

Motives for Choosing a Ski Destination According to the British Ski Experts Opinion

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a preliminary investigation into factors affecting the destination choice of British skiers travelling to Bulgaria and particular, the choice between different resorts – Borovets, Bansko and Pamporovo. In the past various 'decision' elements can be found discussed in the literature, including income, family size, cost, accessibility, skill level, snow conditions and terrain diversity. However, in this research were given other suggestions related to the ski area - length of ski slopes, variety of ski slopes by difficulty, natural snow fall frequency and quality of the artificial snow on the ski slopes, capacity and quality of lifts and quality of ski instructors ability and ski hire equipment. Also, subjects like nature, transportation accessibility, hotel/accommodation quality, hospitality of local people and general "Value for money" are few of the most important features, which plays a role of a destination choice for the British skiers. According to the opinions of the specialists (respondents) shared in the individual interviews, the choice of a vacation destination and the formation of preferences for it is based on a recognizable image, a good reputation, awareness of the main competitive advantages of a given destination, and hence the importance of this image and reputation for the competitiveness of tourist destinations.

Keywords: ski, tourism, destination, image, competitiveness, quality, anthropogenic landmarks, infrastructure

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Introduction

The motives and the choice for undertaking a tourist trip is primarily determined by the characteristics and ideas of the tourist about the place of consumption of the tourist products, namely the tourist destination.

When we ask the tourists, about the purpose of a vacation trip, in their answers we most often hear the name of a specific place that is the purpose of the trip, such as a ski vacation, a vacation at the sea, or a visit to some exotic destination.

Once the service has been selected (skiing or sea relaxation), the tourist's attention is directed to the choice of the given touristic location depending on the specific tourist service chosen. The choice for his trip is first of all aimed at a certain place (destination) for the purpose of his trip (for example, Pamporovo, Borovets, Bansko or one of Tunisia, Thailand, Palma de Mallorca, etc.), and only then (secondarily) – accommodation, food options, social life, places to visit, etc.

Thus, the choice by the tourist can be considered as a process that could be divided into three stages. A process that would eventually bring him closer to his ultimate goal.

So, in the first stage of his selection, the tourist has to **decide on the country to which he would like to travel** (for example, Bulgaria, Austria, Italy, etc.). Here, however, his decision will be influenced by factors related to what the tourist knows about the places he has chosen (heard, read or has previous experience), that is, the "image" of the tourist place built in his mind. Image targeted and related to the purpose of the trip (for example: an alpine destination popular for its steep slopes/pistes, with guaranteed snow coverage or suitable for beginner skiers and families with children).

The next decision (second step) is related to **the specific region** (resort: Borovets, Bansko, Pamporovo) of the destination, which is the purpose of the trip. Here, the factors (he weight) that will influence the decision are related to its choice. And they are: gather information from friends and family based on their experience, check for reviews and check for local prices, resort most suitable for their ski abilities and skills (completely novice to skiing, some experience on dry ski

slopes at home, etc), look for Special offers from specialist Tour Operators (TO) for the chosen destination, look for added values (Apres ski and excursions programme).

And finally - the last step, **choosing effects** - a specific place to stay overnight (in a exact hotel), as well as for meals (food options outside the hotel), additional services and etc.

Of course, in this selection process scenario, some exceptions could be included. Exceptions concerning cultural and sporting events, which in themselves may constitute the motive that will influence travel to the particular tourist location. These events could be seen as elements building the image of a place for tourist residence.

"Image" in tourism should be understood as the set of beliefs, impressions, thoughts, imaginations, emotions, not the human individual or a group of such for a given object (product, enterprise, and place)¹.

The **focus** of the current study is Bulgaria, as a mountain destination for ski tourism and specifically the ski resorts of Borovets, Bansko and Pamporovo.

The **subject of this research** is to establish what are the most important measures (changes) to improve the image of Borovets as a mountain destination for a ski/snowboard holiday?

The **purpose** of this article is to present the point of view through the lens of specialist tour operators (TO): of how is the British ski tourist changing?; what motives for traveling for a ski holiday does the British; and how is the demand for mountain ski tourism in Bulgaria developing (what is it like) and in individual resorts?.

1. Thesis statement and literature review

A tourist destination is a physical space targeted by the tourist, which he visits and in which he stays for a certain period of time. Based on the tourist resources, infrastructure and superstructure in the destination, tourist products are created and consumed as basic and complementary tourist services.² There are a number of well-studied factors that stimulate, motivate or deter tourist demand in the eminent domain - natural geographic characteristics (climate, landscapes, etc.), quality of the living environment (urbanization, ecology, etc.), tourist profile (income, age, education, motivation, etc.).³ Key elements for the tourist destination as a system are distinguished: "attractions (natural resources, climate, culture, historical resources, ethnicities, accessibility, development and design of attractions, events such as festivals, etc.); amenities (hotels, restaurants, supporting activities such as marketing, guiding, etc. etc.); infrastructure - transport (water supply systems, communication networks, health posts, transport terminals, energy sources, sanitation, streets and highways, security systems)" and add "hospitality (attitude of locals towards themselves, attitude towards others, attitude towards work)".⁴ Similar are the components of a tourist destination mentioned by Ch. Cooper, namely: "attractions; accessibility; amenities (hotel, restaurant, retail, utilities and other services); ancillary services, such as those of destination promotion, development, control, reservation organizations".⁵ A winter mountain destination is usually chosen for snow sports, particularly skiing, but increasingly more tourists want to fully exploit their holiday opportunity with an authentic and comprehensive experience of the place.⁶

According to Sun, H., Xie, X., Gao, J., & Zhang, L., in their research, ski enthusiasts are a unique group of travelers whom many travel businesses and destinations market to. Their study explores the main factors affecting the destination choice of ski tourism enthusiasts. Three levels of main factors, including destination attribute, experience consequence, and personal value, were first

¹ Kotler, P., Marketing Management, Millennium edition, p.16

² Marinov, S., Tourist Destination Management, University education Science and Economics, Varna, 2015, p.27

³ Rakajiyaska, S., Marinov, S., Tourist Markets, Advertising and Public Relations, Varna, 1998, p. 32-33

⁴ Mill, R., C., A. Morrison., The Tourism System: An Introductory Text, Second Edition, N. J.1992. p. 263.

⁵ Cooper, Ch., Tourism: Principles and practice., Prentice Hall, 2008, p. 80.

⁶ Mauri, C., & Turci, L. (2018). From ski to snow: rethinking package holidays in a winter mountain destination. Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes, 10, 201-210.

explored via a soft laddering interview, followed by a questionnaire survey. The results show that ski resort conditions (e.g., quality of ski tracks and snow quality) are the most important attribute of the destination for ski enthusiasts, with the strongest influence on their experience sequence. In addition to the value needs of positive emotion and self-adjustment, ski tourism enthusiasts also show a strong need for self-development. This result has important guiding significance for the formulation of ski tourism destination choice.⁷

Bulgaria Mountain tourist destinations

The robust development of skiing in Bulgaria in the past few years is mainly due to significant investment in mountain resorts and the country's attempts to host the Winter Olympics (despite several bids, the candidacy has never been retained). In addition, the quality of the services and activities offered has also improved. A few resorts possess world-class infrastructure. One of the main assets of Bulgarian ski resorts is their excellent price/quality ratio, much less expensive when compared to the Alps; this attracts a number of international visitors. Foreign tourists from the United Kingdom, Russia, Romania, Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and Israel visit Bulgaria's ski resorts. Despite the lack of official figures, ski resorts are estimated to attract roughly 1.2 million skier visits per year. The country's most internationally renowned ski resorts are Bansko, Borovets and Pamporovo.⁸

Borovets ski resort claims to be the leader in the Bulgarian ski market and the largest ski area of Eastern Europe. It is the oldest Bulgarian ski resort, with a history that dates back to 1896, when it was established as a hunting place for the Bulgarian kings. Aristocrats and members of the Bulgarian elite followed the trend and subsequently built their summer cottages and chalets in Borovets. Winter sports developed and the first downhill race was held in 1930. The resort expanded in the 1960s and 1970s based on the French ski resort development model, when between 1980 and 1985 were build the modern at the time gondola lift POMA and few of the most popular hotels Rila and Samokov. In the year of 1974 hosted its first FIS competition, Borovets has 13 ski lifts with a total capacity of 16'300 people per hour. Large expansion plans have been developed for the **Super Borovets project**. Once fully completed, it would provide around 17'500 hotel rooms, extend the number of slopes and double the number of lifts. However, it never turned into reality because of setbacks and environmentalists oppositions.

Bansko, from a small local village turned to be often called as the Winter Capital of the Balkans and said to be the most modern resort of Eastern Europe, contains a wide variety of hotels up to 5-star. Home of FIS World Cup Ski races, Bansko present 75 km's of ski runs and 14 ski lifts with a capacity of 23'100 people per hour. The resort has many restaurants and a very dynamic après-ski offering, which is very appealing to both national and international tourists.

Pamporovo, as most known "the sunniest" of the Bulgarian mountain resorts, is nestled in the heart of the Rhodopes Mountains at 1'650 m above sea level. It is the perfect resort for beginners and it claims to have one of the best ski schools in Eastern Europe. Pamporovo has 14 ski lifts with a total capacity of 13'000 people per hour. Home for INTERSKI CONGRESS in 2019.

Thus, as an integral part of the European tourism sector, the future development of Bulgaria as a tourist destination could be considered within the framework of the trends for the development of European tourism. This is necessary in order to get out of some existing stereotypes, as well as to be able to integrate and adapt the tourism sector to the European conceptual model. To follow development trends such as sustainable nature-friendly, cluster trends, image trends, etc. Here I can mention (since they are not the subject of consideration in this article) the guidelines drawn up based on analyzes carried out by the European Tourist Commission, the World Tourism

⁷ Sun, H., Xie, X., Gao, J., & Zhang, L., Influencing factors of destination choice of ski tourism enthusiasts: A means-end chain analytical perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2022, p. 13.

⁸ Vanat, L., International Report on Snow & Mountain Tourism - Overview of the key industry figures for ski resorts, 12th edition - April 2020

Organization and the World Travel and Tourism Council.⁹ More recently, attention has been directed to trends in the field of tourism in the British market, related to the type of motivation; the characteristics of tourist trip; choice of tourist destination and tourist product; as well as the business model adopted by the tourism enterprise to respond to the new trends and travel motives of tourists.

2. Methodology and experimental methods

Data collection

The present work relied on data collected from experts – representatives of TO's (incl. TUI UK, Balkan Holidays UK and independent consultant in the industry) and consisting their opinion based on the knowledge they experience. The data was collected during my personal meetings with some of them and other were approached via telephone interview.

For the purpose of this study were created on two-step approach.

1. A Non-standardized survey (inquiry) with experts – representatives of TO's were respondents throughout a various different questions has to indicate the trends and the changes of the British ski market, the motives and the behavior when British tourist make their choice for travel destination and developing in the individual resorts.

2. The image of Borovets as a ski resort compared to Bansko and Pampovo.

Throughout satisfaction scale, the despondence has the opportunity to compared via numbers of criteria the attractiveness, the accessibility, the safety on the slope and in resort, quality of services provided, the hospitality and the price opportunity – “value for money”. Also in this survey the respondents were given the chance to share their honest opinion on what are the most important measures (changes) to improve the image of Borovets as a mountain destination for a ski/snowboard holiday?

3. Results and discussion

A total of 13 TO's experts took part in the survey. The different position within their respective companies (managing director, marketing manager, contracting manager, head of operations – Bulgaria, ctr.) give a professional overview of the discussed case. (see Table 1).

What is the respondents' main concern?

1. A Non-standardized survey (inquiry) with experts – representatives of TO's

✓ People are price led so demand should rise with cost of living crisis in UK. Customers may start noticing cheaper resorts over more expensive resorts in France and Austria, which can be beneficial for Bulgaria being a cost-effective destination. After Covid pandemic the UK market is willing to spend money on such holidays, even if it's for a short weekend or few days only.

✓ Some changes can be noticed in terms of the traditionally booking organized ski packages from TO's. It can be recognised that the tourists are much more educated on the destination prior to travelling and they are also not concerned about putting their own package together. The traditions are replaced by dynamic packaging and direct bookings with suppliers, or even a local independent people in the respective destination. Traditionally early market now is changing to late offers, as they turn to be better than the early booking discounts.

✓ Ski has always had its core clientele which will prefer this holiday over the summer holiday. And still the main motives are the beautiful mountains, outdoor type of sport, skiing enthusiasm, Après ski and quality time with family. Possible other motive for ski travellers can be seen, the price and location of the hotel, positive snow record and the transfer time to resort.

✓ What need special attention is the behavior when choosing a ski destination. Special offers, added values to the additional services; Network connections with the locals, looking for the

⁹ <http://www.etc-corporate.org/>;
<http://unwto.org/>;
<http://www.wttc.org/>.

most popular winter resort on a best possible price, fashion, advertising, travel time to resort, snow condition.

✓ The demand is high and bookings are good at present. Borovets is the most popular resort, driven by the very popular hotel Rila. Due to the financial crunch and other reasons the Bulgarian ski market has lost most of British ski TO's, with Pamporovo with almost none for this winter.

✓ In that survey are also covered subjects like what cause to complain and what can be done to improve. The respondents are unanimously certain that the length of queues in Bansko and the price of food and drinks at the mountain and sometimes the food in some hotels it is the cause of complaints and putting off travellers. For Borovets the quality of ski services, the clearness of the public areas/streets and the high prices in the mountain are to be improved.

Table 1. Non-standardized survey (inquiry) with experts – representatives of TO's¹⁰

Non-standardized survey (inquiry) with experts - representatives:	
Questions:	experts – representatives of TO's
Q: How is the demand for mountain ski tourism developing in Great Britain?	<p>№1: The British ski market is one of biggest ski markets in Europe; High demand after Covid – 19.</p> <p>№2: We are seeing a strong demand this winter but the cost-of-living issues in the UK may mean that people will either wait until the last minute when they know their finances or they will sacrifice the ski holiday. But with Bulgaria being a cost-effective destination the situation could be to our benefit.</p> <p>№3: Demand is present however the overall economic situation somewhat impacts the destination choice. Bookings are strong and very close to 2019.</p> <p>№4: Following two years of Covid pandemic the UK market is very vigorous and robust when it comes to skiing and snowboarding. There is always a certain segment of the UK market willing to spend money on such holidays, even if it's for a short weekend or few days only.</p> <p>№5: Despite the inflation and higher cost of living in UK, current demand for skiing holidays is high, bookings generated to date looks pretty good. Last winter excellent snow report is push factor for early planning the ski holiday.</p>
Q: How is the British ski tourist changing?	<p>№1. The traditionally booking organized ski packages from TO's, now are replaced by dynamic packaging and direct bookings with suppliers Price orientated; Hotels are booked through online platforms (Booking, Expedia etc), or direct with hotels; Traditionally early market now is changing to late market; Late offers turn to be better than the early booking discounts; Looking for best snow conditions; Factors changing.</p>

¹⁰ develope from the author

	<p>№2. I don't think it is specific to Ski but in general the tourists are changing. They are much more educated on the destination prior to travelling and they are also not concerned about putting their own package together. With a wide network of low cost carriers to Bulgaria now the market is much more open now to these types of travellers. They also are not concerned about higher prices if the quality matches the price which can be seen in Borovets (a budget resort) with Rila the most expensive hotel being the best booked.</p> <p>№3. Information is ready an available and new destinations are appearing (Bosnia & Herzegovina with Crystal)</p> <p>№4. Over the years the British winter client has become more and more demanding, looking for very good value experience for the money spent.</p> <p>№5. We find our ski clients are determined to have their week on the slopes. They weren't deterred by the pandemic last season and any tests that were needed. Bookings are good for this season compared to weak demand for summer 2022. I would also say that tourists, post pandemic, are more demanding in terms of the service they receive.</p>
<p>Q: Motives for traveling for a ski holiday?</p>	<p>№1. Skiing enthusiasm; Active Après ski; Meeting friends; Quality time with family.</p> <p>№2. Price and location of the hotel, possibly positive historic snow record and the transfer times I think are at the forefront of people's minds.</p> <p>№3. Ski has always had its core clientele which will prefer this holiday over the summer holiday. Given that ski is not cheap holiday it will be less impacted in the higher bracket earners and more expensive resorts.</p> <p>№4. The main motives are the beautiful mountains, outdoor type of sport, fresh and clean air in combination with great snow, spending quality time with the family and friends, recommendations from friends and social media.</p> <p>№5. People who go on a ski holiday love the adrenalin of skiing and the thrill it gives you. Plus being outdoors at the top of a mountain is a great way to forget your everyday worries.</p>
<p>Q: Behavior when choosing a ski destination?</p>	<p>№1. Two types of travelers: Travelers that traditionally visit particular resort or destination - Check for special offers (TO packages, Hotels, Airlines... etc); Contact local friends for special offers directly from the resort; Look for added value.</p> <p>Travelers new to ski holidays - Gather information from friends and family based on their experience; Check Trip advisor for reviews & check for local prices; Decide on resort most suitable for their ski skills (completely novice to skiing, some experience on dry ski slopes at home, etc); Look for Special offers from specialist TO's for the chosen destination; Talk to travel agents</p>

	<p>or direct with the TO; Look for added value (Après ski and excursions program).</p> <p>№2. Special offers; Decide on resort most suitable for their ski abilities; Added values to the additional services; Network connections with the locals.</p> <p>№3. Price is one of the major but not the only parameter. People will have preferences according to previous experience and budget.</p> <p>№4. Looking for the most popular winter resorts which is Bansko. Than Borovets and Pamporovo. Despite that the most sought winter resorts is Borovets.</p> <p>№5. There are a few different factors affecting the choice of a ski destination which are playing different role, depending on the type of present day British ski holiday maker. These are some of the factors but not all: Price, Quality of services, Fashion, Advertising, travel time to resort, snow condition.</p>
<p>Q: How is the demand for mountain ski tourism in Bulgaria developing (what is it like) and in individual resorts?</p>	<p>№1. Sofia is the main ski market in Bulgaria; Short stay and weekends – the average stay is about 3 days; Borovets – preferred due to its location (close to Sofia – majority of the people ski during weekends or night skiing as many of them prefer to drive to the resort for a day skiing and then return to Sofia, and travel back to Borovets on the following day), three ski areas – one ski area located by the hotels in the resort - reduced by far waiting time at lifts comparing to Bansko, very active night life; Bansko - Still lots of people prefer to go to Basko, regardless that half the skiing day will be wasted due to long wait at the gondola lift; Pamporovo – offers best slopes for beginners and sunny days. Usually great snow conditions, but the distance from Sofia and the other main cities in Bulgaria, and the difficult drive put lots of people off.</p> <p>№2. Demand remains high as it still good value for money for the ski services. If this increases per km’s of piste slopes significantly then people will consider paying a little more to have more extensive ski runs.</p> <p>№3. Borovets and Bansko due to improved hotel and resort infrastructure and vicinity of the airport are preferred. Pamporovo is hampered by distance from Sofia. Lack of Plovdiv airport charter program operation, most of the charters are on Sofia.</p> <p>№4. The demand grows higher every year and after a great holiday and time in Bulgaria, a destination providing extremely good value for your money, the demand grows even more for next year.</p> <p>№5. The last few years the quality of the ski services has improved. Mainly ski equipment and ski runs, while the traditionally good standard of ski tuition has gone down. Due to the financial crunch and other reasons the Bulgarian ski market has lost most of British ski TO’s, with Pamporovo with</p>

	almost none for this winter. However, the demand is high and bookings are good at present. Borovets is the most popular resort, driven by the very popular hotel Rila.
Q: What are the main complaints of tourists from mountain ski resorts in Bulgaria?	<p>№1. Hotel food.</p> <p>№2. Cleaning of the streets; prices on the mountain for food and drinks; Food in the hotels; Cleanliness and Service from staff</p> <p>№3. from Borovets: Night clubs, strip clubs, litter, noise, young-loud clientele, food in hotels, quality of rental; from Bansko: Lift ques, extra gondola needed badly especially in the high season, food in hotels.</p> <p>№4. Main complaints are the gondola/lift queues, standard of accommodation, quality and quantity of food, ski school instructors.</p> <p>№5. The length of queues in Bansko is the cause of complaints, and sometimes the food in certain hotels is too. Also, in Borovets the quality of services and the high prices in the mountain.</p>

Conclusion

According to F. Kotler, "formation of the image of the tourist product" should be understood as a constant and systematic process of researching the ideas related to a given tourist place, characteristic of certain segments of tourists, distinguished on the basis of various diverse criteria, leading to positioning of the tourist destination and strengthening or creating a positive image of the tourist territory.¹¹

With an aging infrastructure and less than optimal connections, a few resorts may lose some of their international popularity, likely limiting the industry's growth and development in the country.¹²

Bulgarian ski resorts are facing the challenge of attracting tourists. Problematic areas like lifts renewals, resort infrastructure, accommodation hotel development and the environmental activists who seem to systematically oppose any new lift projects. The increasing temperatures that lead to less snow resulting in shorter winter seasons and the number of skier days in the region is decreasing constantly. Especially lower lying ski areas of the resorts are threatened by the falling demand.

Despite the ongoing global challenges, the appetite for travel has reached unprecedented levels. World Ski Awards¹³ is the only global initiative to recognize, reward and celebrate excellence in ski tourism. This event is the only time that the international leaders of the industry come together to exchange local knowledge, innovations and principles of best practice on a global stage. The results follow a year-long search for the world's leading ski travel, tourism and hospitality brands. Votes are cast by ski industry professionals (senior executives, travel buyers, tour operators and media) and by the public (ski tourism consumers) in a range of categories, including best resorts, hotels, chalets and tour operators. The nominee gaining the most votes in a category named the winner.¹⁴

¹¹ Haider, D., H., Kotler, P., Rein, J., Marketing places: attracting investments, industry, and tourism to cities, states and nations. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1999, p. 142

¹² Vanat L., International Report on Snow & Mountain Tourism - Overview of the key industry figures for ski resorts, 12th edition - April 2020

¹³ World Ski Awards is the sister organisation of World Travel Awards.

¹⁴ <https://worldskiawards.com/>

That kind of events are where Bulgarian tourist industry has to turn to in order to learn from the best as to create an image of a leading ski destination.

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