Product Design Decisions for Developing New Tourist destinations: The Case of Rhodopi Mountains

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PRODUCT DESIGN DECISIONS FOR DEVELOPING NEW TOURIST DESTINATIONS: THE CASE OF RHODOPI MOUNTAIN

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The scope of the paper is to present the proper tourist product characteristics and market opportunities by the recipients of the tourist market, aiming at the support of the sustainable tourism design process. These characteristics concern the prospective elevated tourist destinations that may be exploited strategically by the tourist administration of the destinations. For the investigation of the most important product characteristics factor analysis was applied, as well as, spatial perceptual mapping techniques. The paper is based on a situation analysis, using as case the Rhodopi Mountain area in Greece. Results showed that the design of the elevation of the destination is a viable market prospective, if it is based on three major factors: the climate (geophysical and archaeological characteristics), taverns-restaurants (gastronomy) and parking areas (spa, post shops and health centers). Various combinations of relevant characteristics are proposed, which ameliorate particular effective characteristics of the area, which could raise the area's attractiveness to professional partners and potential groups of customers.

Keywords: *new tourist destinations, perceptual mapping, importance-performance analysis, assessment of product characteristics, attribute-based procedure, tourist destinations' design*

INTRODUCTION

Development consultants and designers are usually concerned with the development and promotion of a selected tourist area. Sometimes

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hardship regions, like those ravaged by political adversities, aim to position their standing internationally as a new alternative tourist destination by highlighting unique product characteristics (Waitt, 1996; Kotler et al., 1993; Inskeep and Kallenberger, 1992; Wilkinson, 1997; Gunn, 1997).

The scientific research has presented analysis techniques of the Destination Image, which focuses on identifying the appropriate product characteristics for particular groups of visitors (Chu and Choi, 2000; Uysal et al, 2000; Joppe et al, 2001; Ashworth and Voogd, 1995).

The scope of this paper is to present the proper product characteristics and opportunities by the recipients of the Tourist Market (Tourist Offices and Visitors) to support a sustainable design process to increase tourism, and which can be managed by the destination's respective Tourism Administration.

PAST LITERATURE

Previous research studies suggest that images of tourism products play crucial roles in potential visitors' destination choice (Sirakaya et al., 2001). To date, great importance has been given to Image Analysis techniques that support the development of a geographic unit. Image analysis, also, contributes to the development of successful marketing and positioning strategies. The geographic unit, otherwise labeled as destination, is examined as a Product that includes particular attractions. The capability to detect desirable product characteristics reinforces the competitiveness of the destinations (Aaker, 2001; Heath and Wall, 1992) and contributes to sustainable markets (Vukonic, 2000; Smith, 1989; Murphy, 1983; Haywood, 2000). This is very important for the case of promoting tourist destinations (Kozak and Rimmington, 1999; Evans and Chon, 1989).

Image Analysis with the use of research techniques, such as the 'Importance–Performance' technique (Martilla and James, 1977), would probably contribute to this direction as it could evaluate the merits of new tourist policies, taking into account the most attractive product characteristics (Gartner, 2000; Gunn, 1997). A process for the Image Analysis of the Destinations and their product characteristics' promotion follows.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Before the statistical analysis of the research data, current situation analysis was developed. The analysis of the current situation was based on five control points (Swarbrooke, 2000) and was conducted in order to describe the characteristics of the area and detect the phase, in which the area finds itself, according to the Tourist Area Cycle (Butler, 1980; De Albuquerque and McElroy, 1992; Cooper, 2000).

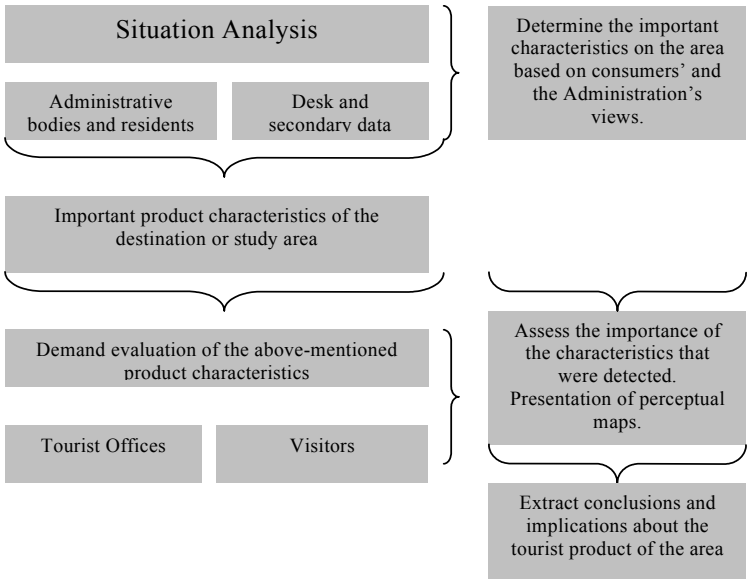
The above description is useful since it can support the detection process of the factors, which probably influence the strategies carried out by the Administration (Aaker, 2001; De Albuquerque and McElroy, 1992). Within the process, an empirical research of collecting primary data was conducted. The primary phase of the empirical research contained in-depth interviews. The interviewees were the destination's Administrative Bodies and the destination's residents. Perception of the local community and its bodies is crucial for the design process especially when dealing with crises (Pearce et al., 1997). The second phase contained the assessment of the first phase's results, i.e., the Tourist Demand's most important product characteristics of the region. Tourist Demand refers to the tourist customers' potential tourist offices and visitors (Wheeler, 1992).

The process followed in this paper to analyze the destination's characteristics follows the Attribute-based procedure and is based on the detection of the factors in space. The 'spaced' components stand for the basic categories of product characteristics, according to which customers decide for the purchase of a product or a service. In the present case, product characteristics are those which were described important by the Bodies of the local government and the residents. Assessing gain in product characteristics resembles the process of the Product Management, proposed by Hauser and Shugan (1980).

For the investigation of the most important product characteristics and for the detection of new opportunities, which contribute to ensure the destination's future success, factor analysis was applied (see also Oppermann, 1996; Go and Zhang, 1997; Chu and Choi, 2000). Subsequently, the factor analysis results were presented in space following the Perceptual Mapping technique. Data analysis with the use of Perceptual Mapping techniques is commonly used in marketing research, and especially for the design or redesign (i.e. repositioning) of new products, and new services (Hawes and Rao, 1985; Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991). This finding supports our case study, that is to say the designing and building of a new tourism destination in the mountain area

of Rhodopi, Greece. The product characteristics, which were included in the perceptual mapping, are presented in Appendix I. Potential recipients of the Tourist Market assessed the characteristics which were then positioned in space to identify product opportunities in perceptual diagrams (i.e., perceptual mapping procedure). To that end, a relevant quantitative research methodology was followed and is presented progressively below.

Figure 1. Research methodology



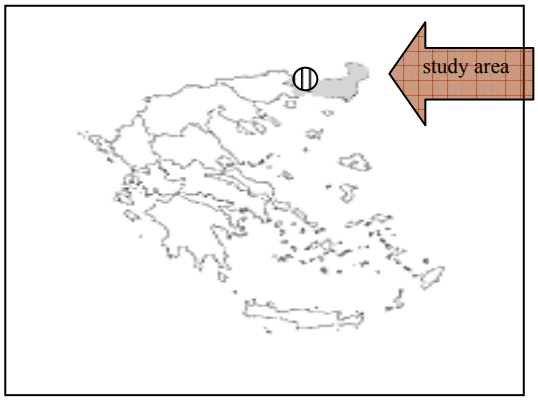
Situation analysis of the study area

In this article the destination area is the mountain rural destination of Pomaks residence in the prefecture of Xanthi district (Thrace). The research area is geographically located in the Rhodopi Mountain, in the Northeastern part of Greece (Figure 1). According to Swarbrooke (2000), the current situation in an investigated destination is described by the following five important control points:

- the development design (when and what benefits were gained)
- the development level of the local tourist industry and its relations with foreign tourist organizations

- the type of the Tourism and Tourists
- the public sector's policy
- the sensibility of the local environment, the economy and culture

Figure 2. The study area.



For the description of the investigated destination's current situation according to the five control points, the present study took into account the opinions of the local government bodies and the residents' opinions (Brunt and Courtney, 1999; Lawson et al, 1998; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Kousis, 2000; Jamal and Getz, 1995; McKercher, 1993; Hjulmand, 2003). The research was carried out in the specific area by using in-depth interviews based on a predetermined questionnaire. The interviews were conducted based on the focus-group analysis technique. Eventually, 183 residents were interviewed and their opinions coded, and classified in frequency tables. In addition, a relevant desk research, nine current development studies and advertising materials were investigated, to reach conclusions regarding public policy and market management of the area.

Control points for the situation analysis

The design and the local tourist development

Tourist development in the residential area of Pomaks in the prefecture of Xanthi is considered nonexistent. It is worth mentioning that in a relevant question, concerning obstacles against development, 38% of

the interviewees answered that appropriate road networks did not exist, 25% considered development impossible because of the lack of an infrastructure, 17% implied that the area was not attractive for investment, 14% believed there were many problems or there was lack of hotels and hostels. In addition, 34% had a negative opinion about a future tourist development, 20% had a confused opinion, 28. 4% expressed a positive opinion, while 11.9% had a positive opinion with certain conditions. Regarding the available print promotional material (i.e., tourist brochures of the area), only one tourist office highlighted, the residential stretch, presenting the inhabitants, along with the natural and cultural sights as the area' s particularities.

The tourist demand (outline of the tourist types)

The opinion of four local government supervisors is also notable. According to their view, there is a fundamental Tourist Demand because of hunters, weekend visitors driving in 4x4 cars, and students or members of the alpine clubs. According to them, tourist development can be possible if some thirty-five (35) characteristics of the area are promoted. These characteristics are presented below, in the data analysis section. Moreover, there is no relevant brochure; visitor information about the sightseeing and the destination is done mainly by word-of-mouth communication, published articles or rare media highlights.

The public sector's policy

The analysis of relevant development studies conducted for the regional Administration shows a positive prospect because of the borders' opening with neighboring Bulgaria. According to the judgment of the relevant contractor of public projects, this prospect is long-term because of other priorities assigned by the Government for building roads and border crossings. These officials measure prior improvements as marginal. The opinions of a group of residents (23%) are distinctive. According to them, the basic problem, which delays tourist development, is government policy.

Sensibility of the local environment, economy and culture

The area shows sensibility in all three factors. The natural environment presents unique elevating characteristics (e.g., medicinal sources, caves, rock goats, bears, wild pigs, hares and accipiter, tea and

rich vegetation on the mountain area). In order for these characteristics to be conserved, the forthcoming development has to respect them. Another important issue is the economy, which is based on agriculture (e.g., tobacco crops) and retail trade (primarily small retail shops that sell food, beverages and commodities for agricultural needs). According to the supervisors of the local administrative bodies, tourist development could probably contribute financially as subordinate income. Finally, the cultural identity presents a particularity as far as religion is concerned. This particular characteristic should be respected and policies have to be adapted in such a way, to maintain the unique traditions and folklore. At the same time, the nationalist feelings and disunion policies should be reduced.

Based on the above points, the destination under investigation could be in the research-design and development phase (R&D) of the Product Life Cycle (i.e., the 'conception of the new product idea' phase) (Wasson, 1978) or in the exploratory stage (Butler, 1980) or in the emergence stage (De Albuquerque and McElroy, 1992) of the Tourist Area Cycle.

Collection and preparation of data

The Administrative Bodies and the residents of the destination identified thirty-five (35) important product characteristics, as mentioned above (Appendix I). The characteristics were assessed with the use of a standardized questionnaire, with a 5-grade scale of measurement (where: 0= "not-at-all important" characteristic and 4= "very important" characteristic). To that end, a representative sample of potential professionals working in tourist offices and visitors was interviewed. Finally, twenty-eight (28) questionnaires were fully completed by tourist officers and two hundred (200) questionnaires were completed at the airport by visitors who were leaving the area. The data were coded and classified with the use of a statistical package. The variables presented skewness between –2 and 2 and Kurtosis between –3 and 3 and were accepted for further analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

The statistical analysis was completed in two phases. The first phase was the application of a factor analysis of the product characteristics, based on the opinions of the tourist offices, which are the potential external partners of promoting the destination. The second phase

concerned the analysis of the opinions of the destination's potential visitors, regarding the thirty-five (35) product characteristics of the investigated destination.

Table 1 presents the factor loadings that arise from the cross tabulations of the eleven (11) factors with the thirty-five (35) product characteristics that resulted from the Varimax rotation. The most important loadings, with correlation coefficient greater than 0.50, are highlighted. The analysis of each loading presented characteristics that supported the process of the defining names for the eleven (11) factors.

Table 1. Factor loadings

Variable/ No	Components of characteristics										
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**
V12	0,90										
V14	0,84										
V11	0,83										
V9	0,70										
V37	0,54										
V7	0,53										
V28		0,90									
V40		0,59									
V29		0,54									
V26		0,54									
V32			0,88								
V30			0,77								
V39			0,77								
V31			0,66								
V25			0,54								
V38			0,50								
V16				0,86							
V15				0,83							
V17				0,73							
V21				0,56							
V24					0,82						
V10					0,70						
V13					0,54						
V33						0,87					
V35						0,64					
V34						0,64					
V22							0,76				
V18							0,74				
V6								0,85			
V27									0,75		
V20									0,63		
V19											
V6										0,80	
V36											
V23											0,88

The factor names of the tourist offices study is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Factor names

Factor Names of the Tourist Office Study (Names Extracted from the Factor Loadings of the Study with Coefficients of 0.50 or greater)	
Component	**Factor names**
1	Geophysics: Geographical and archeological characteristics of the place
2	Infrastructure: Infrastructure (parking, post offices, restaurants and taverns, health centers)
3	Healthcare: Spa activities and flora picking (mountain tea), physique and health activities
4	Tradition: Historical / archaeological sites and information
5	Lodgings: Lodgings in the agricultural country side and observing wild animals
6	Hiking: Hiking, flora and bird watching, hunting
7	Culture: Archaeological resources on the rocky mountains and cultural aspects
8	Gastronomy: Gastronomy and caves
9	Telecom: Telecommunications and historical sites
10	Physical: Natural beauty
11	Restaura: Restaurants & taverns

Respectively, the results from the tourists' study are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Factor loadings

Variable/ No Components of characteristics										
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
V38	0,83									
V25	0,73									
V13	0,73									
V39	0,70									
V26		0,83								
V27		0,78								
V28		0,60								
V29		0,59								
V11										
V32			0,79							
V30			0,75							
V31			0,68							
V7										
V14				0,93						
V12										
V37					0,74					
V21					0,73					
V22					0,71					
V20					0,54					
V15						0,83				
V16						0,81				
V17							0,82			
V36							0,80			
V18										
V19										
V6								0,68		

V8								0,67		
V9								0,55		
V23									0,78	
V40									0,75	
V24									0,62	
V34										0,72
V33										0,54
V35										0,50
V10										

Table 4. Factor names of the tourists' study

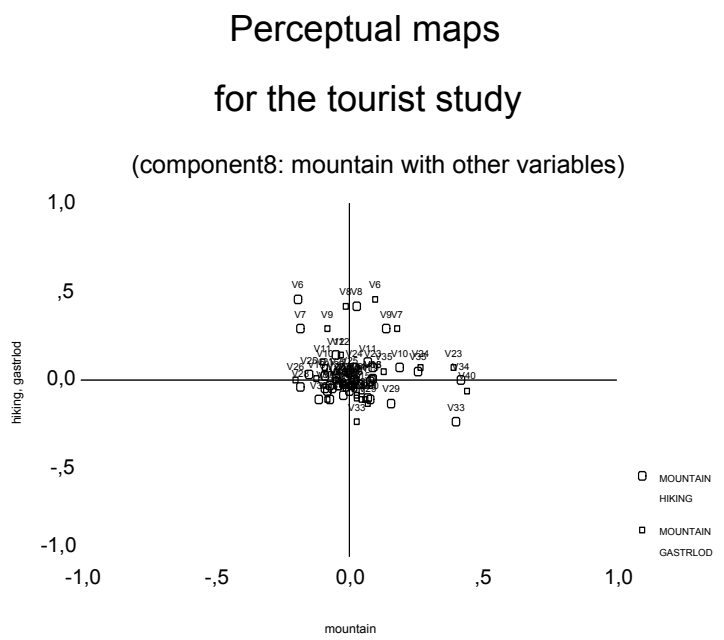
Factor Names (Names Extracted from the Factor Loadings of the Study with Coefficients of 0.50 or greater)	
Component	**Factor names**
1	Healthcare: Physique and health activities
2	Infrastructure: Infrastructure (parking, post office, health centers)
3	Health2: Spa activities & and centers flora picking
4	River: Riversides and river places
5	Culture: Historical / Archaeological sites and information
6	Tradition: Traditional architecture of heritage buildings
7	Religion: Temples
8	Mountain: Caves, birds on rocky mountains, natural beauty
9	Gastronomy: Gastronomy, lodgings, restaurants & taverns
10	Hiking: Hiking, flora and bird watching, hunting

RESEARCH RESULTS

The perceptual maps of the product characteristics are generated from the factor score coefficients matrix. If the factor scores of the product characteristics are presented in an axis system in space, where axes X and Y represent the pairs of the strong cross tabulations between the factors (i.e., Factor pairs), combinations of product values between the pairs may be detected, which correspond with (to) the important product characteristics of the destination. The detection area of the effective characteristics in space (Space for New-Product Opportunity) is formed by the right and above the quadrant of the perceptual map (e.g., the factor scores which are above +0.5 for both factors). In this paper, because of the large number of factor combinations, only a few selected perception maps are presented. Indicatively, in Figure 2 (two) a Perceptual Map of the tourist study is presented, which concerns the factor that was named 'mountain' and the results of two factor pairs (i.e., *mountain - hiking* and *mountain - gastrlod*).

Observing the perceptual map, one may conclude (suggest) that the

characteristics V23 V34, V6, V8, V7 and V9 could be product characteristics with successful perspectives in the market. The three characteristics that correspond (with) to the factor pairs are presented in Table 5.



The above suggested research process of the perceptual analysis of the Bodies and the members of the local community, the investigated destination's customers, as well as the detection of valuable (beneficial) product characteristics for an elevating tourist destination, could be summarized in the following six points:

1. Determination of the product characteristics based on the opinion analysis of the members and bodies of the local community. The residents and the local Administration Bodies (i.e., municipality and local communities) express their opinions in focus groups about the ideal product characteristics of the investigated destination. In the present research, with the use of personal interviews and a standardized questionnaire, thirty-five (35) important product characteristics connected to the Pomaks residential area were determined.

2. Assessment of the product characteristics expressed by customers. The product characteristics are assessed by potential visitors and professionals on the criterion of importance (i.e., tourist offices). In this study, the potential customers (potential visitors in Macedonia Airport, Thessalonica's international airport and tourist offices in Thessalonica) rated the thirty-five (35) product characteristics by their relative importance of each characteristic on a 5-grade scale. The minimum value (i.e., 0) of the common rating expressed an insignificant characteristic, while the maximum value (4) expressed a very significant characteristic.

Table 5. Most frequently mentioned characteristics for each factor pair

The most frequently mentioned- The most beneficial characteristics for development and elevating.	Factor Pairs	
	Tourist office study	***Tourist study***
The Climate (V7)	Geophysics & physical	Health2 & mountain Health2 & gastrlod Health2 & river River & mountain Mountain & gastrlod
Taverns and restaurants (V23)	Healthcare & restaura Lodgings & restaura Hiking & restaura Culture & restaura	Mountain & gastrlod Gastrlod & hiking
Parking areas (V29)	Infrastr & physical Infrastr & restaura Infrastr & telecom Infrastr & culture Telecom & physical Telecom & restaurant Physical & restaurant	Infrast & hiking

3. Test of the statistical suitability of the variables for data analysis. The appropriateness of the variables was controlled on the basis of their variation and their value distribution (skewness control). All the variables in both analyses presented skewness in the value distribution between –2 and 2 and were used for further statistical analysis.
4. Statistical analysis of the data for the reduction of the number of characteristics and the determination of their basic representative factors, using the Common Factor Analysis. The statistical determination of the factors (components) was based on the rating

analysis of the thirty-five (35) product characteristics, as were evaluated by two hundred (200) potential visitors and twenty-eight (28) tourist offices in Thessalonica. The factor estimation can be expressed mathematically by the following relation: F_{1jk}= [(degree of the value of the 1st regarding the 1st product characteristic under investigation) * (*factor score*, for the 1st product characteristic, k)] +..+ [(degree in value that the last observation expressed for the last product characteristic under investigation m) * (*factor score*, for the last product characteristic under investigation, m)] = Result or estimation degree of the factor for the 1st observation .Where: 1= the first observation (1..n), j= tourist area product (of the destination under investigation), k= investigated characteristics (k..m).

5. Classification of the Varimax rotation technique results in a table and drawing of useful conclusions. The table that presents the results includes the product characteristics (in the horizontal dimension-rows), and the basic factors or components, which were determined by the previous step [4] (in the vertical dimension-columns). For each factor, both the factor loading and the factor score are determined. Furthermore, the high correlation values that are expressed through the factor loadings (e.g., correlations with values above 0.50) are presented. The factor naming procedure follows according to the most important product characteristics that each factor contains. Finally, the Perceptual Mapping for detecting opportunities in valuable product characteristics follows, based on the factor scores (Hauser and Shugan 1980).
6. Construction of perceptual maps and determination of the characteristics' degree of benefit (new product opportunities based on beneficial characteristics). The factor scores are presented in the Perception Maps. The two dimensions correspond to two relevant factor pairs and the axes' values range between –1 and 1. In the present study, two analysis tables were created, one for potential visitors and one for potential tourist offices. Moreover, the entire probable cross tabulations in factor pairs were created in order to detect product characteristics, which are effective in the market or are beneficial for the area.

CONCLUSIONS & STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS

The proposed design and renovations under examination can be justified, according to market segments (i.e., tourist offices and visitors),

if they are based on three distinct factors (climate, taverns/restaurants and parking areas). As for the climate factor, in the case of tourist offices, a system should be designed, comprising of *geophysical and archaeological characteristics,* to give visitors the opportunity to admire the natural beauty of the area. Respectively, in the case of tourists**,** the spa and herb collection activities should be encouraged. In addition, the geophysical particularities of the mountain (e.g., caves, birds in rocks and beauty) should be enhanced to promote residential growth. The focus should also be placed on gastronomy with special emphasis on restaurants and taverns.

In the tourist offices, visitors' attention should be drawn to the area's spa facilities herb flora, and any activity which promotes personal health. The existence of adequate housing in an agricultural setting, and the opportunity to observe wild flora in *plains* and mountainous regions, bird watching, hiking and hunting, as well as cultural points of interests like the rock painting representing the Persian God Mithras should readily attract discerning consumers. As for parking, which is always an important consideration, the design process should incorporate *post shops and health centers*.

The proposed process provides useful information to managers responsible for designing rural tourist destinations. The research reveals possible combinations of characteristics, which may successfully attract professional partners or potential groups of customers. The questionnaire, however, could have been distributed to Greek tourists also or to a larger sample of foreign visitors. It would have been interesting to investigate the tourist product characteristics, and market opportunities as perceived by tourists visiting Greece for a short period of time versus eco-tourists. Finally, further research could have focused on other areas' tourist characteristics in order to cross-culturally compare the results of the present paper.

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Appendix 1. Important product characteristics of the area.

The characteristics were expressed by members of local Government's Bodies and by the residents based on their importance and their proprietness for a tourist evelation of the specific residential area.
<u>Natural</u> Natural beauty (V6) Climate (V7) Caves (V8) Rocks with impressive shapes and birds' nests (V9) Rock goats and bears (V10) Drinkable water (V11) Forests (V12) Tobacco cravings and small farms (V13) Rivers and the riparian fields (V14) <u>Cultural</u> Traditional mills and traditional buildings (V15) Traditional bridges (V16) Historical religion temples (V17) Rock paintings (archaeological findings (V18) Traditional bakeries (V19) Historical points (V20) Libraries and information brochures for the civilization of an area (V21) Laographic elements (V22) <u>Technical</u> Taverns and restaurants (V23) Hotels, hostels and apartments for rent (V24) Sport fields (V25) Health centers (V26) Telecommunications (V27) Post office (V28) Parking areas (V29) Spa installations (V30) <u>Activities</u> Herb collection (V31) Baths in spa (V32) Hunting (V33) Observation of nature, landscape and animals (V34) Walking in traditional roads and mountain footpaths (V35) Visits in religious temples- mosque (V36) Study and investigation of the history of the area and visits in the archaeological areas (V37) Sports and exercise (V38) Visits in fields and crops (V39) Participation in meals with good food and beverages (V40)

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