

EMERGING RURAL DESTINATIONS: THE CASE STUDY OF FLORINA, WESTERN MACEDONIA, GREECE

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Rural tourism seems to be an appropriate tool for the revitalization of the declining rural areas and the assurance of a sustainable future. For this reason the present paper builds on the viewpoint that the future of rural tourism destinations is inextricably connected to the implementation of best practices. The development of rural tourism in Greece faces a series of major contradictions; taking this into consideration, the case study focus on the emerging rural destination of Florina, in North Western Macedonia that has been awarded by the European Commission as one of the 10 best European destinations for agrotourism (2007). The aim of the paper is to identify and discuss tourism strategies and “good practices” that can clearly improve the quality of tourism offer in equivalent rural areas.

Keywords: *rural destination, agrotourism, best practices, Florina/Greece*

JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

INTRODUCTION

In Europe, tourism has long been considered as a key-component for the regeneration and economic restructuring of rural areas, particularly where traditional agrarian industries are in decline (Williams & Shaw 1998, Gannon 1994, Gronau & Kaufmann 2009). Rural tourism is one of the main priorities of tourism development in many European countries – including Greece– for two main reasons: a) the market for rural holidays is growing, while b) at the same time the future of many rural regions is uncertain, due to changes in agricultural practice (including the effects of



the Common Agricultural Policy in the EU) or the increasing attractiveness of urban living standards.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the investigation of examples of agrotourism best practice in Greece and to examine the characteristics of success at emerging rural destinations, using Florina, Western Macedonia, Greece as a case study. Following an extended literature review, the study –that is still in progress– is based on both primary and secondary research, namely data collection from local authorities and administrative records, semi-structured interviews with tourism stakeholders in Florina and field (observational) research at the destination.

DEFINITIONS OF RURAL AREAS, RURAL TOURISM AND AGROTOURISM

Rural areas are heterogeneous and problematic to define: most people can recognize a rural area when they see one, but few can agree on a short definition. Debates aside, common features of rural space are:

- spaces where human settlement and infrastructure occupy only small patches of the landscape, most of which is dominated by fields and pastures, woods and forest, water, mountain and desert;
- places often with low population density where the majority of people spend most of their working time on farms;
- abundance and relative cheapness of land;
- high transaction costs, associated with long distance and poor infrastructure (adapted by Ashley & Maxwell, 2001 as cited in Holland, Burian & Dixey, 2003:5).

However, the definitions of tourism that capitalize on rural landscape, culture and activities as tourist attractions have proven to be a very difficult task. More specifically, the main difficulty in trying to define “rural tourism” and “agrotourism” (or “agri-tourism” or “agricultural tourism”) is that there are many different definitions in literature in different parts of the world (see Rátz & Puczko 1998), while in some countries –Greece for example– the two terms are often used as synonyms. Moreover the term “farm tourism” appears also quite often, complicating the picture even more. In an attempt to unravel such issues Boučková (2008:15) has reached the conclusion that “in most definitions, a difference is made between rural tourism as a wider concept and

agritourism as one of the forms of rural tourism". In more detail, we could underline the following:

Rural tourism

...is essentially an activity which takes place in the countryside. It is multi-faceted and may entail farm or agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism (Boučková 2008:12).

...is a recreational experience involving visits to rural settings or rural environments for the purpose of participating in or experiencing activities, events or attractions not readily available in urbanized areas. These are not necessarily agricultural in nature (Lobo, 2009).

...covers not only farm tourism or agrotourism (which is generally what rural tourism means for most people), but also special interest nature holidays, touring in rural areas and residential tourism, and the services include –besides accommodation– events, festivities, outdoor recreation, production and sale of handicrafts and agricultural products, etc. (Rátz & Puczkó, 1998).

Agrotourism

...refers to the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural or agribusiness enterprise for the purpose of enjoyment, education or active involvement in the activities of the farm, ranch, vineyard (wine tourism) or enterprise (Lobo, 2009).

...is directly linked to agriculture; it is made up of tourism products directly connected with the agrarian environment, agrarian products or agrarian stays (Jansen-Verbeke & Nijmegen, 1990) including stays on a farm, either in rooms or camping, educational visits, meals, recreational activities, and the sale of farm produce or handicrafts (Apostolou & Papanis 2007).

...is a specific form of rural tourism, with the following features: a) close relation to nature and countryside of rural areas, b) direct relationship to agricultural activities or traditional buildings with agricultural function, c) provided by entrepreneurs whose dominant activity is farming (registered farmers according to the country's law) (Boučková 2008:17).

Rural tourism studies are focusing mostly on the benefits for the local community since rural tourism provides the means not just to counteract

economic decline but to ensure a sustainable future. However, we should never forget that tourism development can have negative impacts on residents: especially in rural areas, displacement of people from their land, competition for other natural resources such as water, forest, and wildlife or even aesthetic pollution or loss of the local identity are likely to be some of the most challenging issues for the destinations. That is why sustainable tourism development should be achieved by or through the following (Swarbrooke, 1996, Rátz & Puczko, 1998):

- Contribution to rural incomes;
- Creation of intersectoral linkages along the supply chain;
- Consumption of local products;
- Development of value added tourism products
- Job retention or even job creation;
- Increased job diversity;
- Infrastructural development, contributing also to the growth of other economic activities;
- Forestalling outmigration by the indigenous population;
- Landscape and nature conservation;
- Maintenance or even rejuvenation of rural arts and crafts as tourist attractions;
- Opportunities for social interaction for the –often isolated– local people.

Farm facilities and infrastructure -such as basic transport- are in place, thus the critical strategy for the destination is to adapt them for tourism purposes, market the rural attractions, and draw clients, particularly domestic visitors, from the cities (Holland, Burian & Dixey, 2003:10). As for the increase in rural tourism demand, especially in Europe during the last two decades, there is evidence that it is associated with the development of the short-break holiday market, the demand for more activity-based holidays and the numbers of more conscious and sophisticated consumers “reacting” against mass tourism (Shaw & Williams 1994:236, Walford 2001:332-333, Dodds & Butler 2010).

RURAL TOURISM IN GREECE

The concept of agrotourism, as used in Greece, embraces tourism activities carried out in non-urban regions by individuals mainly employed in the primary or secondary sector of the economy (Iakovidou 1992, 2066). Such activities typically involve small tourism units of

family or cooperative type, which offer accommodation, goods, and/or other services and provide a supplementary income for rural families and/or an independent income for women living in rural areas (ibid).

Rural tourism in Greece is strongly associated with the so called “rural idyll” and highly romantic notions of rural life even in official sources (Kizos & Iosifides 2007:63-64), and it promotes and supports moderate and small-scale tourist services, the local agricultural production, the manufacture and trade of traditional products, and the local culture and natural wealth. The sectors and businesses mostly interested in rural/agro-tourism are: businesses offering traditional accommodation, traditional restaurants and cafes, local product manufacturers and tradesmen activities businesses, museums of all sorts clubs (cultural, natural etc.), co-operatives (women’s, agricultural etc.), local authorities and schools & educational institutes.

During the last decades, the development of Greek agro-tourism has been incorporated within the EU strategy; the latter instituted funding programs for its promotion and subsidized agrotourism activities. The above-mentioned programs are: Regulation 1257/1999; the Regional Operational Programs (ROP) of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Community Support Framework Support (CSF) and the Community Initiatives Leader I, Leader II and Leader Plus. Table 1 shows the rural tourism investments financed in Greece by LEADER I,II and plus:

Table 1. Rural tourism investments financed in Greece by LEADER I,II and Plus

	LEADER I	LEADER II	LEADER +
Budget	161.8 million €	343.95 million €	316 million €
Rural tourism investments	82.6 million €	114 million €	135 million €
Accommodation units	279	540	210
Beds	2,700	4,600	No available data
Created job positions	834	2,340	No available data

Source: Simeonidou 2009:31

As we notice, Community Initiative Leader with a total budget of 821.75 million Euros subsidized the creation of 1.209 accommodation units with more than 7.300 beds and offered more than 3.174 job positions in rural areas during the last two decades.

The managing authorities for the related funds are, most commonly, the Ministry of Rural Development and Food, prefectures, regions or local action groups (development agencies). As for the targets of agrotourist programmes, as set out by the Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food (minagric.gr, Kizos & Iosifides 2007:63), these are:

- diversification of activities for farmers;
- new and non-agricultural incomes for farmers;
- development of new activities in rural areas;
- improvement of living standards and working conditions for rural populations;
- prevention of rural depopulation;
- promotion of and support for rural women's social and economic role;
- promotion and support of local food and handicraft products;
- environmental protection;
- preservation of the cultural heritage;
- utilization of the architectural heritage.

The development of agrotourism in Greece seems however to face a series of major contradictions and a great divergence between official rhetoric/objectives and reality. Kizos & Iosifides (2007) examined whether Greek agrotourism can be considered “real” agrotourism or... more “tourism” and less “agro”. As for the main reason for the contradictions and the distorted course that agrotourism development has taken in Greece, it seems to be the lack of coherence and strategy at the national level in terms of imposing strict criteria for financial eligibility, the creation of structures for the constant monitoring of investments and the establishment of specialized marketing agencies.

THE CASE OF FLORINA PREFECTURE, WESTERN MACEDONIA, GREECE

Florina: General Information²

The Region of Western Macedonia in Northern Greece, comprised of the prefectures of Kozani, Grevena, Kastoria and Florina, is the only one in the country that has no access to the sea; however its visitors can enjoy the serene beauty of many lakes and the rough beauty of many rivers as well. Florina borders to the north with the F.Y.R.o.M. and to the west

with Albania. The Lake “Megali (means Big) Prespa” is the point where the three countries meet, forming the tri-national point. Towards the Greek interior, Florina borders with the prefectures of Pella, Kozani and Kastoria.

The region covers a surface area of 1,924 sq.km, with an abundant succession of scenery, and an average altitude of 650 m. that rises to 2,524 m. at the summit of Voras. Morphologically, the prefecture consists of mountainous and semi-mountainous areas and lowlands. The total size of Prespa in Greece is no larger than 330 sq.km but in such a small natural space exist a wide variety of flora and fauna features, some rare and declining. The “Prespa National Park” covers an area of 249.5 sq.km, while the "core" -the zone of strict protection- covers almost 50 sq.km. It is one of the most important and famous National Parks of the country. The prefecture's climate is clearly continental with cold winters, heavy rainfall and snow and an average annual temperature of 11.5 1oC, although there is a noticeable difference between the three plateaus of Amynteo, Florina and Prespes.

The prefecture's population that counts 54,768 inhabitants (0,5% of the country's population) is distributed in an urban centre, the town of Florina (14,279 inhabitants), a semi-urban centre Amynteo (3,636 inhabitants) and in a total of 88 communities, with populations ranging from... one (Milionas in Prespes) to 1,821 Florinians (Filotas). The prefecture suffered a huge loss in human resources during the 50s and 60s as a result of domestic and external migration and displacement, caused by the unfavourable political conditions that were prevalent during the foreign occupation, the subsequent civil conflict, and also the warped course of economic development.

Economic activities, which are determined by the area's geographical position, its subsoil, geomorphology and climate, are described as follows: Agriculture and cattle-breeding constitute the primary sector's most dynamic fields. Along with fishing, the exploitation of forests and the mines they compose 30% of the prefecture's Gross National Product (GNP), marking Florina as a chiefly agricultural and cattle breeding prefecture.

The secondary sector, which corresponds to 25% of the prefecture's GNP, consists mainly of the manufacturing, electric power production and construction branches. The Florina Chamber of Trade and Industry was founded in 1938. The Industrial Park at Florina began operating in 1986. Presently, 600-650 manufacturing firms operate in the prefecture. 17% of these are operate in the field of wood and furniture, 17% in the metal, 15% in the field of food and beverages (including the reputable

wines of Amynteo and the renowned soft drinks with natural carbonated water), 14% in construction and transportation and 9% in the textiles/ footwear/ clothes branches. The Public Power Corporation (PPC) is the main company active in the field of electric power production. The tertiary sector, which represents 45% of the prefecture's GNP, includes the commercial branch with 917 shops. Moreover, 391 leisure and recreation businesses are in operation.

Tourism in Florina

Florina holds one of the latest positions amongst the 54 prefectures of Greece, as far as prosperity indexes are concerned. However the prefecture's natural wealth, along with its diversity, climate, alpine environment and traditional culture make Florina into an ideal place for winter and summer tourism. Having no access to sea, tourism development in Florina focused on alternative forms of tourism, such as agro- and ecotourism. Local communities realized, early enough, that agrotourism development can support rural economies, through multiplying the demand of local products, creating new work places and supplementing local income.

As seen on the diagram 1, accommodation figures fluctuated highly during the previous decade. According to the prefecture's Culture and Tourism Agency, tourism arrivals increased during the years between 1994 and 1966, and decreased during year 1997, before start rising again during 1998 and 1999. The data recorded for tourism arrivals seem to follow the data recorded for nights spend in Florina.

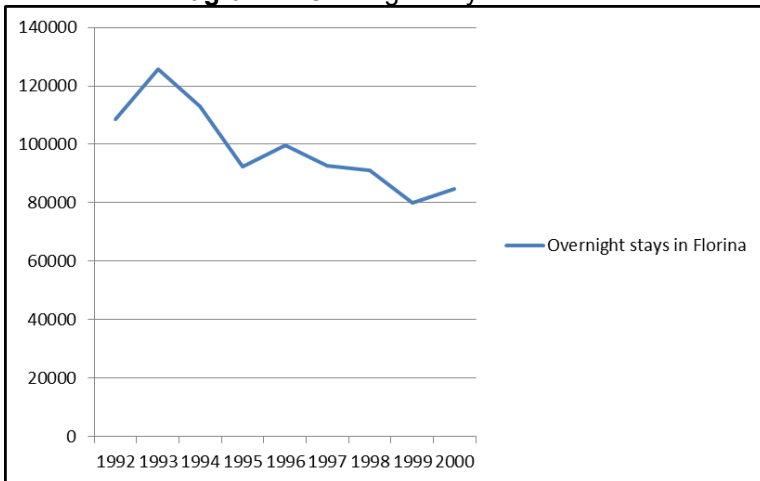
Use Tourism arrivals in Florina decrease dramatically. In 1993, 70.933 tourists visited Florina whilst in 2002, just 42.065. Decreasing started some years ago, since in 2000 and 2001, tourism arrivals were just 46.526 and 43.013 respectively. However, during the last decade, through the exploitation of Community and National Programmes (LEADER, INTERREG, Regional Operational Programme, etc.), Florina's tourism infra- and superstructure has significantly upgraded while, especially, accommodation facilities are continually improving.

Three mountain ranges (Varnountas, Vernon and Voras), six lakes, a clear and pronounced distinction between the four seasons, the natural environment, the Vigla Pissoderi Ski Center, the European walking routes E4 and E6, the potential for alternative forms of tourism, the infrastructure and the activities being developed by two of the most important, both at national and European level, environmental

organizations, “Arcturos” and the “Society for the Protection of Prespa” (SPP).

Moreover there are archaeological sites with findings and historical monuments of Hellenistic, Byzantine and post-Byzantine eras, traditional settlements, historical buildings (of Macedonian or neoclassical architecture) and interesting museums. We should also mention Florina’s cross-border locations and the possibility offered by local tourist agencies to organize brief excursions to neighboring countries, artists' workshops, the Network of Folklore Collections, the area's traditional cultural identity, its customary and cultural events, the “wine roads” (Petres - Aghios Panteleimonas - Amynteo - Xino Nero), the local products and distinctive Balkan flavors.

Diagram 1. Overnight stays in Florina



Concisely, the area's most significant tourism attractions are:

An interesting detail is that boatmen (fishermen) of the village “Pсарades” take visitors on boat tours to the rock paintings and cave hermitages of “Megali Prespa” Lake in all seasons, while various activities, such as canoe, kayak and rowing, are organized in the beach of “Koula” during the summer months; this beach is also great for swimming. Worth mentioning is also the Prespes cultural festival, held on the islet of Aghios Achillios in the last ten days of August every year. It attracts artists of worldwide reputation. The programme includes concerts,

poetic evenings and an outdoor animated feast to which everyone is welcome.

The north-western prefecture of Florina has been picked by the European Commission as one of the 10 best European destinations for agrotourism. More specifically, Florina was among the 10 European regions awarded as “Best Emerging European Rural Destination of Excellence (EDEN) 2007” during the 6th European Tourism Exhibition that took place in Portugal . This annual European quest for excellence in tourism is developed around a theme, chosen by the Commission together with the relevant national tourism bodies. According to EDEN official website “The key feature of the selected destinations is their commitment to social, cultural and environmental sustainability. The recipients of the award are emerging, little known European destinations located in the 27 Member States and candidate countries. The EDEN project helps to spread the sustainable practices used in the chosen destinations across the Union and to turn these places into all-year-round venues.”

Florina is the destination which fulfilled all the criteria of the competition such as traditional establishments, rich natural and cultural attributes, a wide range of local products, rich popular art, many local customs, local cuisine, many events organized in the spirit of agro tourism and many activities organized in the countryside. Florina was particularly praised for the ski resort Vitsi and the mountaineering paths on Mounts Varnous, Vernon and Voras leading to the Prespes Lakes.

In more detail, amongst its assets it was appreciated that Florina (EDEN website):

- is an emerging tourist destination actively promoting rural tourism
- has a survey on a strategic plan of development of rural tourism
- the whole prefecture has signed up to a “local Contract of quality”, (e.g. the use of plastic chairs is not permitted in hotels and rented rooms, hotels and restaurants must use local produce for the preparation of meals etc.) ,
- a “local network of tradition and folklore” promotes tourism with promotional material in many different European languages and actively participates in international tourist fairs
- organises annual seminars on the development of improved rural tourism procedures
- has a very rich cultural and historic heritage and many popular art exhibitions

- has many well preserved local customs and that events such as local feasts are organized on a regular basis
- has several cultural parks
- promotes a wide variety of local products (dishes, wines) and enhances local entrepreneurship and fosters female business partnerships and networks
- participates in programs concerning the development of rural tourism
- has a renown national park (Prespes)
- has international alpine routes and its own Ski centre
- has 6 lakes (some of them on the borders of Northern Greece)
- has the ability to organize adventures in nature, sports and rural activities for tourists
- has a nature reserve centre (for the protection of wild life such as bears, wolves)
- has traditional settlements and villages with excellent infrastructure
- participates in many international projects (e.g. promotion of wine and beans products, nest project on the development of a standard for sustainable development in INTERREG projects, participates in LEADER Programs and some areas are part of NATURA 2000)
- is a member of the “euro-villages” network.

The inFLORINA-center of organization, information and promotion of tourism is the first company for tourism management and development in Greece (<http://www.inflorina.gr>). With services such as supplying tourism services, organizing conventions and shows, publications, vocational training, business counselling and advertising, e-commerce, inFLORINA has all the necessary tools to achieve main goals such as:

- the vertical and horizontal networking of the region’s businesses,
- the development of innovative services,
- the encouragement and development of entrepreneurial activity in the wider field of tourism,
- to provide full services to businesses,
- and the promotion and advertisement of the wider region, by establishing a powerful brand name which will act as an “umbrella” for the whole area, rendering it recognizable.

In Florina there is accommodation of all categories, levels and prices according to modern quality standards, especially in the city of Florina, Prespes and along the areas of Aghios Panteleimonas-Amynteo-Aetos-Sklithros-Nympheo. Most hotels in the city of Florina are “typical” hotels, while many of the accommodation units in villages are old houses converted into traditional lodgings (bed and breakfasts, or B&Bs). These traditional apartments are concentrated mainly in Nympheo, Prespes and other mountainous villages.

It should be mentioned that all 65 accommodation units –meaning 22 hotels, 12 traditional guesthouses, 5 furnished apartments/houses, 24 rooms to let and 2 luxury manors– are open all year round (Data from the City of Florina Development Agency & Destination Management Company Inflorina.gr). Most traditional guesthouses, apartments or rooms to let in Florina are remarkable examples of local architecture fitting in with the breath-taking environment: made of stone, with traditional wooden furniture, fireplace and local decoration. The vast majority of the accommodation units are Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and many of them are family businesses; this is an extra reason explaining why they are considered as ideal destinations for families with young children, couples and for anyone who seeks a quiet family environment. The medium cost per night for a double room at a traditional guesthouse of B Class varies from 40–60 Euros. Prices usually include a rich breakfast consisting of traditional products and local homemade delicacies: fresh milk, mountain tea, orange juice and pies, eggs, fresh bread with butter, cheese, honey and jams, “trachana” or “chilopites” (traditional pasta soup).

CONCLUSIONS

Any successful tourism development depends on issues, such as the quality of the product, accessibility and infrastructure of the destination, availability of skills, the interest of investors, destination image and repeat visitation (Dermetzopoulos, Bonarou, & Christou 2009). As Holland, Burian & Dixey (2003:5) underline, in most of these aspects, rural areas may well be at a disadvantage compared to urbanized and more developed areas. The lack of policy co-ordination between rural development and tourism development along with the low priority provided to rural areas by central governments have been and still remain probably the most challenging obstacles to overcome for rural destinations (see also Korstanje 2012).

In Greece “rural hospitality” is more or less connected to an agribusiness product consisting mainly of accommodation services, catering and leisure time services in –usually mountainous– rural destinations of exceptional –or even rare– flora and fauna. The Greek case study and more specifically the case of Florina in North-Western Macedonia that has been awarded as “Best Emerging European Rural Destination of Excellence 2007” testify that European Initiatives can be proven as important catalysts stimulating local tourism projects integrated within rural development processes. The EU has placed tourism support high in the development agenda and has established a dedicated web site, while also supports the already mentioned pilot project “European Destinations of Excellence” that apart from others aims at the exchange of good practices in tourism.

Very important is, moreover, the notice that “It is not clear if globalisation, changes in consumer demand and the Internet will benefit the sector. It appears to have made consumers more mobile and flexible as shoppers. It may well be that it leads to a dichotomy where some companies successfully adapt to these forces while others fail to adapt and become unable to compete.” The development of new products and services and the supply’s adaptation to global customer trends requires a great deal of innovation, as well as matters of improving quality through interpretation (Gallo & Krupka 2008:6, Skanavis & Giannoulis 2010). Yet, most innovations currently happen outside the tourism industry and are only later adopted by organizations within it; this is partly due to the unique structure of the industry and the particular nature of its product (Gretzel 2008:5). Tourism experiences consist of a variety of products and services that need to be created, marketed and sold by a multitude of businesses which are typically small and do not engage in research and development-related activities, or at least not to the extent common in other industries (ibid.). The successful development of a tourism enterprise in a rural area extremely needs to take into consideration two facts: a) that both in local and global tourism market it is destinations, not individual businesses that at first compete to attract more customers and b) that if you are not online you... are not on sale.

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ENDNOTES

1. Both authors have contributed equally to the paper.
2. All information comes from the Prefecture of Florina & the presentation prepared for INTERREG IIIC.

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