

State of the art of tourism in Észak-Alföld Region

Észak-Alföld Region has much to offer in terms of tourist attractions. Typical products of tourism in the region are the following:

- health tourism (medical- and thermal tourism, wellness),
- eco-tourism,
- active tourism,
- event tourism (cultural, sport, gastronomy) and
- rural tourism.



In the region rural, medical and thermal tourism actors have the most important and well-organized associations.

A potential natural resource and the most valuable asset of the tourist industry are **mineral and thermal water reserves**.

There are

- 221 thermal wells in the region;
- baths of various types can be found at 57 places,
- 33 of them using thermal water suitable for medicinal purposes as well

The potential offered by **health tourism** has been best utilized in Hajdú-Bihar County, where the spa in Hajdúszoboszló has earned international recognition.



There are three key health resorts in the region:

- Debrecen,
- Hajdúszoboszló and
- Szolnok.

Further popular places include

- Nyíregyháza,
- Berekfürdő,
- Tiszaújváros,
- Cserkeszőlő,
- Hajdúnánás,
- Püspökladány,
- Kisvárda and
- Túrkeve.

Conditions (e.g. high quality baths and pools as well as the related medical services) for medicinal and thermal water to be gainfully utilised internationally are available at few places only. Development of tourism, health resorts, in particular, should pay special attention to the loading on thermal water reserves, the environment and the limit to their exploitation for business purposes.

Another attraction of the region is its natural heritage, natural setting and cultural heritage. **Hortobágy**, the largest contiguous expanse of grassland (or “puszta” (heathland, steppe)) in Central East Europe and a **World Heritage** site, is by far the most valuable asset of the region.

The Hortobágy National Park was the first and the largest of its kind in Hungary.

Besides Hortobágy, there is

- another national part (the Körös-Maros National Park) as well as
- 4 protected districts,
- 19 nature reserves and a further
- 123 areas of local importance in the region.



Unfortunately, the vast majority of these areas

- lack the necessary infrastructure that is indispensable for them to become tourist attractions;
- purpose-driven strategic marketing and the development of related products are also lacking,

which reduces the hospitality-related capacity and competitiveness of these areas.

International demand for **eco-tourism** is likely to further increase in the future, thus, special attention will have to be paid to

- the preservation,
- amelioration,
- reconstruction and the
- availability in a sustainable form of the protected areas in the Regions

and those that are, although not protected, of similar nature; similar care must be exercised in the case of areas that are, although not protected, almost in their original state.



Appeal associated with rivers (and lakes) like **the River Tisza and its tributaries** play an important role in what the Region has to offer in terms of tourism. The upper and middle sections of the River Tisza are popular amongst those that love **water sports**.

Rivers are key components of eco-tourism, as

- fishing,
- water sports and
- equestrian tourism

attract many nature lovers to the region.

Lake Tisza is famous for its unique natural beauty. In the interest of the further development of **hunting** great emphasis must be placed on the preservation in terms of both quality and quantity of the game stock, which is of excellent quality.

Ecclesiastical heritage and related **monuments, highlights** and events also represent an important appeal to tourists, mainly those from the neighboring regions.

Further assets from the point of view of tourism include

- the relics of traditional lifestyle and farming,
- folk traditions (Jászság, Nagykovács, Hortobágy, Hajdúság, Szatmár and Bereg),



- folk crafts, as well as
- stately homes and mansions (most still vacant and unutilized).

Event tourism also has long-standing traditions. Every year many festivals are organized, most of them are artistic festivals (for example folkdance-festivals and theatre festivals) or linked to traditions (horse shows, Goulash festival, Folder festival, etc.), with local or regional scope. The Flower Carnival of Debrecen is internationally famous, and has been enlarged into a carnival week so that the tourists should spend longer time in Debrecen and its surroundings. The fairs, exhibitions, conferences are held mainly in the county centers, it is only Debrecen which is suitable for the organization of events of greater importance, the other two county-towns and Jászberény can organize only some special events with fewer participants.



Events are, for the most part,

- **cultural** events (e.g. folkdance festivals and theatre festivals with the participation of national theatre companies),
- events that are either evocative of **local traditions** or **offer culinary delights** (e.g. equestrian days, goulash festival, shepherds' days, etc.) and
- events of **local or regional importance**. Currently, the number of internationally famous events (such as the Debrecen Flower Show, the Goulash Festival in Szolnok, Summer in Jászberény and Fruit Show in Nyíregyháza, etc.) is low.

Mainly county-towns host **fairs, exhibitions and conferences**; currently, only Debrecen has the necessary facilities for events involving large contingents of guests or visitors; the other two county towns and Jászberény and Hajdúszoboszló can only host events with fewer attendees or visitors.

PROBLEMS

- However, the attractions described only hold a regional or local appeal; **only a few qualify as a complex tourism product**.
- What further hinders their development and better utilization is the **scarcity of hotels** and other places of accommodation in the region: in terms of hotels and other places of accommodation per 1,000 persons the North Great Plain Region ranked 5th to 7th among the regions in Hungary in 2005; by contrast, the utilization of such places was the third highest in the country.
- Furthermore, conditions for **hospitality also leave a lot to be desired**, especially in the case of less well-capitalized SME's.
- A further problem is that the **number of up-market hotels** and places of accommodation is **low**. This seems to be the primary reason why, although the number of visitors to the Észak-Alföld Region continued to grow in 2005 after a decline in 2004, specific tourism indicators (e.g. the number of (foreign) visitors per 1,000 residents) are not favorable: the region only precedes the South Great Plain Region and – in respect of foreign visitors – the North Hungary Region, falling significantly behind the national average. As a result of the above, gross added value per one resident in leisure and tourism was hardly one-third of the national average in 2004.

The **volume of tourism** in the Észak-Alföld Region can be characterized by a specific **duality**, which is attributable, fundamentally, to the significant **territorial imbalance** in tourism. Both capacity and frequency of visits are concentrated in places with special appeal

(concentration is even stronger in the case of foreign visitors), which have the necessary infrastructure in terms of both accommodation and other services (the concentration of guest nights is the highest in this region). At the same time, in 2005, 183 settlements (i.e. over one-third of the total number of settlements) were destinations for visitors to the region, which, on the demand side, justifies the development of regionally diversified tourism. Seasonality is a further problem that faces the region. Despite the decline experienced over the past few years, the North Great Plain Region has managed to retain its position in the mid-league among the regions in Hungary.

The **institutional system of tourism** in the region is diversified. It includes

- local governmental alliances operating side by side,
- various micro-regional and county associations, those involved with regional level tourism-related responsibilities and
- NGOs.

Tourinform Offices (there are 23 of them) are **of great importance**. In addition to the above organisations, there are 31 travel agencies and tour operators in the Region.

Magyar Turizmus Zrt. (Hungarian Tourism Private Limited Company), Észak-alföldi Regionális Marketingigazgatóság (North Great Plain Regional Marketing Directorate) and Tisza-tavi Regionális Turisztikai Projektiroda (Lake Tisza Project Office for Regional Tourism) are responsible for regional marketing aimed at the promotion of tourism. The key responsibility of the North Great Plain Tourist Board and the Lake Tisza Regional Tourist Board is **to ensure the most efficient possible implementation of the objectives and tasks**.

They also play an important role in the **co-ordination of the regional development of tourism**. Tourism does not seem to be high on the agenda of local governments; developments are neither co-ordinated nor overseen in most cases. Most local governments have no dedicated office-holder responsible for tourism; concerted development concepts also lack.

Tourism has become a “cool” career recently, which is clearly reflected in that there are far too many undergraduates with tourism as their major. Many with a college degree in Tourism, Hotel and Catering or Hotel and Catering attend university or college courses in economics leading to a second degree. Curricula for undergraduate economists place great emphasis on the hands-on approach. By contrast, other areas of tourism (e.g. health tourism, leisure and sports tourism) face a shortage of dedicated professionals. Although a labour market with oversupply has a lot to offer in terms of job opportunities to top-notch professionals with a degree in tourism, regional experience reveals that the region is facing a shortage of professionals trained to a high standard in certain specific areas (e.g. therapeutic and bath massage, event organization, tour operation and wellness).