

ANALYSIS OF RURAL TOURISM WEBSITES: THE CASE OF CENTRAL MACEDONIA

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Our study of rural tourism enterprises in Central Macedonia uses the functional and technical factors posted on Greek official websites during the year 2009 to explore typical guest expectations based on those posted factors and the perceptions of enterprise owners and/or managers in light of those factors. The evaluation of the hotel 74 rural enterprises in Central Macedonia was based on the examination of the importance of functional and technical quality in rural tourism services. The analysis includes all the rural recorded hotel units in Central Macedonia of Greece. We build our research hypothesis upon the literature and we make the following hypothesis: the functional and technical dimensions can also be applied as important factors for the level of quality the customer perceives from a related web site. Our study contributes to the inference of objective conclusions of the actual quality of the rural tourism hotel units in Central Macedonia.

Keywords: *Rural tourism hotels, Website analysis, functional and technical dimensions, Service Quality.*

JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

INTRODUCTION

There are about 400,000 hotel lodgings and approximately 3.6 million beds available to tourists in Europe today. The economic impacts of those activities are the creation of about 900,000 jobs and income creation for rural areas that has been estimated at the level of 150,000 million Euros (Myncke & Nuñez, 2009). Recently in the European Union

there has been development of models for the growth of the agricultural sector and rural income, and also for the protection of the environment and quality of life. These frameworks incorporate rural tourism which includes activities based on the exploitation of the natural, cultural and human resources, contributing to the maintenance of traditional rural activities, rural entrepreneurship and cultural monuments. The membership of Greece in the European Financial Community, gender equality, and the upgrading of living conditions have promoted the development of countryside tourism, with the parallel technical and financial support by public and private offices (Mihalik, 1992). From 2001 until 2009, Agrotouristiki S.A. and Guest Inn contributed to the promotion of rural tourism in Greece and tried to inform and protect the citizens who are involved in countryside tourism. Today their actions are planned for inclusion in the new Rural Tourism Organization (O.T.Y.) of the Ministry of Economic Development or the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, with more orientation to the management of public business policy.

QUALITY, INFORMATION AND THE AGRO-TOURISM LODGING SECTOR

While it is relatively easy to define the quality of a product, the process of defining the quality of a service is a challenge. The products are discernible and relatively easy to count. On the other hand, the services are characterised by indistinct elements of separation (as they are produced and consumed at the same time); they are perishable (they can not be stored) and they have high level of variety (Kotler, 1997).

According to the definition of rural tourism, the quality of the services includes the attitude of the entrepreneur towards the guests, the competence of the booking system, the cleanliness of the rooms, their furniture, as well as the attitude of the local residents towards the guests (Fleischer, et al., 1993). Grönroos (1990) suggests a differentiation between the technical and the functional quality of the services and, as it has been mentioned before, the technical quality refers to “what”, while the functional quality refers to “how”. Sharpley (2002) reports that there is an observed lack of essential knowledge and skills in the agro-tourism lodging sector, so there is a need for quality analysis and improvement. ¶ In the related literature, quality of provided services and information for the customers are essential factors for the purchasing decision that concerns the choice of agro-tourism lodgings by the customers. Those

factors can be constituting elements for competitive advantage creation (Pazek, et al., 2005; Potocnik, 2006; EUAB, 2011).

THE INTERNET TECHNOLOGY

Internet technology supports the process of the description of customer behaviour (EUAB, 2011; Aaker et al., 2001; Siegel, 1997). The significance of electronic consumers and e-markets in the day-to-day praxis no longer constitutes an unknown parameter for the agro-tourism business sector. Websites are rapidly becoming a must for both promoting and selling agro-rural enterprise products (Beus, 2011). Utilities also result for the customer as he/she can strengthen his/her briefing via the Internet with regard to interesting product characteristics as well as combine this digital service with the services that are provided in the conventional market by the points of sale. ¶This alternative it is particularly important for customers that conceive that the growth of transactions via the Internet includes a high risk of failure (Bailey & Bakos, 1997, p.18). Those utilities can contribute to the building of longer-lasting relations between enterprises and customers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2006, p.302; Sviokla & Rayport, 2011). Finally, the information retrieved by customers from the Internet is viewed by them as useful and adding value as per their perception of benefits received and manifested in their chosen activities.

Today we have access to numerous website evaluation tools. Most of them are the result of theoretical and empirical research (e.g., Quality Criteria for Website Excellence, 2011; Law et al., 2010; Parasuraman et al, 2005). Based on Reichel et al., (2000), we make the following hypothesis: the two basic dimensions, functional and technical, can also be applied as important factors for the level of quality the customer perceives from a related web site.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the present study was to evaluate the hotels in Central Macedonia region of Greece based on the expected degree of satisfaction by the expectant guest and the specification of weaknesses in the examined sectors of the rural tourism units. The evaluation of the functional and technical factors was conducted on the basis of the data posted in the websites of Agrotouristiki S.A. and Guest Inn during the year 2009 for each tourism unit in Central Macedonia. The evaluation was objective, as much as possible, since the personal, subjective judgment

inevitably affects the final grading. However, the present study investigates the evaluation of the expected quality, which definitely results from the personal judgment of each possible guest.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of the hotel enterprises in Central Macedonia was based on the study of Reichel, et al (2000), who examined the importance of quality in rural tourism services. They studied the difference between the level of expected customer satisfaction by the provider of services and the level the customers actually experienced. They also investigated the perceptions of the entrepreneurs about rural tourism services and management tactics for the elimination of differences between the rural tourism entrepreneurs' perceptions and those of the regular administrators in order to eliminate disparities. The survey was conducted with tourists and business administrators in rural Israel, via questionnaires and personal interviews. To gain useful information for our study we applied the definition of Gronroos, (1990). This type of information was created by a list of criteria for rural tourism services and we created two sub-categories (Table 1). In rural tourism, the functional quality is determined mostly by the owners or managers as they have the most consistent contact with the staff providing services to guests and will base their assessment on perceived satisfaction or dissatisfaction of guests.

The data used by the present study were collected exclusively from the websites of Agrotouristiki S.A. and Guest Inn during 2009. The data reflects the hotels of Central Macedonia recorded in Agrotouristiki S.A., which operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Tourism Development, and Guest Inn, which is the Greek network of rural accommodation and a member of the EuroCites. Thus, the data analysis concerns the entire population, not only a sample of hotels, which reinforces the reliability of the final observations. Specifically, this census concerns the population of the rural tourism hotels in the seven prefectures of Central Macedonia: Thessaloniki, Halkidiki, Kilkis, Imathia, Pella, Pieria and Serres. The data provided for each hotel are its name, its location (in or out of the settlement), the altitude of the region, the date of its establishment (if it is mentioned), the number of rooms available, and the provided services and activities which can be developed in or out of the rural tourism unit. All the above mentioned data are taken into consideration and affect the evaluation of the rural tourism units, as the average grading is figured for each unit. We should note that the provided services which are not recorded in the tables are 100% available

in all units. Such services are TV and telephone in the room, room services and cleaning services. In cases where a fireplace is mentioned among the services, it is in the room, not in a place of common use. In Table 1, fifteen criteria, technical and functional, are presented, on which the evaluation of the rural tourism units was based in relation to the satisfaction that the potential guest expects to experience during his/her stay in one of the hotels.

Table 1 Evaluation criteria for the hotel units based on Grönroos theory, (1990) as used by Reichel *et al*, (2000).

Factors of expected satisfaction

Functional factors:

Booking system

Behaviour of the locals

Behaviour of the owners/staff

Service quality

Technical Factors :

Printed information about the activities in the region

Room size

Room cleanliness

Air conditioning

Level of prices

Room and region aesthetics

Activities for children

Bathroom

Food facilities

Room furniture

Activities in the unit

A rating of “1” implies the lowest quality, while “5” implies the highest level of service quality. For the evaluation of the “booking system” factor, we had to take into account the existence or not of a website or e-mail address and the potential of booking through an agency or electronically, for the best possible facilitation of the possible guests. We should note that the evaluation of the “service quality” was greatly affected by the access to the units by persons with special needs, the

acceptance of pets and the existence of washing machines. The “size of the room” was mainly evaluated by the photos of the rooms available in the websites of Agrotouristiki S.A. (www.agrotour.gr, 2009; today available at <http://www.agrotourism.gr>, 2011) and Guest Inn (www.guestinn.com), and also by the availability (or not) of suites. As far as “air conditioning” is concerned, we should mention that many of the units are located in mountainous regions of quite high altitude. This means that they constitute winter destinations and the lack of air conditioning did not greatly affect the grading. On the other hand, the existence of a fireplace in the room did influence grading. The evaluation of the criterion of “level of prices” resulted from the recorded prices, in cases where they were available, as well as the services each unit provides and its general image. It is important to note that for the evaluation of the price, the rating scale was reversed, with a grade of “5” indicating that the expected price is very high, while a grade of “1” indicated the price as very cheap. The rating of the criteria “aesthetics of the room and region” and “room furniture” was determined by the photographs posted in the websites of Agrotouristiki S.A. and Guest Inn for each hotel unit. The technical factor of “activities for children” had the highest grading wherever the availability of children’s facilities was mentioned, and the potential of children’s participation in other activities, e.g. cycling, was also taken into consideration. The criterion of “bathroom” was evaluated with the highest grading in cases where the services of sauna/Jacuzzi/hydro massage were available. Moreover, the evaluation of the “food facilities” was positive especially in cases where the potential to use the kitchen was mentioned and also wherever there was a restaurant/tavern in the rural tourism unit. Finally, the factor “activities in the unit” was evaluated as providing high quality even in cases of cooperation of the unit with external organizers, while the evaluation was harsher in cases of various activities only out of the unit.

Data analysis

In the prefecture of Thessaloniki only two units with 70 beds are recorded. The total amount of hotels in the prefecture is 132, with 13,386 total provided beds (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2007). This small number of rural tourism units can be explained by the fact that the provincial regions of the prefecture are close to the capital of the prefecture which is one of the country’s commercial centers. Naturally, the economic support comes from other sources and the residents do not

fulfil the preconditions to be financed for the development of rural tourism units. Both of the units in the prefecture of Thessaloniki provide accommodation, breakfast and parking. One of them provides activities such as horse riding, archery, canoe and shooting, while another one has a swimming pool and sauna. We notice that only one unit is accessible by persons with special needs.

The average expected satisfaction grading for the quality of the provided services in the rural tourism units in the prefecture of Thessaloniki is 3.37, which is 0.48 units lower than the average of the whole Central Macedonia (Table 2). Additionally, the expected quality of the booking system is lower than the general average, with 1.5, as is the printed information about the activities in the region. On the other hand, the expectation for the development of activities in the unit was evaluated much higher, with a grade of 4, as were the activities for children, which are crucial factors in rural tourism. Hoyle stated that “weekends are more likely the most marketable option for family activities” (Hoyle, 2002, p.25, 58, see also Beus, 2011).

In the prefecture of Halkidiki, 16 units are recorded, with 289 beds. The total number of hotels is 521, with 44,764 beds (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2007). Six of the units (37.5%) are located in the region of Taxiarhis, 3 units (18.75%) in Arnea, 2 units in Parthenonas (12.5%) and 2 in Megali Panagia (12.5%). The remainder of 18.75% are located in various provincial regions, such as Vrastana, Vavdos and Paleohori. All of these units provide accommodation and breakfast. Three out of 16 units (18%), are characterized as “traditional” or scheduled buildings, and only one unit (6%) is a farm, which includes tennis courts and a football field, archery and also the opportunity to walk around it. We should note that a farm can include infrastructure for the development of various activities within the unit, which is a competitive and attractive advantage for the choice of the potential guest. In total, 31% provide the potential for physical exercise and development of the previously mentioned activities, with 12% through external cooperation. Additionally, 37% have children’s facilities, 62% have a fireplace in the room and 31% mention that they offer traditional or/and homemade treats to the guests. Moreover, 25% of the units allow pets, while only 12% are accessible by persons with special needs.

The average expected grade of satisfaction was found to be 3.59, which is only 0.26 units lower than the general average in Central Macedonia. The range of the average expected grades for all the hotels in the prefecture of Halkidiki is quite high (1.54 units) and ranges from 2.73 to 4.27. For the hotels in this prefecture there is also a low expectation for

the high quality booking system, as well as for the existence of printed information about the activities in the region and the activities in the unit. On the contrary, there is a high expectation for the qualitative aesthetics of the room and of the region. Moreover, the expected level of prices was evaluated with 3.63, which shows relatively expensive prices for the rural tourism hotels of the prefecture.

In the prefecture of Kilkis there are 3 units recorded, one of which is characterized as a traditional or/and scheduled building. The total amount of beds, within the frame of rural tourism is 107, while the total hotel units are 14 with 612 beds (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2007). All of the units provide breakfast and accommodation. Concerning the other services, 2/3 of the units are accessible by the persons with special needs and 1/3 allows pets. All of the units, in combination with the natural environment where they are built, provide the opportunity for ecological excursions and activities, while 1/3 of the units, within their collaboration with local units provide the guest with the opportunity to visit the botanical garden of the region and the winery and to participate in related local events.

The prefecture of Kilkis displays differences in relation to the other prefectures. There, the average grade of satisfaction is 4.31, which is 0.46 units higher than the ones of Central Macedonia. We should highlight that the elements which seem to be weak in the hotels of Central Macedonia in general, excel in the prefecture of Kilkis. In particular, the expectation for high quality in the booking system was graded with 4, as opposed to 3.28 in Central Macedonia. Additionally, there seems to be a high expectation for printed information about the activities of the region, as well as for the development of children's activities and other activities in the unit. Finally, we should note that the prefecture has only three recorded rural tourism units, which have all been evaluated with the highest expected grade in comparison with those of central Macedonia in general.

In the prefecture of Imathia 12 units were recorded in Agrotouristiki S.A. and Guest inn with 257 beds in total. According to the 2007 data by the Hellenic Statistical Authority, the hotels of the prefecture number 27 with 1,284 beds. Four of them (33%) are characterized as traditional or/and scheduled buildings. On the other hand, 16%, or two units, are in a farm and one unit shares its roof with the ski center, while 66.6%, or 8 out of 12 hotels are located in regions of altitude higher than 500m. All the units provide breakfast and accommodation, while 66% offer homemade or/and traditional treats, either for breakfast or at the restaurant, wherever there is one. Moreover, 25% of the units allow pets, and 33% are accessible by persons with special Needs. In combination with the natural

environment, 66% of the units mention the opportunity for ecological excursions, while 16% provide outdoor activities, such as hiking, climbing and skiing, in collaboration with an external partner. In only one of the units (8%) and more specifically in one of the farms, the guests can watch, or even participate in rural activities.

The image of the prefecture of Imathia is similar to the one of Central Macedonia in general, as the average of expected satisfaction is 3.81. As presented in Table 2, there is a low expectation for the hotels in the prefecture of Imathia regarding the booking system, the printed information about the activities of the region, and also for the activities for children and others, within the unit. On the other hand, the behavior of the residents and the owners/employees is expected to be high, as well as the cleanliness of the room. In addition, we should mention that in this prefecture we find the hotel with the lowest expected degree of satisfaction in Central Macedonia, displaying only 2.67 units. The average grades for the evaluation of the hotels in the prefecture of Imathia display a relatively wide range of 1.86 units.

As far as the prefecture of Pella is concerned, there are 17 rural tourism hotels with 403 beds. The total number of the hotels in this prefecture is 57 with 2,137 beds (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2007). All of them provide accommodation and breakfast, while 76.4% offer homemade or/and traditional treats. The majority of the hotels, 64.7%, or 11 out of 17, are located in old Agios Athanasios, which is a recently developed region in high altitude. It is a traditional settlement of natural beauty suitable for the development of rural tourism. The second location is in the prefecture of Pella with the most rural tourism hotel units, where we find 17.64% or 3 out of the 17 units in Loutraki where there are well-known spas. In these units the visitors are mainly older people and we should note that three of them are accessible for persons with special needs. The total number of rural tourism hotels in the prefecture of Pella which are accessible for persons with special needs is 6 (35.3%). In 23.5% of the hotels in the prefecture, pets are allowed. Moreover, there is no unit mentioning the availability of children's facilities, as well as the possibility to develop various activities within the unit, except for only one unit which provides esthetician services or "beauty therapies." All of the units provide the opportunity for ecological excursions and the development of activities and sports in the region, while only one unit mentions its collaboration with a climbing club. Finally, the majority of the hotels in the prefecture (58.8%) are characterized as traditional/scheduled buildings.

The prefecture of Pella is one of the prefectures with the lowest expected satisfaction by the provision of services and its grade is 3.72. There is a low expectation for the existence of children's facilities, as well as for the development of activities in the unit. However, the behavior of the locals and the owners/employees is estimated as excellent, as is the cleanliness of the room. In addition, the range of the average grading for the hotels in the prefecture of Pella is 1.07 units, while the lowest value is 3.13 units and the highest expected satisfaction is 4.20 units.

In Agrotouristiki S.A. and Guest Inn website listings at the year 2009 for Pieria, there were listed 15 rural tourism enterprises with 366 beds. In the prefecture of Pieria there were 373 units and 17,839 beds (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2007). All of the units provide accommodation and breakfast, while 66.6% provide homemade or/and traditional treats. Eight of 15 units or 53.3% are located in the area of Elatohori, a mountainous village which has attracted winter visitors during the last few years. In 6 out of 15 (40%) units the guest is able to participate in activities within the unit, such as watch or even take part in rural activities or visit the exhibition of traditional art. Moreover, all of the units mention the chance for ecological excursions and environmental education in the surrounding natural environment. Forty percent of the units are accessible for persons with special needs, while 20% offer children's facilities. The expected satisfaction from the services in the hotels of the prefecture was evaluated with 3.89 units, which is almost equal to that of Central Macedonia. The sectors with the lowest expected satisfaction are the same as those of the other prefectures. We should highlight that in the prefecture of Pieria we find one of the two rural tourism hotels with the highest expected satisfaction at 4.73 units. The range of the evaluation grading is 1.93 units.

Finally, in the prefecture of Serres, nine rural tourism units are recorded, which provide 259 beds, while the total number of hotels in the prefecture is 31 with 1,659 beds (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2007). In Serres, 33.3% of the rural tourism units are located in Ano or Kato Poroia and 33.3% in the area of Kerkini. All of the units promote the opportunity for ecological excursions; 3 out of 9 units mention participation in activities such as horse riding and hiking out of the unit; 2 of the units are able to organize or arrange outdoors activities; and only one unit enables the guests to exercise and take part in activities in the rural tourism unit. We should highlight the fact that 77.7% or 7 out of 9 hotels are accessible by persons with special needs, while 22.2% of them allow pets. Moreover, only one unit is characterized as a

traditional/scheduled building and one is characterised as an Activities Park, without being mentioned as a farm.

Table 2 Average expected grade of satisfaction.

Prefecture:

	Central Macedonia	<i>Thessaloniki</i>	<i>Halkidiki</i>	<i>Kilkis</i>	<i>Imathia</i>	<i>Pella</i>	<i>Pieria</i>	<i>Serres</i>
Functional Factors :								
Booking	3.28	1.50	2.38	4.00	3.67	3.12	3.73	4.56
Local	4.36	3.00	3.94	4.33	4.42	5.00	4.87	5.00
Owners/empl	4.54	3.00	4.31	5.00	4.58	5.00	4.87	5.00
Service	4.24	3.00	4.31	5.00	4.00	4.35	4.47	4.56
Technical Factors :								
Printed information about activities in the region	2.86	2.50	2.38	4.33	2.67	2.00	2.47	3.67
Room size	3.78	3.00	3.56	4.33	3.42	3.82	3.87	4.44
Room	4.58	4.00	4.06	5.00	4.58	4.71	4.73	5.00
Air	3.81	3.00	3.67	4.00	3.92	3.76	3.87	4.44
Level of	3.66	4.50	3.63	3.33	4.00	4.12	3.47	2.56
Room and	4.37	3.00	4.44	4.33	4.25	4.82	4.73	5.00
Activities for	3.12	4.50	3.06	4.33	3.00	1.18	2.20	3.56
Bathroom	4.49	5.00	4.31	4.67	4.08	4.47	4.33	4.56
Food facilities	3.70	3.50	3.44	4.00	3.83	3.82	4.00	3.33
Room	4.07	3.00	4.00	4.33	4.00	4.18	4.20	4.78
Activities in	2.84	4.00	2.44	3.67	2.67	1.41	2.60	3.11
TOTAL AVERAGE	3.85	3.37	3.59	4.31	3.81	3.72	3.89	4.24
Rural Hotel Units :	74	2	16	3	12	17	15	9

Finally, the image of the prefecture of Serres is slightly different, with the expected satisfaction being graded with 4.24 units. The expected satisfaction with the booking system of the hotels in this prefecture is quite high (4.56 units), 1.28 units higher than the average of the whole central Macedonia. In addition, the expected level of prices is estimated to

be relatively high, while there are no crucial differences in the other criteria from the general data.

CONCLUSIONS – DISCUSSION

In general, we conclude that there are positive expectations about the functional factors of the rural tourism hotels in Central Macedonia. The potential guest expects to experience a friendly and warm attitude from the local residents in addition to a high quality of services from the owners/ employees of the hotel. Meanwhile, the positive expectation is lower for a reliable and modernized booking system. This may be explained by the fact that Agrotouristiki S.A. and Guest Inn provides the exact information for booking, and subsequently this factor can be evaluated more objectively by potential guests. We should mention at this point that for the inference of conclusions and the evaluation of units, there must be a clear distinction between functional and technical services. In other words, the distinction between the objective and the subjective dimensions of the services is essential, as it will help to comprehend the viewpoint of the client. More specifically, knowledge of the differences in the clients' viewpoints regarding the various dimensions of the services can contribute to the development of an effective marketing strategy, as well as demonstrate the crucial aspects which need improvement. Therefore, we divided the provided services into two groups, based upon the subjective and objective nature of those factors.

The first group includes the factors which are viewed as "sensitive" by the client. These are "subjective" functional factors such as "The entrepreneurs of rural tourism hotels should be very careful in avoiding disappointment on the part of the clients when they visit his/her unit". It should be noted that these "sensitive" factors which are rated quite subjectively are difficult for the entrepreneurs to change and for the marketers to promote, as they require a special study during the planning of the marketing strategy.

In general, the expected satisfaction ratings for technical factors are lower than the ratings for functional factors. Specifically, the expectation for printed information about the activities of the region seems to be rather low. There are also lower ratings for the factors of "activities in the unit" and "activities for children". Moreover, the level of prices is expected to be medium to high. The food facilities are expected to be satisfactory. The expected satisfaction for the room cleanliness is very high, along with the aesthetics of the room and the region, and the

furniture. The above mentioned factors can and have been evaluated more objectively and most of these factors can be changed by the owner more easily than the functional factors. Agrotouristik S.A. and Guest Inn provide adequate data for the (as much as possible) more objective evaluation of the technical criteria, such as photographs of the region, the hotel and the rooms, prices for some units and other information, as registered in the databases of the hotels. Beyond these particulars, the entrepreneurs can adopt methods for the prevention of negative impressions by the guests who expected higher service quality.

As previously mentioned, the perception of the technical factors can change. In particular, factors such the room size, the level of prices, children's activities, room furniture and activities in the unit can be presented in a brochure, or they can even be mentioned to the potential customers during the booking process. In addition, these factors can be presented via advertisements in order to convey the level of the prices. Other factors, such as the cleanliness of the room, air-conditioning, food facilities and bathroom can be improved in order to satisfy the needs and fulfil the expectations of the guests. We should note, however, that despite the fact that some of these elements can be changed, either through marketing communication or through other small changes, some of them are not suitable for every customer. We can also conclude that rural tourism is more appropriate for a low to medium range of prices, which, however, requires additional research. We should also add that it is rather difficult to change the perception of the customer regarding operational factors. These types of services constitute undetermined factors which have been classified on the basis of the perception and the evaluation by the customers. This fact, in combination with the concept of rural tourism, means that they should be examined from a different point of view. As we will discuss later, we suggest educational programs for new and older rural tourism entrepreneurs, in order for them to become familiar with the tourism sector.

At this point we need to comment on the administrative skills of the rural tourism entrepreneurs. Taking into consideration the prerequisites for the development of a rural tourism unit e.g., the importance of quality in rural tourism services criteria sated by Gronroos (1990) and Reichel's, et al. (2000), work, as they have been mentioned at the first part of the present study (see table 1), most of the entrepreneurs may not have the appropriate skills such as to develop a interactive web-site with just in time booking facilities, or to analyse and improve with questionnaires their service quality to customers, in order to develop an independent and effective enterprise, since most of them are farmers of relatively small

scale who simply seek a complementary income. The majority of the rural tourism entrepreneurs were motivated to engage in this sort of enterprise because of the decline in agriculture, not because of their interest in developing a new business strategy.

According to the global literature about rural tourism, the lack of appropriate administrative education is a serious problem faced by the entrepreneurs worldwide. Certainly, the lack of education can be one of the greatest threats against the development of rural tourism (Davies & Gilbert, 1992). The crucial need for education is highlighted by Page and Getz (1997) and Alexander and McKenna (1998), who suggest a list of various educational issues ranging from small enterprise marketing to client service and in-house communication. The present study has examined and evaluated the expected quality of the provided services in the rural tourism units of Central Macedonia, emphasizing fifteen operational and technical factors of service evaluation. The result of this evaluation has been the specification of weaknesses the hotels display regarding expected satisfaction; these weak points can affect the decision of the possible customers in their choice for hotel. Thus, the present study can be examined and used by interested entrepreneurs in order to amend their weak points. It can become the basis for the prevention or reduction of a gap between the expected satisfaction and the actual satisfaction experienced by the guests during their stay at any hotel.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study has comprised a recording of the total population of rural tourism hotels in Central Macedonia in a database, with the further objective of evaluating the units depending on the expected level of satisfaction, according to 15 technical and operational factors, as proposed by Grönroos (1990). Before the recording and the evaluation, we conducted a literature and theoretical review of the concept of rural tourism. Tables provided refer to each of the seven prefectures of Central Macedonia, with the average grade of each examined factor, and also the total average which will characterize the expected quality of services in the rural tourism hotels of Central Macedonia.

The average expected grade for the quality of services in the rural tourism hotels in Central Macedonia is 3.58. According to the data, the lowest quality of services is found in the expectation for activities in the unit with an average rating of 2.84. Next is the expectation for printed information about the activities of the region with 2.86, as well as the possibility for children's activities with 3.12. Moreover, the expectation

for a qualitative booking system was evaluated with a relatively low grade of 3.28. In contrast, the potential guest expects to meet with high quality service (a rating of 4.24 units) in the rural tourism hotels of Central Macedonia, as well as a high quality of behavior from the owners/employees (4.54 units) and the local residents (4.36 units). He/She expects the same regarding the cleanliness of the room with a rating of 4.58 units (Table 2).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Firstly, the evaluation of the expected quality of the provided services through another method is suggested. There is an extended relevant literature and a researcher can depend on various criteria and evaluation methods. Thus, a comparison is possible between the conclusions and the general picture displayed by the rural tourism units in Central Macedonia. Another suggestion is the complementary study of the degree of satisfaction experienced by the guests from the provided services during their visit or/and stay in one of the hotels. The method for the suggested study can be either a personal interview with a sample of customers, or the filling of a questionnaire.

The study and analysis of the actual degree of satisfaction will fulfill the present study of the expected degree of satisfaction. It will contribute to the inference of objective conclusions and to the depiction of the actual quality of the rural tourism hotel units in Central Macedonia. In other words, it will confirm or not the weak points recorded at the expected level and additionally it will contribute to the effort to improve the quality provided by the rural tourism units in Central Macedonia. Finally, we consider as significant the contribution of the geographical extension of the present study, in order to include Northern Greece and gradually the whole population of rural tourism units throughout Greece.

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