

Travel and Tourism

Overview

The World Tourism Organization describes Bulgaria as one of the most appealing “new faces” in the tourism industry today, and it is true that this industry in particular has gone from rags to riches over recent years.

The tourist industry is certainly one of the most dynamic sectors of the Bulgarian economy. The recent strategy of the Ministry of Economy, Energy and Tourism of Bulgaria includes the tourism, together with the manufacturing industry and the Small and Medium Size sector, in the group of the most competitive sectors of the Bulgarian economy. The tourist sector is important also from macroeconomic point of view. It's one of the few sectors, generating foreign trade surpluses and hence contributing to the external equilibrium of the Bulgarian economy. The tourism industry provides nearly 10% of the country's GDP. Bulgaria's total 2011 revenue from foreign tourists exceeded EUR 2, 7 B. In 2011 Bulgaria's revenue from foreign tourists grew by 4.5%, while the total number of foreign visitors to the country increased with 14%. At the same time, the total revenue from Bulgarian tourists was more than BGN 1.5 B, or about EUR 770 M. The tourism industry in Bulgaria plays a critical role in the country's economy. Accession to the EU has made a positive impact on the market, due to the improved facilities and hotels, great affordability and accessibility, and increased exposure. The seaside summer resorts on the Black Sea coast and the winter mountain resorts are the main attractions. Alternative streams such as art, wine, spa-based travel, and a wide range of archaeological, historic, scenic and recreational attractions represent good potential. Building golf courses, marinas, and luxury spa facilities aims to shift a greater percentage of tourists away from low revenue package tours and into more luxurious and upscale resorts. The Bulgarian Government would like to increase off-season tourism, attracting higher spending travelers by further developing its convention and festival markets. New developments are making Bulgaria more attractive.

Sub-Sector Best Prospects

Among the primary reasons Bulgarians travel to the U.S. are leisure, incentive tours, holidays, and business including participation at conferences and exhibitions, and visits to relatives. More than 250,000 Bulgarian-Americans live in the U.S. and approximately 3,700 Bulgarian students study at American universities and colleges. Over 40,000 Bulgarian students experienced the “Summer Work and Travel” Program that started back in the late 1990's. The primary information source for Bulgarian travelers remains their travel agent. The Internet is also considered a reliable source, especially by travelers aged 20-35. U.S. destinations have become very popular because of the weak dollar and the increased disposable income of Bulgarians.

Opportunities

Market segments with high potential for American firms are the development of wellness and spa complexes, golf courses, hotel management, development and expansion of marinas, high-end convention hotel development, amusement games and attractions. The sector offers opportunities for utilization of seasonally employed workers, and it needs support and assistance for promotion of Bulgarian touristic sites and towns.

The U.S. Commercial Service can facilitate information exchange between U.S.-based tour operators and tourism establishments in Bulgaria. There are many mutually beneficial opportunities for business partnerships and/or collaborations. Also, regional business cooperation should be encouraged through business development (e.g., tours which combine several countries in the region).

Web Resources

National Hospitality Management Club www.tourmarketing.org
International Tourism Conferences and tourist info www.bulgariantourism.com
National Tourist Info Center & Tourism Authority www.bulgariatravel.org
Bulgarian Tourist Chamber www.btch.org
Ministry of Economy and Energy – tourism sector www.mi.government.bg