourism used to represent the activity of moving out of the usual place, especially on the coastal area, whose principal factors of attraction were the sea, the sun and the sand, presently tourism destinations have registered a diversification of the offer based on the main sights of tourism interest.

Rural tourism represents an alternative to the classic form of tourism, by offering the possibility of relaxing in a natural area, unsaturated, specific to each destination, with a large variety of tourism services.

Developing this form of tourism at the level of Tarnava Mare Area imposes conjugated efforts to assure services at a competitive quality, starting with the basic services, and finishing with the complex ones.

Beside these efforts, identifying the target group and adapting the offer to demand should be also taken into consideration. Providing quality services represents a competitive advantage for the investors and improves the profitability and the performances of the firm.

Taken into consideration all the aspects mentioned above, the identification of the tourism attraction points and the determination of tourism services quality level represent the first steps in developing a strategy for rural tourism in Tarnava Mare Area. Tribe and Snaith (1998) developed the HOLSAT method in order to evaluate the satisfaction level of visitors in a tourist destination. Murphy (2003) highlighted the importance of planning the tourism activity and the providing good tourist services quality by using the SERVQUAL method. Lynch (2007) developed the ATTRACTQUAL method in order to evaluate quality of tourist sights.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Tarnava Mare Area is located in the South part of Transylvania spread on the surface of eight communes: Saschiz, Vanatori, Albesti, Apold, Bunesti, Laslea, Biertan and Danes. This area is known as a saxon one and is attracting tourists due to the diversity of the landscape, heritage and UNESCO sites (Akeroyd, 2006). In order to estimate the tourist services quality of the entire area a research was conducted during August 2010 and April 2011. The subjects of this research were the owners of the guesthouses, nine of them being visited, on one hand, and the visitors of the area, on the other hand.

The instrument used was a questionnaire designed by adapting the QUALITOOL method in order to obtain the necessary information for accomplishing the purpose of this paper. Both the tourists and the owners of the guesthouses were asked to rank on the scale from 1 to 5 their impression regarding the quality of the tourism destination area based on 11 aspects such as: the quality of the services, the access to the area, the quality of the information regarding the things to do in the area, the quality of food and beverages, the quality of the landscape and so on. Beside all these aspects others information such as the length of stay, the amount of money spent during the trip and socio-demographics were obtained from tourists.

The collected data were analyzed using the SPSS software (version 17), employing basic indicators such as means and frequencies, as well as bivariate analysis methods such as the ANOVA test for the equality of means and correlation coefficients.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to data presented in Table 1 the “Quality of tourism services” did not match the tourists expectations, the score registered in this case being below 3 - the middle point of the evaluation scale. Quite the same situation was noticed in the case of “Range and quality of things to do”. The owners of the guesthouses are less optimistic regarding the “Accessibility to tourists’ services” and the “Accessibility of tourists”. The scores registered in these cases are 2.22 and 2.88, both below the level of satisfaction (Tab. 2).

Tab. 1

Level of satisfaction regarding tourism destination’s quality from the tourists’ point of view

No.	Statements	Scale of appreciation					Don't know	Total	Average	
		1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)				
1.	Pre-arrival communication	15.78	13.35	15.78	19.17	15.78	20.15	100	3.07	
2.	Quality of tourism services	18.69	16.26	13.11	17.48	17.48	16.99	100	2.99	
3.	Accessibility of tourists	16.99	16.02	15.53	18.20	18.45	14.81	100	3.06	
4.	Range and quality of food and beverages	14.32	17.23	16.26	16.26	17.48	18.45	100	3.07	
5.	Quality of information on things to do in the destination	17.96	17.48	14.81	15.78	18.20	15.78	100	2.99	
6.	Feeling of security and safety	17.48	16.02	16.02	16.75	17.26	17.48	100	2.98	
7.	Range and quality of things to do	15.05	14.56	15.53	16.99	19.66	18.20	100	3.14	
8.	Standard of transport services in the destination	18.20	17.96	15.78	15.53	15.05	17.48	100	2.89	
9.	Accessibility to tourist services	15.29	13.35	17.96	19.90	15.78	17.72	100	3.09	
10.	Friendliness of the local population	14.08	16.26	16.75	16.50	18.20	18.20	100	3.10	
11.	Cleanliness and quality of the local environment	16.26	17.96	16.26	16.26	16.99	16.26	100	3.00	
12.	Total quality average									3.03

Note: 1 – very poor, 3 – satisfactory, 5 – very good

The smallest score was encountered in the case of “Standard of transport services in the destination”. This fact is not surprising at all considering that in the studied area there is no public transportation network, which could assure the link between the localities. On the other hand the rail stations exist only in the area’s bordering cities, such as: Sighisoara, Medias, Dumbraveni. The aspect was noticed both by tourists and guesthouses’ owners (Tab. 1 and Tab. 2).

Regarding the feeling of safety, it was found that the tourist accommodation facilities owners have a better perception about this aspect than tourists themselves. From this point of view, it can be said that the tourist accommodation facilities owners actually do not know their customers' perceptions of the destination and they overrate the tourists feeling of safety about the tourist destination. This is not surprising given the fact that tourists are outside of their ordinary environment and, inevitably, there is some state of uncertainty, as opposed to owners who are familiar with the destination, but they wrongly expect the tourists to feel the same level of safety as they do.

Tab. 2

Level of satisfaction regarding tourism destination’s quality from the guesthouse owners’ point of view

No.	Statements	Scale of appreciation					Don't know	Total	Average	
		1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)				
1.	Pre-arrival communication	0.00	33.33	55.55	0.00	11.11	0.00	100	2.89	
2.	Quality of tourism services	0.00	0.00	66.66	22.22	11.11	0.00	100	3.44	
3.	Accessibility of tourists	22.22	0.00	44.44	11.11	11.11	11.11	100	2.88	
4.	Range and quality of food and beverages	0.00	0.00	33.33	55.55	11.11	0.00	100	3.78	
5.	Quality of information on things to do in the destination	0.00	11.11	33.33	44.44	11.11	0.00	100	3.56	
6.	Feeling of security and safety	0.00	0.00	0.00	44.44	55.55	0.00	100	4.56	
7.	Range and quality of things to do	0.00	0.00	0.00	88.88	11.11	0.00	100	4.11	
8.	Standard of transport services in the destination	33.33	22.22	11.11	22.22	11.11	0.00	100	2.56	
9.	Accessibility to tourist services	22.22	55.55	11.11	0.00	11.11	0.00	100	2.22	
10.	Friendliness of the local population	0.00	0.00	22.22	55.55	11.11	0.00	100	3.89	
11.	Cleanliness and quality of the local environment	0.00	22.22	44.44	22.22	11.11	0.00	100	3.22	
12.	Total quality average									3.37

Note: 1 – very poor, 3 – satisfactory, 5 – very good

Given the 11 statements that were the basis for establishing the quality of the tourist destination, it was hypothesized that "the average of estimated quality by tourist does not significantly differ according to their number of visits." As shown in Table 3, the null hypothesis is confirmed for each of the 11 cases. This is not surprising considering that over 65% of respondents are at their first visit to the region.

Opportunities of information about tourist region are situated at a level that meets the needs of tourists, but in the case of tourist accommodation owners, the score is lower (2.89). This confirms anxiety of the ones that provide tourist services in the region related to the existing activities of promotion and publicity designed to raise awareness of potential tourists to the existence of the region and its attractiveness. To these actions activities designed to improve the environmental quality should be added. Although the Tarnava Mare Region is a Natura 2000 Site, the environmental quality requires improvement in order to support biodiversity conservation and to ensure a sustainable development of the area. Recorded score in this category is 3.10, from the point of view of tourists and 3.22 in terms of providers of

tourist services. Other studied aspects focused on quality of the services used by tourists, here including the basic services: accommodation and food.

Tab. 3

Testing differences between the average scores among tourists grouped on the basis of number of visits

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre-arrival communication	Between Groups	3.074	3	1.025	0.513	0.674
	Within Groups	649.175	325	1.997		
	Total	652.249	328			
Quality of tourism services	Between Groups	2.425	3	0.808	0.373	0.773
	Within Groups	732.502	338	2.167		
	Total	734.927	341			
Accessibility of tourists	Between Groups	2.870	3	0.957	0.460	0.710
	Within Groups	720.874	347	2.077		
	Total	723.744	350			
Range and quality of food and beverages	Between Groups	9.828	3	3.276	1.671	0.173
	Within Groups	650.731	332	1.960		
	Total	660.560	335			
Quality of information on things to do in the destination	Between Groups	3.504	3	1.168	0.549	0.649
	Within Groups	729.424	343	2.127		
	Total	732.928	346			
Feeling of security and safety	Between Groups	2.599	3	0.866	0.423	0.737
	Within Groups	688.257	336	2.048		
	Total	690.856	339			
Range and quality of things to do	Between Groups	4.365	3	1.455	0.701	0.552
	Within Groups	690.798	333	2.074		
	Total	695.163	336			
Standard of transport services in the destination	Between Groups	10.175	3	3.392	1.696	0.168
	Within Groups	672.014	336	2.000		
	Total	682.188	339			
Accessibility of tourists to services	Between Groups	6.322	3	2.107	1.103	0.348
	Within Groups	639.843	335	1.910		
	Total	646.165	338			
Friendliness of the local population	Between Groups	5.845	3	1.948	0.987	0.399
	Within Groups	657.520	333	1.975		
	Total	663.365	336			
Cleanliness and quality of the local environment	Between Groups	2.170	3	0.723	0.359	0.783
	Within Groups	686.827	341	2.014		
	Total	688.997	344			

Even if the tourist services providers are proud of their cuisine, seeing it as having a more than satisfactory quality, for the tourists, the average scores hardly exceeded 3. There were negative remarks from tourists about the fact that some pensions were offered dishes of hunted animals, without asking the tourist if they feel comfortable with this kind of food. In other cases it was found that all three dishes served at the same lunch were based on raw material derived from a single animal species, which excluded the diversity, fact that caused dissatisfaction among tourists. These issues point out that the staff of the guesthouses should be better trained on how to prepare the various products offered to tourists, how to mix and serve them, especially because only one respondent said that graduated gastronomy courses, excepting two accommodation facilities that have their own restaurant, the rest having no formal training in this field. In Figure 1 it can be observed that the scores registered by the

general level of satisfaction regarding the quality of the tourist destination is above 3, so it can be stated that tourists' needs were complacent. The Saschiz area encounters a higher score in the case of "pre-arrival communication" that the one registered at the general level. This fact is due to the tourist information point center that exists in Saschiz. Even if also the quality of information given ranges at a satisfactory level, not the same can be said about the range of things that can be done in Saschiz mainly because for specific activities such as: visiting the beekeepers, the traditional handcrafts ateliers, tourists have to go to other villages from the neighborhoods. In Viscri the statements that registered a score above the average of the region were those regarding the range and quality of food and beverages, accessibility of tourists to services, friendliness of local population and cleanliness of environment. In Crit village the main problem observed was the one regarding the friendliness of local population and food and beverage quality. On the other hand this aspect, "range and quality of food and beverages" registered the highest score in Copsa Mare, due mainly to the cuisine event that took place in that area during the fall of 2010.

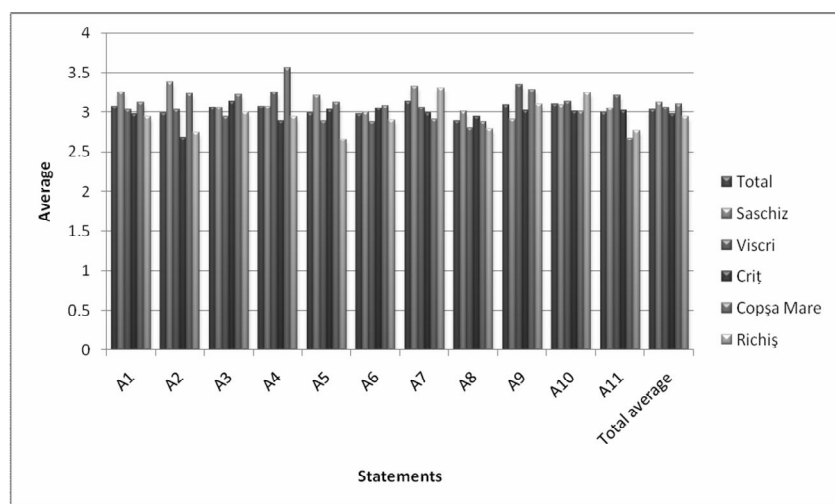


Fig. 1 Average distribution on category of statements and localities
 Note: A1, ..., A11 – represent the statements presented in tables 1-2

To complete the overall image of the tourist destination it was tested the relationship between average length of stay and average scores for the 11 statements, being formulated the hypothesis that "the estimated average quality of tourist destination as perceived by tourists does not significantly differ according to their average duration of staying" (Tab. 4).

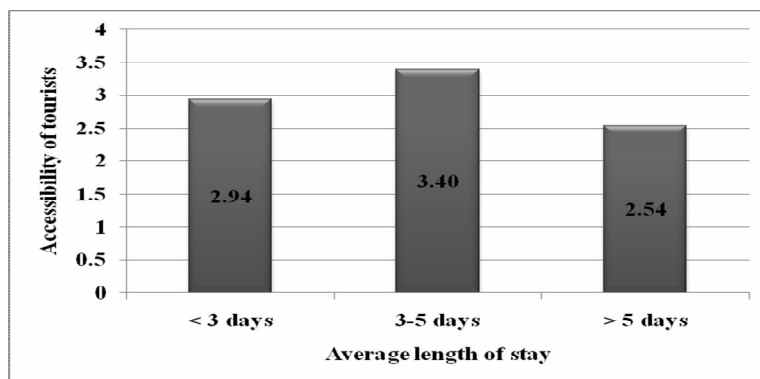


Fig. 2. Average scores on accessibility in the region according to the average length of stay

The hypothesis is confirmed for most aspects, but not for accessibility of tourists (where Sig = 0.015 < 0.05), in which case there are differences depending on the average length of stay. Thus, the accessibility of tourists in the region has better average score on those with a length of stay of 3-5 days, compared to those with a length of stay less than 3 days or more than 5 days (Fig. 2).

Tab. 4

Testing differences among scores awarded by tourists based on their average length of stay

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre-arrival communication	Between Groups	6.542	2	3.271	1.651	0.193
	Within Groups	645.707	326	1.981		
	Total	652.249	328			
Quality of tourism services	Between Groups	4.769	2	2.384	1.107	0.332
	Within Groups	730.158	339	2.154		
	Total	734.927	341			
Accessibility of tourists	Between Groups	17.392	2	8.696	4.284	0.015
	Within Groups	706.351	348	2.030		
	Total	723.744	350			
Range and quality of food and beverages	Between Groups	6.025	2	3.012	1.533	0.218
	Within Groups	654.535	333	1.966		
	Total	660.560	335			
Quality of information on things to do in the destination	Between Groups	1.933	2	0.966	0.455	0.635
	Within Groups	730.995	344	2.125		
	Total	732.928	346			
Feeling of security and safety	Between Groups	5.506	2	2.753	1.354	0.260
	Within Groups	685.349	337	2.034		
	Total	690.856	339			
Range and quality of things to do	Between Groups	7.159	2	3.580	1.738	0.178
	Within Groups	688.004	334	2.060		
	Total	695.163	336			
Standard of transport services in the destination	Between Groups	0.545	2	0.273	0.135	0.874
	Within Groups	681.643	337	2.023		
	Total	682.188	339			
Accessibility of tourists to services	Between Groups	0.007	2	0.004	0.002	0.998
	Within Groups	646.158	336	1.923		
	Total	646.165	338			
Friendliness of the local population	Between Groups	1.414	2	0.707	0.357	0.700
	Within Groups	661.951	334	1.982		
	Total	663.365	336			
Cleanliness and quality of the local environment	Between Groups	5.116	2	2.558	1.279	0.280
	Within Groups	683.881	342	2.000		
	Total	688.997	344			

Another issue considered was the link between perception on quality tourist destination for each of the 11 statements and the amount of money spent during their stay. A link was found in two of the 11 statements, the null hypothesis that "the estimated average quality of tourist destination as perceived by tourists does not significantly differ according to their total expenditure," was rejected for the statements "Quality of tourism services" and "Quality of information on things to do in the destination".

Tab. 5

The correlation between quality of tourism service used by tourists and their average expenses

Correlations			
		Quality of tourism services	Total expenses average
Quality of tourism services	Pearson Correlation	1	,166**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,002
	N	342	342
Total expenses average	Pearson Correlation	,166**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,002	
	N	342	412

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Figure 3, between the perceived quality of services and the amount of money spent during their stay there is a directly proportional link, as confirmed by Pearson's correlation coefficient (Tab. 5).

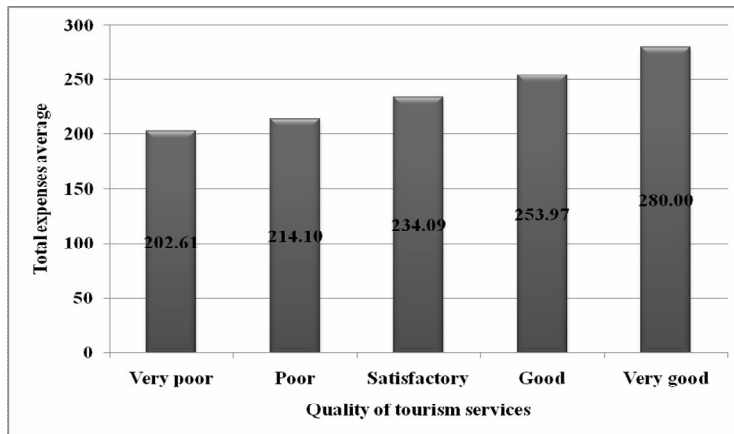


Fig. 3. Average scores for the quality of tourism services based on the amount of money spent during the stay

CONCLUSIONS

Service quality, because it relies mainly on affective impressions, can only be estimated, and not exactly determined, fact that makes the process of measuring it more difficult and complex.

Tourists and visitors of the Tanava Mare Region have noted differences between the tourist services they expected to receive and the tourist services they received in fact, although it was noted that managers of the tourist accommodation facilities have tended to overestimate the perceptions of tourists. The fact that tourists did not receive desired quality tourism services has led to their dissatisfaction regarding the quality of existing services as a whole. It is therefore necessary to create a strict set of quality standards at for each guesthouse and clear and precise rules to transpose them into practice, constantly observed and followed.

Overall service quality should be improved; achievements are needed both at the level of the entire region, as tourist destination, and at the accommodation facilities' level, especially as the interest in tourism within the area is not similar in all sub-arias.

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