

## BULGARIA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION: THE PRODUCT QUALITY PERCEPTION OF THE RESORT HOTELS

**Prof. Lina Anastassova, PhD**

*Burgas Free University*

**Maria Johann, PhD**

*Warsaw School of Economics*

***Abstract:** The paper presents the results of a secondary data analysis examining Polish tourists' perception of tourism product quality offered by Bulgarian hotels. The researchers examined data collected by Itaka travel agency between 2010-2012 regarding tourists' satisfaction with the package holidays in Bulgaria. Since the number of Polish tourists visiting Bulgaria has increased over the last years, it has been hypothesized that Bulgarian hotels offer a competitive value proposition and a very good price/quality relationship. The surveyed sample of tourists spent their summer holiday in one of 18 summer resorts located in Sunny Beach and in Golden Sands, 10 – three+-star hotels and 8 – four-star hotels and the total sample volume is 888 tourists. The quantitative analysis of tourists' perceptions of product quality offered by Bulgarian hotels was performed through the SERVPERF scale based on the evaluation of a list of hotel attributes representing values important for tourists.*

***Key words:** hotel product attributes, product quality perception, quantitative analysis of tourists' perceptions.*

This paper presents the results of a secondary data analysis examining Polish tourists' perception of tourism product quality offered by Bulgarian hotels. The researchers examined data collected by Itaka travel agency between 2010-2012 regarding tourists' satisfaction with the package holidays in Bulgaria. Bulgaria is perceived as an attractive country for Polish visitors and a very attractive destination for summer holidays. Since the number of Polish tourists visiting Bulgaria has increased over the last years, it has been hypothesized that Bulgarian hotels offer a competitive value proposition and a very good price/quality relationship. The aim of the research study was to analyze the Polish tourists' opinions concerning the most important hotel attributes with regard to hotels located in the main summer resorts in Bulgaria. Another important goal of this research was to pinpoint quality gaps and the areas of tourists' discontent. The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in the paper.

### **The characteristics of Poland outbound tourism with regard to Bulgaria**

Polish participation in foreign trips has been constantly growing during last two decades, with Polish visitors present in all of the major world tourist destinations. The most visited countries by Polish tourists are: Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, France, the Czech Republic and Spain. Typical tourist purposes usually account for a half of Polish foreign departures; stays with families and friends keep the level around 25%, while the

share of business trips is about 20%<sup>1</sup>. The majority of tourists use their own means of transportation and arrange their visits individually. The great number of visitors to Germany and Great Britain is associated with the fact that many Poles work and study in those countries, so visiting friends and family is one of the main motive for travelling. Another reason explaining the tourism attractiveness of Germany and Britain could be the interest in learning English and German, which are the most popular foreign languages taught in Polish schools. Additionally, Germany as well as the Czech Republic are Poland's bordering countries, so naturally tourists flow in these directions. Italy, in particular, and Spain as well are Catholic countries, so they attract very many Polish pilgrims. Considering a great historical heritage of Italy, Spain, and France, a constant influx of visitors to those countries is evident.

The summer holidays are the most popular time of the year for travelling, with the peak season falling in July and August. At this time, the majority of Poles travel on their own, however, more than 20% use travel agencies to purchase package holidays to visit popular summer resorts<sup>2</sup>. According to a survey conducted by easygo.pl in July 2012<sup>3</sup>, the most popular tourist destinations included: Egypt (24% of sales), Greece (18%), Turkey (17%), Tunisia (10%), Spain (10%), Bulgaria (7%), and other destinations (14%). It is important to notice that over the last three years the percentage of sales of package holidays to Bulgaria has increased, while the sales share of package holidays to other countries popular among tourists has declined. The same tendency is revealed in the report published by the Institute of Tourism. Beside the analysis of the typical tourists destinations, further characteristics of Polish tourists preferences were described in the report, including: duration of stay, number of persons travelling together, means of transportation, and form of alimentation. More than 59% of customers decided to buy a 7-day package, while longer stays constituted respectively: 22.43% - 14-days packages, and remaining stays - 18.23%. More than 57% of tourists traveled with one person, 2+1 option was selected by 15.8%, 2+3 and more by 14.03%, 2+2 by 6.22%, and singles represented 4.7% of all visitors. The majority of tourists decided to travel by plane which constituted 88% of all selected ways of transportation, while 6.69% traveled on their own - in majority of cases by cars, and 2% by bus. All inclusive option remained the most popular form of alimentation, since it was selected by 68.4% of visitors. 18.6% decided to buy package holidays with a HB option, and 3.63% - BB.

Considering the attractiveness of Bulgaria as a summer tourist destination, it is important to analyze the trends in the Polish tourism market. Bulgaria was a favorite touristic destination for Polish visitors in the 70s and 80s, while in the following decades other destinations became much more popular for summer holidays. These changes were related to the reforms towards free market economy, which started in Poland in 1989. In the early 90s very many travel agencies were set up and started offering attractive package holidays in such countries, as: Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Tunisia, Spain and others. Thus, having a very diversified choice of summer resorts, tourists became more demanding and started looking for offers meeting their individual needs. Despite more and more sophisticated preferences, tourists still appreciate beautiful weather, warm sea, sandy beaches, and reasonable prices. All of those benefits are available in Bulgaria. Moreover, as a result of huge investment in

---

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Tourism, [www.intur.com.p](http://www.intur.com.p), accessed April 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> A survey was conducted on the basis of the sales analysis of the top tourism portals: EasyGo.pl and Wakacje.pl, [www.easygo.pl](http://www.easygo.pl), accessed April 2013.

tourism, Bulgaria presently offers modern infrastructure and equipment as well as good services for tourists. Due to observable changes and attractive package holidays to Bulgaria, during last years a number of Polish tourists visiting Golden Sands and Sunny Beach resorts has been constantly growing.

The tourism sector developed dynamically and since 2000 tourism indicators have constantly risen. In 2001-2004 in spite of the crisis in global tourism after September 2011, inbound tourism to Bulgaria exhibited one of the steepest increase in Europe. Due to observable changes and attractive package holidays to Bulgaria, during last years the number of Polish tourists visiting Golden Sands and Sunny Beach resorts has been constantly growing. As far as the statistical data about arrivals from Poland in the last 5 years concerns, Poland is one of the 10 most important generating markets for Bulgaria<sup>4</sup>. The EU countries are the most important markets generating tourists for Bulgaria. For the twelve months of the year 2012 the number of tourists from EU markets is 4 131 908, which is 4% less the 2011 level. The EU countries' share is 63.2% in 2012<sup>5</sup>. Concerning the contribution of the Polish tourists to the inbound tourism data of Bulgaria, the statistical information reveals that Poland is in the top list of 5 most important generating EU markets of Bulgaria.

*Table 1: Tourist arrivals from EU countries 2012/2011*

No	COUNTRIES	2009	2010	2011	2012	2012/2011
	TOTAL	5 739 000	6 047 000	6 328 023	6 540 839	3.4
	Total from European Union	4052130	4192140	4 305 423	4 131 908	-4.0
	SHARE from EU	70.6	69.2	68.0	63.2	
1	ROMANIA	1399 000	1445 000	960 365	932 208	-2.9
2	GREECE	924 000	1019 000	942 680	928 552	-1.5
3	GERMANY	898 000	853 000	700 062	650 236	-7.1
4	UNITED KINGDOM	286 000 <sup>4</sup>	289 300	284 882	264 560	-7.1
5	POLAND	232 500	235 000	247 012	241 954	-2.0

Source: National Statistical Institute, Sofia

At the same time all top 5 generating markets register decrease in the arrivals between 1.5 and 7.1% in 2012 by Poland registering relatively low decrease- by 2.0%. The highest growth of the arrivals from Poland in the period 2008-2012 is in 2009 (see Table 1) with 6.2 % increase in comparison to 2008 when the arrivals from Poland are 219 350. The percentage of the Polish holiday makers from all arrivals is varying in the interval 42-45% through the last 5 years and the rest are professional and other trips. Considering the data it is worth to investigate and bear in mind the opinions, assessments and hotel product perception of the Polish tourists as the expectations are that the number of Polish tourists will increase in the coming years.

The majority of Polish tourists who decided to spend their holidays in Bulgaria choose three-star, three+-star, and four-star hotels located either in Sunny Beach or Golden Sands. They usually buy a 7 or 14-day package holidays in one of the travel agencies, such

<sup>4</sup> Source: National Statistical Institute, 2012, Sofia

as Itaka, Neckermann and TUI, however, more and more tourists are individually arranging their visit via the Internet. Polish visitors come mostly between June and September by plane, car, and bus. Bulgaria is a popular destination for families and couples, as well as young people who come in organized groups. Older couples come to get rest and refresh their memories related to their visits to Bulgaria in the 70s. Families with children come to enjoy beautiful weather and sea. Students and young couples perceive Bulgarian resorts as a very attractive place for entertainment and they come to have fun.

#### **Research methodology and discussion of results**

The primary objective of this study was to analyze the Polish tourists' perceptions of their holiday experience in Bulgarian hotels in order to identify the quality gaps with regard to the important hotel attributes for tourists. It was hypothesized that Bulgarian hotels located in main summer resorts offer a competitive value proposition and a good price/quality relationship.

The research tasks included:

- the assessment of the tourism product quality offered by Bulgarian hotels with regard to the attributes valuable for tourists,
- the identification of quality gaps and areas of discontent with regard to the attributes valuable for tourists related to their summer experience in the hotels located in summer resorts in Bulgaria.

The analysis of the data in this study consisted of two major parts:

- a quantitative analysis of tourists' perceptions of hotel product offered by Bulgarian hotels. The measurement was based on the instrument SERVPERF. The SERVPERF scale, developed by Cronin and Taylor (1992), is one of the important variants of the SERVQUAL scale of Parasuraman, A, Zeithaml, V A and Berry, L L (1985, 1988) where the gap is the difference between customer 'expectations' and 'perceptions'. SERVQUAL is an instrument which is appropriate when measuring service quality. Customers determine the perceived or cognitive value of service based on their experience with delivered service<sup>5</sup>. Edvardsson (2005) pointed out that service quality perceptions are formed during the production, delivery and consumption process<sup>6</sup>. The applicability of SERVQUAL methodology in the hotel industry has been demonstrated by several authors including recently in China (Law and Yip, 2010), Poland (Goranchewski, 2011) and Germany (Eckert, et.al., 2011). But in this particular study this instrument is not appropriate as the study aim and tasks exclude researching expectations. SERVPERF, being based on the perception component alone, has been conceptually and methodologically posited as a better scale than the SERVQUAL scale which has its origin in disconfirmation paradigm.

-a qualitative analysis of the tourists' comments and opinion regarding their holiday experience in Bulgarian hotels.

---

<sup>5</sup> Markovic, S., S. Raspor, G. Ivanovic and T. Planinc, A study of expected and perceived service quality in Croatian and Slovenian hotel industry, *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 2013. Vol.6, issue1, p.38

<sup>6</sup> Edvardsson, B. Service Quality beyond cognitive assessment. *Managing Service Quality*, 2005, 15 (2), 127-130

The researchers analyzed the data concerning tourists' satisfaction with the package holidays in Bulgaria between 2010-2012 collected by Itaka travel agency. Itaka travel agency collects data concerning tourists' satisfaction with the package holidays. The empirical data collection is an online questionnaire filled in by the respondents. The questionnaire is sent to the tourists after they return from their holidays. Tourists who are willing to respond, fill out the questionnaire. Tourists' opinions concerning package holidays are published on the company's website<sup>7</sup>. The analysis presented in this study includes all tourists evaluations with regard to their summer holidays in Bulgaria in three+ and four-star hotels. Tourists spent their summer holiday in one of 18 summer resorts located in Sunny Beach and in Golden Sands, 10 – three+-star hotels and 8 – four-star hotels. 888 tourists filled in the questionnaire, out of which 560 were visiting three+-star hotels and 328 – four-star hotels.

The quantitative analysis of tourists' perceptions of product quality offered by Bulgarian hotels was based on the evaluation of eight attributes representing values important for tourists<sup>8</sup>. Those included: good price/quality relationship, standard of rooms, location of the hotel, customer service, beaches nearby, attractions nearby, entertainment in hotels, meals. Numerical evaluation of all attributes was made with ratings ranging from 1 to 6. The quantitative analysis of the attribute-based items was carried out on the basis of the tourists' perceptions of main hotel attributes. The hotels were characterized in terms of the three attributes most frequently selected by tourists, which enabled specification of the highest evaluated attributes (Table 2). Then, the analysis of the tourists' perceptions of the main hotel attributes was carried out with regard to all surveyed hotels, three+-star hotels (Figure 1), and four-star hotels (Figure 2).

The results of the quantitative analysis of tourists' perceptions of three highest evaluated hotel attributes are presented in Table 2. In general, Polish tourists appreciate an attractive value proposition offered by hotels located in main resorts in Bulgaria. Main qualities of the surveyed hotels distinguished on the basis of tourists assessments include: good price/quality relationship selected in 12 hotels and standard of rooms indicated in 9 hotels. The location was also chosen in 9 hotels as one of the most valuable qualities. The beaches located nearby were considered one of the main attributes in 8 hotels, the quality of customer service in 6 hotels and attractions located nearby was also chosen as an important quality in 6 hotels. Moreover, tourists consider entertainment offered in hotels as well as served meals as important benefits enhancing their holiday experience in Bulgaria. Entertainment and meals were selected as the most significant attributes in 2 surveyed hotels in both cases. The large number of indications of good price/quality relationship is worth noting, since it shows the attractiveness of value proposition offered by Bulgarian hotels. Customers usually base their purchasing decisions on the evaluation of all benefits related to the market offering and the price they have to pay. The more favorable the relationship between the benefits and the price is, the more customers are eager to buy a product.

---

<sup>7</sup> [www.itaka.pl](http://www.itaka.pl), accessed April 2013.

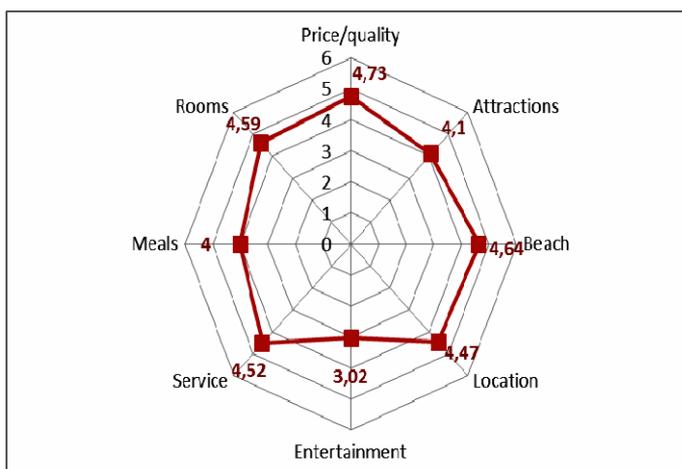
<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, that the researchers decided to decrease the number of the perceived hotel attributes although the number of the items originally in the SERVPERF instrument is much bigger, but previous research experience reveals the influence of their "time factor" in such surveys with holiday makers;

*Table 2: Tourists' perception of the three most important hotel attributes<sup>9</sup>*

Specification	Number of indications	% of indications
Good price/quality relationship	12	22,2
Standard of rooms	9	16,7
Location of the hotel	9	16,7
Beaches nearby	8	14,8
Customer service	6	11,1
Attractions nearby	6	11,1
Entertainment	2	3,7
Meals	2	3,7
Total	54	100,0

The detailed analysis of tourists' perceptions of main hotel attributes involves the analysis of tourists' perceptions of hotel attributes in three+ hotels (Figure 1) as well as tourists' perceptions of hotel attributes in four-star hotels (Figure 2). According to the comparative analysis, all hotel attributes in four-star hotels were evaluated higher than the respective ones in three+-star hotels. Four-star hotels are considered to have better locations (4.94) and higher standard of rooms (4.86) as compared to three+-star hotels. Moreover, they are situated closer to attractions (4.65) and to the beaches (4.71) according to the guests' opinions. Customer service was also perceived to be of better quality (4.65) when compared to three+-star hotels. Generally, those attributes which were evaluated higher in four-star hotels, were also evaluated higher in three+-star hotels. Similarly, the attributes which received lower rates in three+-star hotels, received lower rates in four-star hotels as well. Meals (4.33) and entertainment (3.38) were the lowest-rank attributes in four-star hotels just as they were in three+-star hotels.

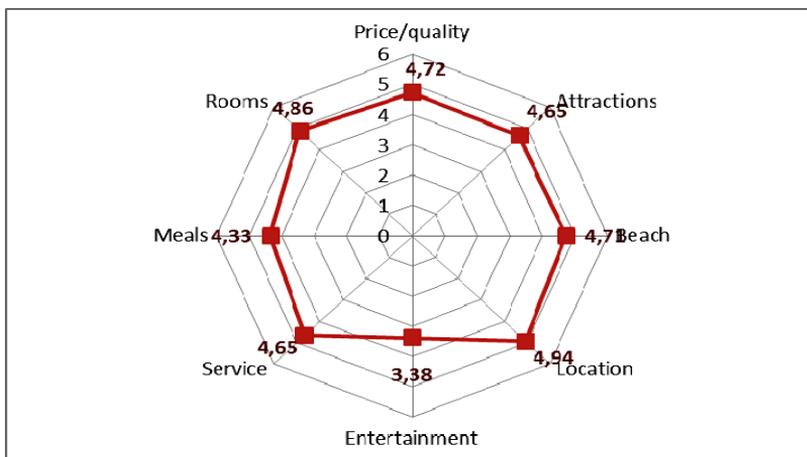
*Figure 1: Tourists' perceptions of main hotel attributes – 3+-star hotels*



<sup>9</sup> The analysis is based on tourists' perception of main hotel attributes. The hotels were characterized in terms of three most frequently selected attributes by tourists.

Good price/quality relationship evaluations were almost the same in four- and three+-star hotels. Guests of three+-star hotels appreciated the most: good price/quality relationship (4.73), the beaches located nearby (4.64), and the standard of rooms (4.59), while tourists spending their holidays in four-star hotels evaluated highest: the location of the hotel (4.94), the standard of rooms (4.86), good price-quality relationship (4.72) and the beaches located nearby (4.71). The overall rating of three+-star hotels was 4.62, while the overall rating of four-star hotels was 4.78.

*Figure 2: Tourists' perceptions of main hotel attributes – 4 – star hotels*



**Conclusions**

Bulgaria is an attractive destination for Polish tourists. Beautiful weather, sandy beaches, delicious cuisine, homely atmosphere and many tourist attractions offered at reasonable prices attract more and more visitors from Poland. Due to huge investment in tourism, Bulgaria presently offers modern infrastructure and equipment as well as good services for tourists, which further contribute to the increasing interest in visiting this country. Polish tourists usually spend their holidays in one of summer resort hotels located either in Sunny Beach or Golden Sands, choosing in the majority of cases three- and four-star hotels.

The analysis of Polish tourists' perceptions of their holiday experience in Bulgarian hotels enable to draw conclusions with regard to the most valuable hotel attributes and identify the quality gaps and areas of discontent. The highest-ranked qualities of the surveyed hotels distinguished on the basis of tourists' assessments include: good price/quality relationship, the standard of rooms, the location of the hotel, the beaches located nearby, the customer service and the location near tourist attractions. Moreover, tourists consider entertainment offered in the hotels as well as the served meals as important benefits enhancing their holiday experience in Bulgaria. The large number of indications of good price/quality relationship is worth noting, since it shows the attractiveness of the value proposition offered by Bulgarian hotels.

All hotel attributes in four-star hotels were evaluated higher than the respective ones in three+-star hotels. Generally, those attributes which were evaluated higher in four-star hotels, were also evaluated higher in three+-star hotels. Similarly, the attributes which received lower rates in three+-star hotels, received lower rates in four-star hotels as well. The highest-rank 3+-star hotel attributes include: good price-quality relationship, beaches located nearby, and the standard of rooms whereas the highest-rank 4-star hotels attributes include: location of the hotel, the standard of rooms and good price-quality relationship. The meals and entertainment offered in 3+ and 4-star hotels were the lowest-rank attributes. Entertainment offered in the hotels was poorly evaluated, since many hotels did not organize any activities for tourists. However, it is important to notice, that those hotels which had had animation programs received very good rates in this category. The conclusion from the recent research is that the Bulgarian sea side hotel management must stress on the animation programs and on a bigger variety of meals in order to achieve higher perception value by the Polish tourists for their offerings.

#### References:

1. Cronin, J and Taylor, S A. "Measuring Service Quality: A Reexamination and Extension," *Journal of Marketing*, 1992, 56(July), pp. 55-67
2. Eckert, M., Brush, M. & Rolling, C. Customer satisfaction, quality service and the importance of individual performance parameters: the example of the Lindner Congress Hotel Cottbus, *TW Zeitschrift fuer Tourismuswissenschaft* 3(1), pp. 81-87
3. Edvardsson, B. Service Quality beyond cognitive assessment. *Managing Service Quality*, 2005, 15 (2), pp. 127-131
4. Goranczewski, B. & Puciato, D. Application of SERVQUAL questionnaire in the measurement of quality of Hotel services: SERVQUAL and Hotel services, *Polish journal of sport and tourism*, 2011, 18 (2), pp. 166-171
5. Law, R. & Yip, R. A study of satisfaction level of Hong Cong tourists with hot springs hotels and resorts in Guangdong, China, *FIU Hospitality Review*, 2010, Vol. 28 (1), pp. 83-107
6. Markovic, S., S. Raspor, G. Ivanovic and T. Planinc, A study of expected and perceived service quality in Croatian and Slovenian hotel industry, *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 2013, Vol.6, issue1, p.38
7. Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V.A. & Berry, L.L. A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research, *Journal of Marketing*, 1985, Vol. 49, pp. 41-50;
8. Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V.A. & Berry, L.L. SERVQUAL: A Multiple Item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality", *Journal of Retailing*, 1988, 64 (1), pp. 12-40;
9. Bulgaria Tourism Industry Analysis 2012, <http://www.reportlinker.com/p0165490-summary/Bulgaria-Tourism-Report.html>;
10. Institute of Tourism, [www.intur.com.pl](http://www.intur.com.pl), accessed April 2013
11. [http://www.mi.government.bg/files/useruploads/files/tourism\\_-\\_izlojenia/bg\\_tourism\\_facts\\_and\\_fig\\_jan-dec2012.pdf](http://www.mi.government.bg/files/useruploads/files/tourism_-_izlojenia/bg_tourism_facts_and_fig_jan-dec2012.pdf);
12. [http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=120418](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=120418);
13. <http://www.itaka.pl>, accessed April 2013;
14. <http://www.easygo.pl>, accessed April 2013.