

**9th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference:
Marian Midsize Shrines: three itineraries between Portugal and Slovakia**

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Biographies

Vitor Ambrósio Ph.D., has been teaching at Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies, since 1991. He also teaches in several Master and Doctoral programs from other Institutions. Prior to this he had worked as a travel agent promoter and tourist guide. His main research interest is Religious Tourism.

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Magdaléna Nemčíková Ph.D., has been working at the Department of Geography and Regional Development in Nitra since 1997 as a lecturer. PhD. degree gained in the field of Theory of teaching geography. Her research interests are at the intersection of didactics of geography, physical geography, tourism and regional development.

Abstract

Many travelers whose main motivation is religious tourism (Catholic) have visited the major shrines such as the Holy Land, the Vatican, Lourdes (France) and Fatima (Portugal). After having been in those places/shrines, numerous religious tourists want to visit other sanctuaries but not many programs offer that possibility. With that in mind, three researchers drove from Lisbon (Portugal) to Levoča (Slovakia) nearly always stopping along Marian midsize shrines. The data collected by participant observation allowed the researchers to design three different itineraries - they include the most important Marian midsize shrines and also towns/small cities along the way.

On the one hand, this paper has a strong practical component in order to be used as a reflective tool by the travel agents/tour operators; on the other hand, academics can use the programs as training material for student exercises, demonstrating that an itinerary is not only a set of thematic resources but also used for time and travel management by visitors.

Introduction

Most scientific articles about thematic itineraries focus on a set of resources. Although many show a varied selection of resources, their authors are not worried about its practical implementation, namely the cross management of time for the visits, time for travelling, places for eating and places for lodging. That is to say that many of such itineraries will probably encounter commercial difficulty.

Travel agents/tour operators are more interested in launching programs which include well-known destinations because those attract more public and generate more financial profit. That may have been the case, but current trends suggest that changes are taking place. First, many of the best well-known places are becoming overcrowded. Secondly, after having been in the most well-known shrines, many religious tourists want to visit other sanctuaries, but it's difficult to find catalogue programs which offer them that possibility.

Under a grant for a research project of a cooperation agreement between Portugal and Slovakia – a group of researchers from both countries planned three feasible religious itineraries for being marketed by travel agencies/tour operators working with religious tourists.

Literature Review

The literature review is based on two pillars: the religious tourism travel programs from the travel agencies/tour operators which are specialized in organizing trips for this tourism segment and scientific articles on itineraries. For the first pillar, it was concluded that either the programs focus on a certain shrine with half-day and full-day circular trips (departure and return to the shrine) or cultural programs which mix more than one shrine with the visit to nearby cities or important monuments. For the second pillar, the literature is somewhat limited on designing itineraries design

or on theme itineraries focusing the religious resources, as for example Lew and McKercher (2006) and Ambrósio (2010).

Methodology

Under the research project of a cooperation agreement between Portugal and Slovakia, and considering that after having been in the more well-known shrines, religious tourists indicate a willingness to visiting other sanctuaries, three researchers drove from Lisbon (Portugal) to Levoča (Slovakia) stopping along Marian midsize shrines to collect data based on participant observation. The data collected by participant observation, combined with experiences gathered during previous religious tourism trips allowed the researchers to design three different itineraries.

The starting point for the three itineraries is in Portugal (either in Lisbon or Oporto airport) and end in Slovakia/Košice airport (or vice-versa). All three itineraries appear to be economically feasible, considering the intended market segments. All have a strong practical component for facilitating training in the design of thematic itineraries and also as a reflective tool for the travel agents/tour operators who work with this tourism segment.

Results

The research result is the design of three itineraries/programs based on the most important Marian shrines and also towns/small cities between Portugal and Slovakia. All are planned taking into consideration its market appeal and economic feasibility.

The first is a 12 days' itinerary. It includes the most important Marian midsize shrines and also towns/small cities along the way - neither capital city nor major Marian Shrine are included. Each day is planned as to keep the distance traveled to a maximum of 550km and every overnight is spent at a different shrine. Although the itineraries could be promoted in Europe, it is mainly targeted at pilgrims/tourists coming from overseas and who have already visited the major Marian Shrines like Lourdes and Fátima, as well as big European capitals. They seek additional religious tourism experiences at lesser known shrines situated in the proximity of mid-sized European cities.

The second is a 15 days' itinerary. Apart from the most important Marian midsize shrines it also includes the two major European Marian shrines (Lourdes and Fátima). Towns/small cities along

the way will be visited (no capital city is included). Each day is planned to cover a distance of no more than 450km and every overnight is spent at a different shrine. The target market is overseas pilgrims/tourists who have visited major European capitals (cultural programs) and are now seeking pilgrimage experiences at the most important European Marian shrines.

The third is a 19 days' itinerary. It includes the most important Marian midsize shrines and better known small cities along the route – but includes neither capital cities nor major Marian shrines. Each day is planned to cover no more than 600km and in every shrine are scheduled two overnights. The day following the group's arrival, pilgrims/tourists have the option of staying the entire day at the shrine or a full-day visit to an important nearby city. The itinerary can be marketed in Europe (mainly amongst retired Catholics) or among overseas pilgrims/tourists. In this program it's possible to combine two segments/motivations even though they may coexist in a given couple: more religious (the ones who will spend the full days in the shrines in praying activities) or more cultural (the ones who will visit the cultural sites in the shrine's proximity).

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper shows how a scientific work can be at the same time used as a tool for academics and also for private stakeholders, given its practical nature on designing thematic itineraries. In this particular case, three religious itineraries crossing Western and Central Europe. To design an itinerary is not only a practical exercise of connections between its components but also a reflective effort trying to find a leitmotiv which can represent both for pilgrims/tourists: an enjoyable and fulfilling experience while simultaneously reinforcing cultural and religious interests/beliefs.

Academics interested in thematic itineraries will find that apart from their important contribution in inventorying, mapping and selecting resources, it's also important to combine them as feasible programs for tourists or as economically interesting programs for travel agents/tour operators. Industry can benefit from the ideas academia can provide, with the provision and diversification to their programs/packages, possibly extending the life span of products at those destinations.

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