THE INFLUENCE OF VIRTUAL TOURS ON ROMANIAN TOURISM

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Abstract:

The aspects of everyday life also influence the choice of destinations for spending free time. It is well known that motivation has a major role, since it is personal, subjective and directly under the influence of endogenous and exogenous impulses. Technology has invaded our lives and can help us choose the appropriate holiday destination.

Virtual tours give a new perspective to those willing to experience a tourist destination, as they are available 24/7, free of charge and easily accessible. Promoting Romanian tourism through modern instruments in the online environment can become an advantage. Numerous tourist resources and locations presented in this way can raise the users' interest, thus urging them to visit such places.

Key words:

tourism, online environment, virtual tours, website, promotion.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing development of society has given rise to other needs, from natural psychological needs related to the need of water, food, air, clothing, over social needs that can translate by the need of belonging to a social group, networking and joint action with other individuals, and then to the rational, spiritual - psychological needs related to education and higher rational professional thinking.

According to the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, needs could be classified into: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and respect, as well as self-achievement.

Currently, the majority of the population wants to occasionally break away from everyday problems and spend leisure time outside their residences.

The main motivations in choosing tourist destinations are linked to a range of needs, namely relaxation and rest ("charging batteries"), knowledge, keeping health or its restoration, integration into a group and comfort, practising sports, entertainment and leisure.

Currently, there is a growing interest in maintaining and beautifying the body, as well as intellectual stimulation (widening the intellectual horizon). It can be said that man travels to feel special.

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Given the reasons presented, the trip can be seen as:

- an initiation;
- an expedition;
- a pilgrimage;
- an access to new places;
- a way of life.

The decision to choose a destination for leisure is influenced by a number of personal impulses or recommendations from close friends and acquaintances.

Increasingly advanced technology also contributes to the choice of the holiday destination.

2. THE VIRTUAL TOUR

A tour means a short walk on a chosen route, and virtual refers to something that is only a possibility, not a fact.

The term "virtual tour" was first used in June 1994 to refer to the presentation of the Dudley Castle museum in England. Two specialists, Colin Johnson (Image Interactive) and Peter Bolad (Dudley Metropolitan Borough) made a 3D reconstruction of the castle, offering visitors a unique "virtual walk" experience. The system conceived in 1994 worked until 2005, but since technology has significantly evolved, today the virtual tour has new meanings.

The virtual tour is based on modern technology to interactively present a location. It is made up of interconnected panoramic images, among which, by means of connections, the transaction can be achieved.

A panoramic image is a photo that can be seen in any direction; it is the basic element of the 360° virtual tour. A virtual tour consists of at least two spherical panoramic photos.

Briefly, a virtual tour may contain the sketch of the location (floorplan), with rooms and places where panoramas were photographed to facilitate the formation of an objective opinion about the tourist attraction, building, hotel, accommodation facility or food service facility. If the presentation of a geographic area is wanted, virtual tours may contain maps like Google Maps or Yahoo Maps, satellite images, panoramas being geo-located by GPS.

For information to be complete, text and photos can be integrated, placed within the panoramas and associated with them or with certain areas of interest, and displayed through sensitive areas.

Last but not least, it is necessary for a virtual tour to have a friendly navigation interface.

Watching virtual tours is performed using Quick-Time, Java, Shockwave Flash and OpenGL plugins. Currently Flash 10 is the best option because over 98% of users have Flash installed on their PCs, and no other plugins are necessary. Using Flash allows us to provide interactive solutions for the 360° virtual tour, and the possibility to show full screen panoramas and virtual tours.

These virtual tours can be viewed on any computer and smartphones.

Their presentation can be integrated in the official website presentation of the location, can be posted on social networking sites, distributed on CD, DVD, flash card, etc., or optimized for printing.

The applicability of virtual tours in tourism refers to the presentation of:

- tourist attractions (buildings, castles, fortresses, museums, memorial houses, churches, monasteries, caves, salt mines, etc.);
- accommodation facilities;
- food services facilities;
- leisure spaces;
- exhibitions;
- treatment centres and spas;
- tourist resorts.

There are multiple benefits of using a virtual tour, namely:

- it is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year from anywhere in the world;
- it presents reality 100%, offers full transparency;
- highlights the strengths of the location / sight;
- gives confidence in the quality and accuracy of provided services;
- the degree of interactivity and accessibility can impress any client;
- it gives the opportunity to explore an area at your own pace, without constraints;
- it presents an increased portability;
- it offers a big advantage over the competition;
- it is the most modern and effective method of promoting a place or a business;
- costs are low compared to other promotion methods;
- the investment for a virtual tour is very low, while the benefits are maximized.

It was found that a virtual tour of a tourist attraction increases the number of visitors, the same goes for the virtual tours of some accommodation facilities where the number of online bookings and occupancy has signifi-

cantly increased. If users are presented a virtual tour, the probability that they make an online booking is twice as high. Users aged between 18 and 34 years are by 130% more inclined to make a reservation after seeing such a tour.

3. VIRTUAL TOURS IN ROMANIAN TOURISM

Romania is one of the countries bordering the Black Sea, located on the north-western shore, in the south-east of Central Europe. Its total area is 238 391 km² plus 23700 km² from the Black Sea platform.

Due to its geographical position, relief and climate, hydrographic network, history, and cultural values, various forms of tourism like coastal tourism, mountain, countryside, spa, transit, business, cultural, scientific, religious tourism, agro tourism, ecotourism can be practiced on the territory of the country.

In order to analyse the evolution of the number of tourists and their preferences, some categories of tourist destinations were marked off, namely:

- ◆ resorts;
- ◆ coastal resorts;
- ◆ mountain resorts;
- ◆ the Danube Delta;
- ◆ the capital city and the county capitals;
- ◆ other destinations

The evolution of the number of tourist arrivals in Romania in recent years has been increasing, oscillating only between the selected destinations (Table 1)

Tourist destination	Year 2010	Year 2011	Year 2012	Year 2013	Year 2014
Resorts	568257	689195	696180	678536	655565
Coastal resorts	702566	735881	804198	728748	747103
Mountain resorts	814973	962415	1121238	1241133	1291013
The Danube Delta	68414	81567	88021	80885	65604
Bucharest and the county capitals	3011688	3541409	3816873	3983497	4308117
Other localities and tourist trails	906859	1021139	1159979	1230354	1398507
TOTAL	6072757	7031606	7686489	7943153	8465909

Table 1. Evolution of the number of tourist arrivals according to tourist destinations - No. of tourists

Source: TUR 104C Tempo Online time series, www.insse.ro

It could be noted that the number of tourists has increased annually at resorts in the mountain area (new resorts have opened and existing facilities have been modernized), the capital city and the county capitals (promoting city break, organizing various events), and at other localities and tourist routes.

The tourists registered in 2014 in the capital city, in Sibiu (European Capital of Culture in 2007) and Bran (Bran Castle - Dracula myth) preferred September, October and August (Table 2)

Month	Bucharest	Sibiu	Bran
January	80834	15075	4059
February	95114	16445	4714
March	120721	15793	4088
April	111122	18626	4527
May	142027	26343	4257
June	141962	26240	6215
July	125197	24790	7259
August	131688	31860	9367
September	157382	26058	6191
October	157606	21112	5805
November	137846	19309	5255
December	108723	17160	5129
Total	1510222	258811	66866

Table 2. Distribution of tourists by months in 2014. - No. of tourists

Source: TUR 104H Tempo Online-statistical series, www.insse.ro

Business, cultural and scientific tourism is present in Bucharest, while Sibiu and Bran are well known for leisure, recreation, cultural, historical and event tourism.

An issue that the Romanian tourism is still facing is the small share of foreign tourist arrivals (Table 3).

Attracting a larger number of tourists, especially foreigners, can also be achieved through a more sustained promotion in the online environment.

In Romania, 10.3 million people use the Internet (Romanian Audit Bureau Transmedia - BRAT), that is 68% of the population aged between 16 and 64 use the internet, while worldwide there are over three billion people using the Internet (International Telecommunication Union - ITU), therefore the possibility of people knowing the Romanian tourism offer is extremely high.

Indicator	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Romanian tourists (no. of persons)	4726414	5514907	6030053	6225798	6551339
Foreign tourists (no. of persons)	1346343	1516699	1656436	1717355	1914570
Share of foreign tourists (%)	22,17	21,60	21,55	21,62	22,61

Table 3. Evolution of foreing tourist arrivals in Romania

Source: TUR 104C Tempo Online time series, www.insse.ro, processed data

Virtual tours are currently the most modern technology used for the presentation of a location.

There are numerous tourist attractions, accommodation and food services and facilities in Romania that have their presentation via virtual tours, some of which are summarized in Table 4.

Virtual tours have increased people's interest in the tourist attraction, accommodation or food service facility presented. Such tours can be found in Bucharest, Sibiu, Bran and we can say that the number of tourists registered per year and per month shows the growing interest of tourists.

Making more quality virtual tours has a positive bearing on tourist traffic in Romania.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Interactive virtual tours are currently the most innovative technology used for presenting tourist destinations and it allows for effective marketing strategies.

If a virtual tour is well done, it can make any user feel present in the visited space. Watching a virtual tour is extremely easy, the user being able to control his movement within the area, zoom in and out, and being able to focus on the areas that draw his attention.

More and more websites display virtual tours that seek to convince users to buy tourism services. In the case of accommodation facilities, in general, a significant increase could be observed in online bookings.

Romanian tourism can be positively influenced by the existence of these virtual tours accessible to an extremely high number of people, both in the country and worldwide.

Tourist attraction	Location	Link
CurteaVeche Museum	Bucharest	http://360.inp.org.ro
Romanian Atheneum	Bucharest	http://gratuitor.ro/tur-virtual-al-ateneului-roman/
Aviation Museum	Bucharest	http://www.360trip.ro/muzeulaviatiei
Bran Castle	Bran, Braşov County	http://www.castelulbran.ro/
Black Church	Braşov	http://turism.brasovcity.ro/index.php/tururi/detail/12
History Museum	Sighişoara, Mureș County	http://sighisoara360.ro/sighisoara/muzeuldeistorie
Brukenthal Museum	Sibiu	http://www.sibiul.ro/sibiu-virtual-tour/sibiu-virtual-tour-68.html
Astra Museum	Sibiu	http://muzeulastra.ro/vizitare/vizita-virtuala.html
Peleş Castle interior-exterior	Sinaia, Prahova County	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqhAUZHBvps
Sarmizegetusa Archaeology Museum	Sarmizegetusa, Hunedoara County	http://muzeu.geomatic.ro/sectii/sarmis/sarmi_virtual/ro/2/2_amfiteatru.htm
Corvinilor Castle	Hunedoara	https://www.city3d.ro/castelul-huniazilor-hunedoara-city3d
Turda Salt mine	Turda, Cluj County	http://www.qbox.ro/salina-turda/tur-virtual-1974.html
Hotel Aro Palace	Braşov	http://www.aro-palace.ro/tururi-virtuale/hotel-brasov-aro-palace.html
Siago Pension	Cluj-Napoca	http://www.pensiuneasiago.ro/tur-virtual.php
Caru cu Bere Restaurant	Bucharest	http://www.vederepanoramica.ro/tur-virtual-caru-cu-bere
Transfăgărașan	Făgăraş Mountains, Southern Carpathians	http://www.360cities.net/image/transfagaran-virtual-tour-360-romania-fagaras

Table 4. Virtual tours for tourism promotion – examples

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