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DEVELOPING ECOTOURISM IN CENTRAL OSTROBOTHNIA

Analyzing the Russian market

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ABSTRACT

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<p>Ecotourism is not wide-spread, but quite well-known way of travelling. Despite of increasing number of travelers, attracted by this new way of experience, ecotourism needs to make more people know about it. The main aim of this thesis was to identify current situation of ecotourism in Finland, especially in region of Central Ostrobothnia. The thesis also focused on Russia as target market and shows current situation and evaluation of tourism on the Russian market. Beside this, the thesis includes some options and ways of developing ecotourism in Central Ostrobothnia and getting the region more attractive for foreigners.</p> <p>The thesis research was made in support with Kvarnen, the organization, located in Kronoby. Kvarnen involves active participation in various development processes at local, national and international level. It offers many educational and entertainment services for young people from all over the world. As far as Central Ostrobothnia is not popular destination for international travelers, the main aim of Kvarnen is to develop the region and make it attractive for tourists. The thesis contains a research that was made in summer-autumn 2018 among Russian tourists of different ages, genders and social groups. Set of questionnaires was prepared and distributed among people of different ages, genders and professions. The collected data were later analyzed and interpreted through Webropol 2.0. The questions were also translated into Russian to make the research more comfortable for people, who don't speak English.</p>		

Key words Central Ostrobothnia, ecotourism, Kvarnen, Russian market

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 TOURISM IN FINLAND.....	2
2.1 The most popular destinations.....	2
2.2 Russian impact on Finnish tourism.....	2
3 ECOTOURISM.....	4
3.1 The concept of ecotourism.....	4
3.2 Ecotourism in Finland.....	5
4 CENTRAL OSTROBOTHNIA.....	6
4.1 Main industries of Central Ostrobothnia.....	6
4.2 Tourism in Central Ostrobothnia.....	7
5 KVARNEN SAMCOMMUN AND ITS “FUTURE AND NATURE OF ECOTURISM”..	8
6 ANALYZING THE MARKET AND SWOT ANALISYS.....	9
6.1 SWOT.....	9
6.2 Analyzing the market with Webropol 2.0.....	10
6.2.1 Collection information about respondents.....	11
6.2.2 Analyzing the best ways for booking tours.....	12
6.2.3 Evaluation of tourism and ecotourism in Finland.....	15
7 DEVELOPING ECOTOURISM IN CENTRAL OSTROBOTHNIA.....	18
7.1 Tourist agencies.....	18
7.2 Language schools and education centers.....	18
7.3 Social media.....	19
7.4 Work and travel.....	19
7.5 Combine ecotourism with other activities.....	20
8 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION.....	21
REFERENCES.....	22

FIGURES

FIGURE 1. The age ratio of respondents in percentage.12

FIGURE 3. Preferable ways of travelling n percentage.12

FIGURE 3. The most preferable ways of searching for the information about trips abroad.....13

FIGURE 4. The most crucial factor for choosing the destination14

FIGURE 5. Annual cost for travelling abroad15

FIGURE 6. The most attractive aspects of Finland according to the respondents' opinions.....16

FIGURE 7. The most desired region to visit.....32

1 INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is the way of travelling which is becoming more and more popular nowadays. Chaotic lifestyle of modern world makes people turn their attention to escape from cities to the lap of nature. The growing attention to the state of the environment is forcing more and more people to abandon traditional tourism in favor of ecotourism. Despite of its increasing popularity, ecotourism needs to try to make more people know about it. The main aim of this thesis was to identify how ecotourism can be developed in Finland, especially in the region of Central Ostrobothnia and which threats and opportunities it can face with. Central Ostrobothnia is not such developed touristic region as for example Lapland or Helsinki, but still has chances to become unique tourist destination of Finland.

The aim of the thesis is to present some options of developing ecotourism in Central Ostrobothnia and it shows the ways of combining ecotourism with other activities and aims which could be attractive for travelers.

The Russian market is the target group of the thesis. It is well known fact, that most of tourists in Finland come from Russia (Statistics Finland 2018) The thesis is going to contain an empirical research and it will be carried out in the summer and autumn of 2018. The research is going to be made in Webropol 2.0 but also translated into Russian to make the questions easier for the respondents to understand.

2 TOURISM IN FINLAND

Finland attracts millions of people all over the world by its incredible nature and culture. Nowadays tourism has become a vital part of Finnish economic. Many tourists from all over the world visit Finland every year.

2.1 The most popular destinations

One of the most popular destinations in Finland is the capital city of Helsinki. The other popular cities are Turku, Tampere and Oulu. In Finland, mostly in Lapland, winter tourism is developed - downhill for lovers of skiing and snowboarding, hiking on snowmobiles, riding a dog and reindeer sledding (resort in Ylläs and others). The resorts of Salla, Pyhä, Ruka (near Kuusamo), Suomu (near Kemijärvi), Saariselkä, Levi and Ylläs are famous for their ski slopes.

Since the 2010s, ecological tourism is gaining momentum. The tourism industry of the country offers for these purposes walking routes in protected areas, as well as a visit to a network of national parks and protected areas. For example, in Helsinki region, a number of previously inaccessible for tourists, islands are opened for eco-tourism in summertime - Vallisaari, Klovaharun, Isosaari.

2.2 Russian impact on Finnish tourism

Nowadays most of tourists in Finland come from Russia. According to accommodation statistics, the biggest amount of overnight stays was made by Russian tourists (Statistics Finland 2018). The statistics doesn't include people travelling by farriers or ones, who had one day trip. In the same time, Russia takes 5th place among the most popular destinations for Finnish tourists after Estonia, Spain, Sweden and Germany (Visit Finland statistics 2018).

According to estimates of the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat 2018), last year the number of tourist trips to the EU countries from Russian tourists increased by 25% compared to 2016, reaching almost 40 million. Following the analytical agency TourStat, Finland was the most popular the EU country for Russian tourists, perhaps a significant part of the stream are residents of St. Petersburg due to the proximity and simplified registration of the Schengen visa. In general, 12.2 million of trips from Russia to the EU fell on the 5 most popular countries of EU (TourStat, 2017): Finland (3.333 million tours from Russia), Estonia (1,728 million), Poland (1.230 million), Germany (1.229 million), Spain (929 thousand).

3 ECOTOURISM

If things are clear with standard tourism, then with “eco” there are much more discrepancies. The fashion for everything “green” and “eco-friendly” is slowly capturing the world, and our perception filters have already tuned into code words, sometimes not noticing very strange “artifacts”.

3.1 The concept of ecotourism

Experts have their own opinions about ecotourism: this is a responsible journey to nature, which contributes to nature conservation and improves the well-being of the local population. This definition gives the International Society of ecotourism. Ecotourism is similarly defined by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF 2018).

In general, we can specify the main «targets» of ecotourism:

1. The direction of travel - places with relatively untouched nature or preserved authentic life. These are, for example, nature reserves, national parks or such old villages and villages where they ring the bell, go to the bathhouse on Sundays, and grandmothers sell homemade cakes and milk from a ladybug on the square.
2. The purpose of such travel is to study the natural and cultural characteristics. These are not galleries and shopping, but acquaintance with the traditional way of life of the locals, or acquaintance with wildlife, in order to feel part of it for some time and then disappear, leaving no trace behind.
3. The tourism process does not harm natural ecosystems. Everything is clear: we just do not harm nature.
4. It is economically beneficial for local residents to preserve nature and traditions. The trick is that the benefits and revenues from such tourism should not be received by corporations or the head office somewhere in the capital, but locals, who themselves opened a cafe, hostel or boat

rental. And so that the traditions of the region are preserved and raised to the rank of cultural heritage, and not replaced by faceless “standards of service”.

3.2 Ecotourism in Finland

Ecotourism is a new trend in the tourism business, and, like everything new, it is developing actively and uncontrollably. Its prospects are very tempting, and many countries pay great attention to the development of ecotourism. Finland is not an exception.

There are more than thirty national parks with a total area of 8170 square kilometers all around Finland. Some of them are still not fully understood by people to this day. Promotion on the territory of parks on any type of vehicle is prohibited, only walking routes are allowed.

Special attention in the Finnish ecotourism deserves a water section. Here canoeing and many other water sports are popularized. No less exciting pastime will be fishing, walking through the woods, as well as picking berries and mushrooms.

Lapland, located in the North of the Scandinavian Peninsula, almost at the very North Pole, can be called an ecological paradise. Severe climatic conditions, lack of industrial centers, poorly populated area of the region - all this contributes to the maximum preservation of its natural wealth.

In the summer in Lapland, outdoor activities are very diverse - horse riding, mountain biking, canoeing, just hiking in the woods or hills and much more. In winter, in the endless expanses of the region, it is possible ride a reindeer or dog sledding. (visitfinland.com 2018)

4 CENTRAL OSTROBOTHNIA

Central Ostrobothnia is a region located by the Gulf of Bothnia. It borders to the regions of Ostrobothnia, Northern Ostrobothnia, Central Finland and Southern Ostrobothnia. Central Ostrobothnia consists of thirteen municipalities, the biggest town is Kokkola. The region consists of 8 municipalities, two of which are cities: Halsua, Kannus (town), Kaustinen, Kokkola (capital town), Lestijarvi, Perho, Toholampi, Veteli.

4.1 Main industries of Central Ostrobothnia

The key to the high quality of life in the region is clean environment. Tar trade and shipbuilding have been being the main industries which connected Central Ostrobothnia to other Nordic countries and to the rest of the Europe since long time ago. Good connections are also behind the success of the current day; efficient harbors, an airport, highways and high-quality data connections enable excellent conditions for business and leisure.

Central Ostrobothnia is a growing region and it offers possibilities especially in the fields of high quality process technologies, logistics, electronics and fine mechanics.

The main industries are: chemistry, Logistics (Kokkola Industrial Park), metal and machinery industry, sources of energies and renewable energies (battery cells), energy efficient pre-fabricated house constructions, high-end boat building and customized sail boats and education.

The region is also rich by its natural resources; forestry, furs, clean nature environment enabling organic food and pure dairy products .

4.2 Tourism in Central Ostrobothnia

Central Ostrobothnia is very beautiful region by its nature. Due to its landscape the region is suitable for hiking in wilderness and sea shores. Silent, clean environment, huge territory of pure nature and lack of hustle are the main characteristics of the region. The biggest city and a the capital of Central Ostrobothnia is Kokkola. It is also the place where the majority of sightseeing are located. For example, there are some museums such as Kokkolan Museum of Natural History Kieppi, Roos House - K.H.Renlund museum and The Toivonen Animal Park and Peasant Museum. One of the main attractions of Kokkola and surrounding area is Old Wooden Town (Neristan). An old lighthouse located on the sea coast has become a hallmark of the city. This region is perfect for ecotourism and vacation on the lap of nature. There are a lot of forests and beautiful sea coast, which attract hikers. Long seaside and different rivers are suitable for fishing and swimming.

There are many different events organized during the year. Every April we can watch the parade of unique cars from 70-80s. The event is called American Car Show. There are different fairs and trade markets are organized every summer. The city holds Winter Dance Festival which is very popular among people of different ages.

There is one local trip agency called "Visit Kokkola" which offers journeys around Kokkola and surroundings. The agency also offers tours outside of the city where people can enjoy the lap of nature. Tourists can also spend a night in camping outside of the city. The agency is located in the center of the town. (Official website of Visit Kokkola kokkola.fi 2018)

5 KVARNEN SAMCOMMUN AND ITS “FUTURE AND NATURE OF ECOTOURISM”

Kvarnen is a community of the municipality. It consists of Kronoby, Kokkola, Pietarsaari, Pedersöre and Larsmo. Kvarnen offers many educational services such as language courses, trainings, professional studies and other. All the operations of the municipality are financed by government shares, municipalities, participatory fees and other income. (Official website of the organization kvarnen.fi 2018)

The organization also holds different projects, one of them is about developing the region of Central Ostrobothnia and making it more attractive for foreign students and workers. The name of the project is “Framtidens Natur- och Ekoturism” which can be translated as “Future of Nature- and Ecotourism”. The project investigates existing and possible nature and ecotourism actors in the project area and the opportunities for Eco certification of tourism companies in Finland. The project cooperates with Centria University of Applied Sciences, Novia and Swedish School of Economics for these investigations and surveys. The project started on the 1st of May 2016 and will be completed on 31st of December 2018. The project has received funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development via Action Ostrobothnia, r.f. The head of the project is Carola Wiik. (kvarnen.fi 2018)

6 ANALYZING THE MARKET AND SWOT ANALISYS

Before starting business development, it is obligatory to analyze the market and to find out if the business will be attractive for potential customers. The first step of analyzing is making a SWOT analysis of the market, to estimate the chances of survival of this business. The second step is to analyze the market using different tools, more suitable for this purpose, for example, questionnaire form published in the Internet, collecting data from companies, related to the business and other way. In case of the research, the most suitable way was to create the questionnaire form in Webropol 2.0 and spread it among potential tourists from Russia.

6.1 SWOT analysis

Strength

- Unique way of travelling
- Lack of competitors on the market
- Huge area of forests and fields for ecotourism and availability of sea coast for fishing, camping and hiking.
- Big amount of native and international students in Central Ostrobothnia as big group of potential customers and also potential workers in the field.

Weaknesses

- Ecotourism is not such common and well-known way of travelling
- Ecotourism is depended on the climate of the region. Moreover, according to the research, made in Webropol 2.0 quite many tourists are not satisfied with Finnish weather, so ecotourism can tern into seasonal way of travelling, available only in summer and winter, when climate is stable.

Opportunities

- Cooperation with schools, university and student organizations. Such cooperation can increase the number of potential customers, not only from Russia, but from Finland and other countries.
- Cooperation with travel agencies (international and local ones). According to the research, most of Russian tourists prefer book their trips via travel agencies, so, making agreement, or at least create an advertising on travel companies web sites, can be also an opportunity to grow the number of tourists.
- Organizing internships with foreign students and young people who would like to work in tourism sector. There are quite many Russian students who are interested in having internship abroad. Having foreign students who have interest in work in tourism is good opportunity to make the region more attractive for international tourists.
- Organizing language courses and combine them with ecotours. According to the research, a lot of people are attracted by nature of Finland and its culture and language, so the idea of connecting vacation with language studies can be successful.

Threats

- Ecotourism is very young way of travelling. Despite of it is getting more and more popular nowadays, it is still very unpredictable type of business. It is very difficult to forecast the success and profitability of this kind of travelling.
- Economic situation is very important for every kind of business, especially for tourism. All kind of tourism depends on economic situation and income of potential clients.

6.2 Analyzing the market with Webropol 2.0

The best way to analyze the market was creating of questionnaire form and publishing the link in the Internet. The questionnaire form was made in Webropol 2.0 during summer-autumn 2018. The research included fourteen questions, twelve of them were compulsory and two optional. The questionnaire form was translated into Russian language for the more convenient work. All

the answers uploaded into Webropol were translated to English without changing the information they consist of. Conditionally the form can be divided by three parts: the first one is about personal information of respondents, the second one includes analyze of preferable ways of travelling and financial issues, and the last one performs the interest in Finnish ecotourism in ecotourism in general.

6.2.1 Collection information about respondents

As it was mentioned before, the first four questions include private information about the respondents. Total number of respondents was 151 people and most of them were from Moscow and surrounding regions. The gender ratio was about the same: 48% of respondents were male and 52% are female. The research was open for different age groups. As it is shown in the results, most of the respondents were between 18 and 25 years old.

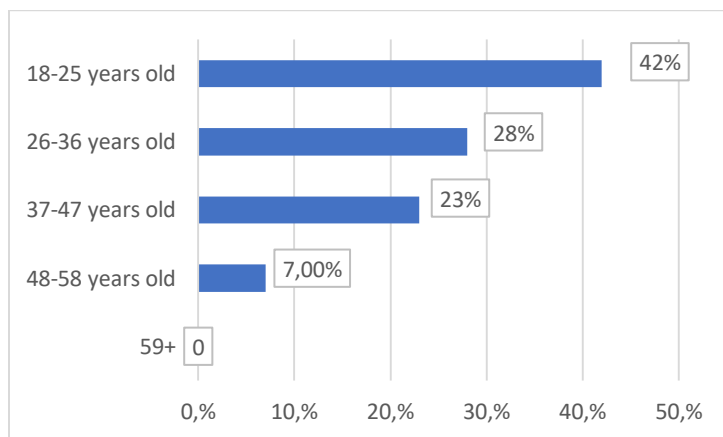


FIGURE 1. The age ratio of respondents in percentage (Webropol 2.0 2018)

Respondents were also asked to choose their most preferable way of travelling. The graph shows us that more than half of the respondents (52%) prefer to travel with their families, while another half prefer to travel alone (25%) or with friends (23%).

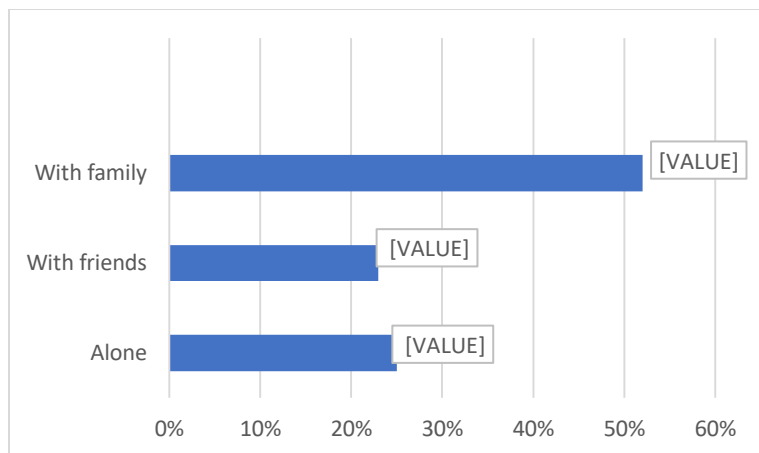


FIGURE 2. Preferable ways of travelling in percentage (Webropol 2.0 2018)

After detailed analyses of answers, it was founded out that he half of respondents, who prefer to travel with families are mostly from 26 to 47 years old. It can be explained that in general they might have children.

6.2.2 Analyzing the best ways for booking tours

Questions from 5 to 8 were related to tourism in general. The purpose was to find out what are the best ways for Russian tourists to find and book trips and what is the approximate budget per year they use. The next step was to know where people get ideas and search for the information about trips abroad. The respondents could choose more than one options and also write their own opinions. The answers can be used while making plan of promotion of the region.

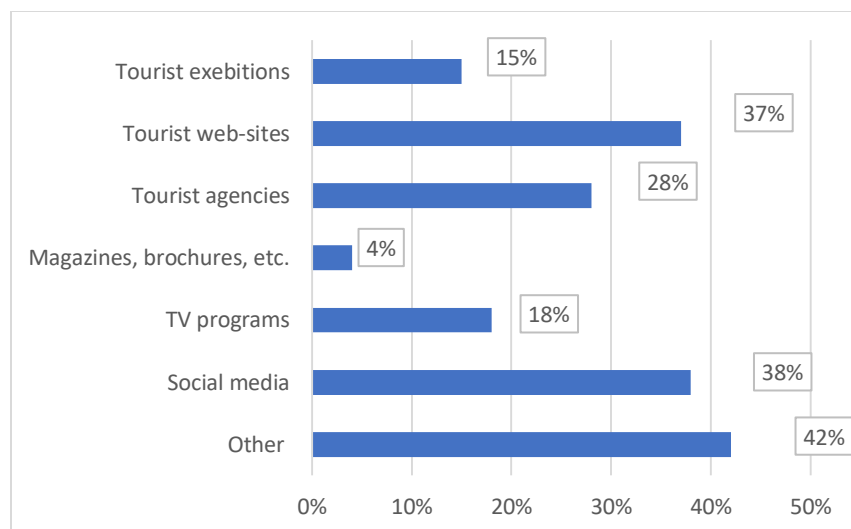


FIGURE 3. The most preferable ways of searching for the information about trips abroad (Webropol 2.0 2018)

In this question respondents could write names of organizations or social media they use. According to their answers, approximately 50% of respondents prefer to rely on opinions of their relatives while searching kind information about trips. This fact can mean that family and relatives are very valuable in Russian society. Moreover, it is popular to share own experience about travelling with others. The next popular searching way were social media and tourist web-sites. Social media (mostly Instagram and Vkontakte) were extremely popular among young generations from 18 to 25 years old. The most preferable web-site became booking.com Around quarter of the respondents prefer to ask travel agencies for finding a suitable trip. This way was wide spread mostly with people who have children and who prefer calm comfortable way of travelling. Tourist exhibitions and magazines were not so popular sources, mostly for once, who work in the field.

However, the most popular way for booking trips was via airline and railway companies (again the most desired one was booking.com). After its popularity gains booking via travel agencies and the last one was via tourist web-sites.

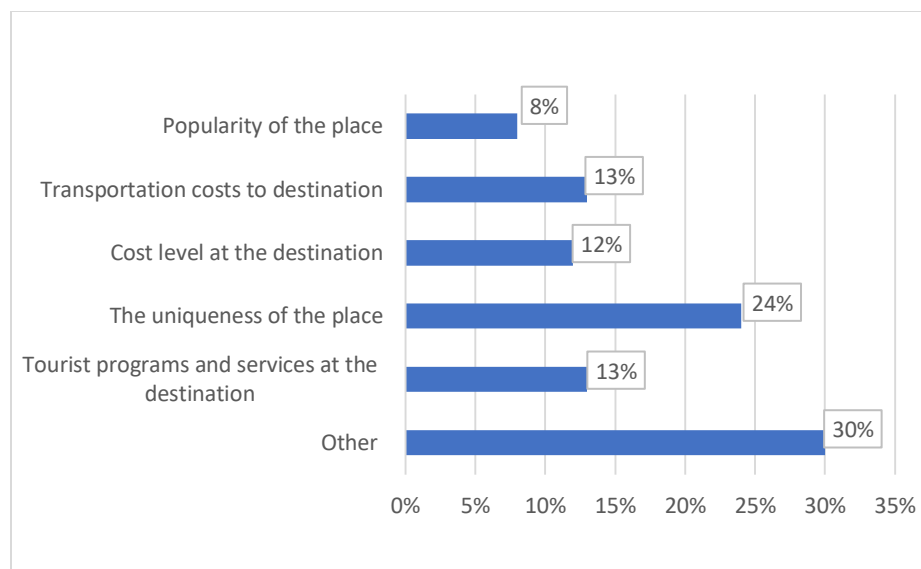


FIGURE 4. The most crucial factor for choosing the destinations (Webropol 2.0 2018)

The respondents needed to mention only one factor, the most crucial for them. As it is shown in the report, the least important factor appeared the popularity of chosen destination. Tourist programs and services at the destination were also not so valuable, but mostly for people who travel with children. Cost level at the destination and transportation cost didn't matter a lot for the respondents. Around the quarter of respondents are attracted by the uniqueness of chosen place and more than 30 % have their own most crucial factors they could write by themselves. The most popular factors were emotions, that travelers can get, atmosphere of the chosen place and also its historical past.

The last question related to tourism abroad was about the annual budget people use. Approximately 40% of respondents spend 1000-2000 euros per year. After analyzing the answers, it was found out that most of these 40% are respondents who have family and children. 22% of respondents, who were mostly from the youngest age group (18-25 years old) mentioned that their annual expenses are less than 1000 euro. Approximately 18% of respondents could say that they are able to spend more than 2000 euros per year and the rest 14% mentioned they are not able to travel abroad now. The detailed analysis is shown on FIGURE 5.

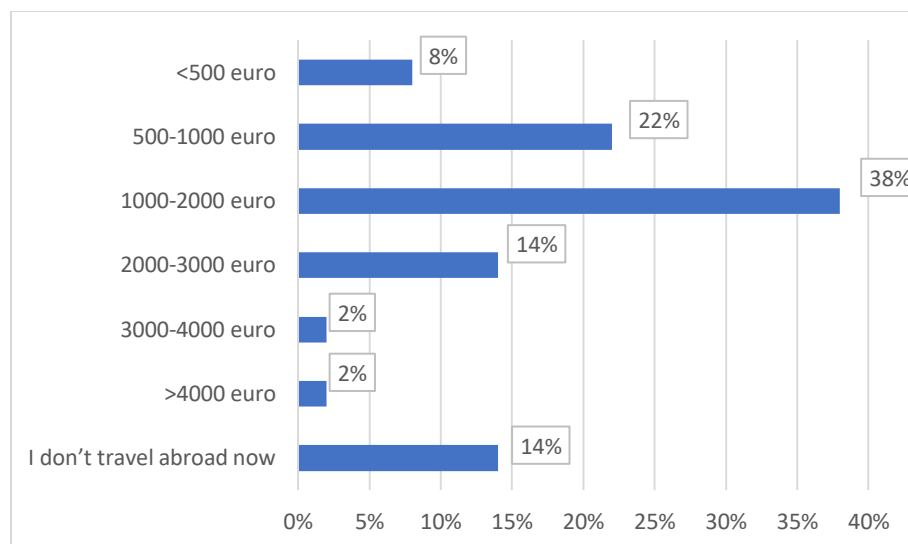


FIGURE 5. Annual costs for travelling abroad (Webropol 2.0 2018)

6.2.3 Evaluation of tourism and ecotourism in Finland

The last part of the questionnaire form was about ecotourism and Finland together. The main purpose of the last questions was to analyze how ecotourism is popular on the Russian market and how attractive Finland seems to be for Russian tourists.

According to the collected answers, half of the respondents tried ecotourism at least once in their lives. The most interesting fact is that almost all ecotours took part in Russia (Urals, Caucasus and Altai) and Kazakhstan and the majority liked their experience. One of the remarkable features was the lack of eco-tourism concept. After the detailed analyses it was found out that some number of the respondents didn't know about ecotourism and couldn't specify it. Despite of half of the respondents had never tried ecotourism before, more than 70% would like to try ecotourism, even if they were not familiar with it.

The main idea of the research was not only analyzing people's attitude to ecotourism, but also to find out if Finland is an attractive country for visiting. According to the statistic, 52% of respondents have visited Finland at least once and the most visited places were Helsinki and Lapland. Mostly, people were tourists, some of them had business trips and also quite small

percentage live there or visit relatives. In general, country has positive feedbacks, the only negative side was cold climate of the country.

Despite of the negative feedback for Finnish climate, 70% of respondents wished to have an eco-tour around Finland. The most of people thought that Finland is perfect place for vacation on nature. The respondents were asked to choose the aspects, that make Finland attractive country for them. The results are shown below on the graph.

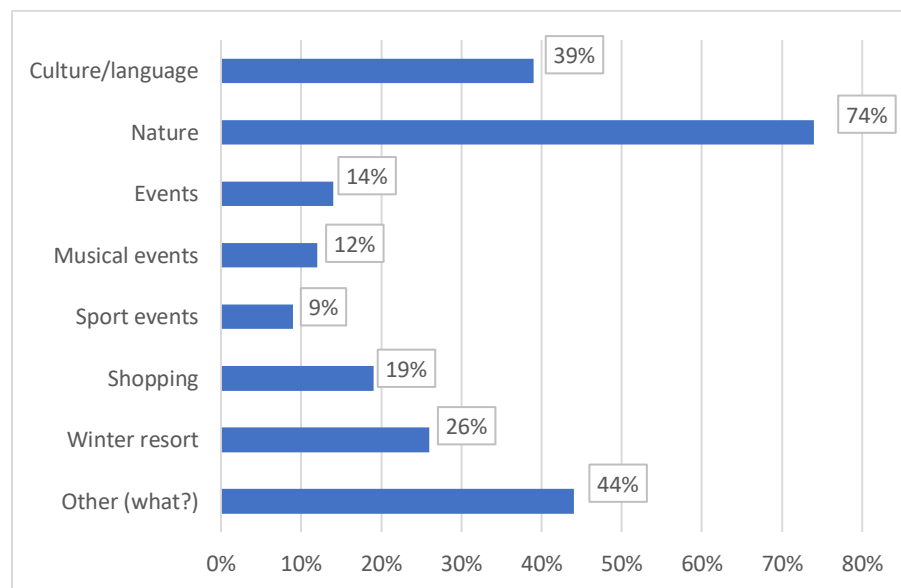


FIGURE 6. The most attractive aspects of Finland according to the respondents' opinions (Webropol 2.0 2018)

Nature became the most attractive aspects among others. Finland is famous by its good ecological situation, fresh air and clean environment. Some of the respondents pointed out they liked Finnish Nordic atmosphere with its wild inhibited places. Culture and language also attract quite many people. Places for winter vacations are famous all over the world with its beauty, Northern lights and village of Santa Clause. In addition, northern lights and Santa`s village were the most famous and the most desired things to see. Shopping, cultural and musical events turned up not so popular and attractive, but still there are respondents who choose these options. Musical events could be a separate topic for discussion as far as many Finnish musical bands are famous all over the world, in addition such big musical festivals as Tuska Open Air or Rock in Tampere always collect people from all Europe and Russia. The least attractive aspect respondents chose sport events.

The last question in Webropol was created to analyze which part of Finland is the most desired to visit among Russian tourists and what they would like to visit in general.

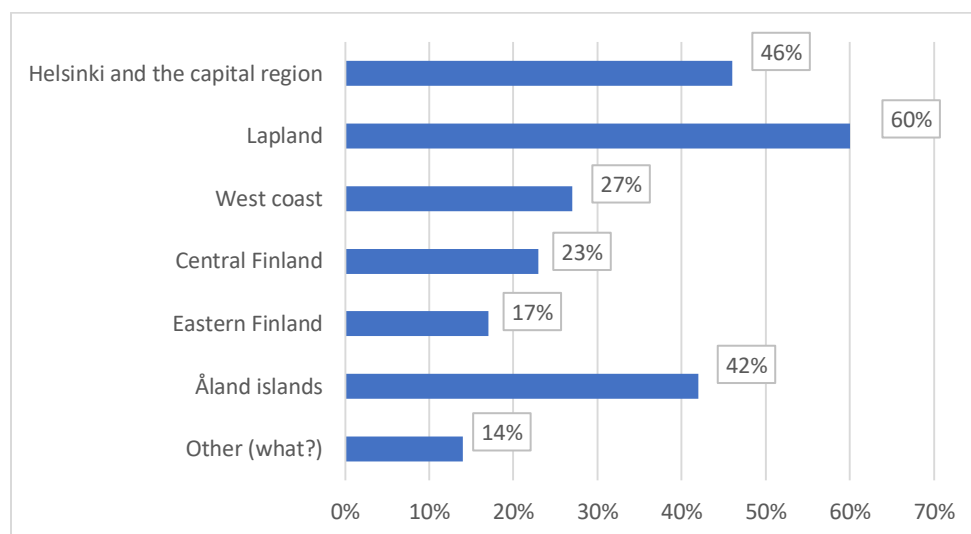


FIGURE 7. The most desired region to visit (Webropol 2.0 2018)

The most desired destinations to visit became Lapland and the capital region. The most interesting fact that Åland appeared to be in wish-list for tourists, despite of this region is not so famous in the world and doesn't have a lot of visitors from other countries. West coast, Central and Eastern Finland also found their lovers, especially among eco-tourism fans and ones who are attractive by vacation on the nature.

Respondents could also include their own opinions in the list of places what they would like to visit. The most popular options became wild inhabited places and villages far from big cities, which can be suitable for ecotourism. Moreover, respondents also mentioned they would like to travel from Finland to other countries by ferry, in other words, to have a tour by sea.

7 DEVELOPING ECOTOURISM IN CENTRAL OSTROBOTHNIA

To attract more tourists, it is necessary to make people know what ecotourism is and what emotions and adventures they can get using this way of travelling. Promotion is the best way to market Central Ostrobothnia region and give more opportunities to develop ecotourism in this area. Promotion for Russian market can be made by different ways.

7.1 Touristic agencies

There are a lot of tour agencies which include Finland in their travelling destinations and help their customers with documents to get Finnish travel visa. Moreover, some of the agencies, if not all, provide their customers with ready travelling packages, which include transportation, hotel overnights, tours around cities, visiting sightsees, shopping, etc. Kvarnen can create ready ecotours for Russian customers and offer them via tourist agencies. In the beginning it is possible to make some discounts as far as Central Ostrobothnia is not a popular region for travelling. The main idea is to make a partnership with Russian tourist agencies, especially ones, which specialize on trips to Finland. The packages can be different by their costs and target groups, for example, one package can include family tours, which are oriented on customers with children and have activities, suitable for every family member, while others can be for survivalists, who prefer sleep under the sky and camping in the wild forest.

7.2 Language schools and educational centers

Language is the best tool to promote the country and attract people. According to statistics, the most popular and preferable foreign language for studying is English, then French, Spanish, Italian and German. Chinese language is gaining its popularity over the years.

Unfortunately, Finnish is not popular language for studying, but it is still spread in regions close to the border. For example, in some schools, which are located close to the Finnish border students can learn Finnish as a foreign language or can take Finnish courses as extra classes. Language schools are also very popular abroad for their students, where they can practice language and get to know local environment. One of the ecotours can be a part of activity in student camp or ecotourism can be a main idea of travelling and language and cultural studying can be an addition to a trip.

There can be an example: one of the most famous language schools, which offers Finnish classes for children and adults is Nordic school, which has its offices in Moscow and St Petersburg. The school offers not only language courses and workshops, but also organizes summer camps in Finland and helps students to apply to Finnish universities. Cooperation with this school can bring benefits to both sides: Finland can get customers for ecotours and standard travelling and students of the school can use their knowledges of Finnish language and practice it with native speakers. In addition, a lot of parents try to provide their children with everything healthy and vacation on fresh air in clean environment could be a significant for parents.

7.3 Social media

According to the research, social media were one of the most popular sources for finding destinations of travelling. It is difficult to imagine a product or service that cannot be promoted via such famous social media as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and others. Social media is a necessary platform for business promotion in the modern world and ecotourism is not an exception. The best option to promote Central Ostrobothnia as a good destination for ecotourists is to create and account on Facebook or Instagram, which promote the region as the most suitable for ecotours. Moreover, most of the respondents found Finnish nature and ecological situation one of the best in the world. Attracted by unique pictures and beautiful views of Finland posted on Instagram or VK tourists can increase their interest in ecotours.

7.4 Work and travel

The Work and Travel program is an international exchange program that gathers hundreds of thousands of students from around the world in European countries and the USA. The uniqueness of the program is that each student can achieve several goals at the same time: get acquainted with the traditions and culture of the country of travelling, gain international experience, improve their English or other languages proficiency through daily communication with native speakers and, at the same time, make an unforgettable experience. Offering Russian students internships in tourist sector is good opportunity to increase interest of visitors. Students, especially ones, who study tourism and hospitality in their universities can get an experience in working in the field and getting knowledge about their profession. Ones, who study teaching and youth education can improve their skills by organizing events and camps for children and host events for people of all ages. Survivalist and professionals who have experience in camping in the woods or other fields of ecotourism could become good huntsmen for tourists.

In other words, providing work placements for foreign students and specialists can attract people from other countries. Moreover, people tend to trust ones who speak their own language, so tourists could communicate with workers in their native languages.

7.5 Combine ecotourism with other activities.

As it is mentioned on the FIGURE 6, Finnish nature is number one by its attractiveness among other things, but there are more activities, which could gain more tourists, for example, sport or musical events. One of the options to increase popularity of ecotourism is combining eco-tours with other entertainment programs, for example, concerts or competitions. Camping in the forest for five days might be mixed with two-days tour to rock concert.

8 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The main aim of this thesis was to identify current situation of ecotourism in Finland, especially in region of Central Ostrobothnia, and analyze its demand for Russian market. Due to the research made in Webropol 2.0 it was possible to analyze current situation of tourism and ecotourism in the region and present some ways for making the region more attractive for foreigners.

Tourist sector plays a vital role in Finnish economy and should be considered as one of the main directions for developing in the country. Russian market is one of the most vital parts for Finland, so keeping attention on it, Central Ostrobothnia has all chances to become one of the most popular touristic places. Finding the best ways to attract different target groups, the region might become rich not only by Russian tourists but also by foreigners from all over the world.

The thesis was done with the help of different sources and researches. There were some difficulties in finding books and e-books as far as ecotourism is very young way of travelling and there were not so many sources which could provide necessary information about it. The main source was the questionnaire form made in Webropol 2.0 and its translation from Russian into English. The research was made with help of Kvarnen Samcommun and the head of the project Carola Wiik.

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