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Spiritual Quest in Rural Hungary and Slovakia: Developing an Innovative Thematic Route

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Spiritual Quest in Rural Hungary and Slovakia: Developing an Innovative Thematic Route

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The purpose of this study is to present a paper about the design of a themed route through rural areas in Hungary and Slovakia to promote sustainable rural tourism. Rural cemeteries were chosen as a focus because these cemeteries are laden with history, culture and associated narratives, yet there is a paucity of empirical research connecting rural cemeteries to tourism development.

The ten cemeteries were selected based on desk research and field trips, following specific criteria set by the authors, including forest and water resources in the vicinity of the research sites. All of the chosen cemeteries have an enormous tourism potential and with the synergy of water and forest, rural tourism can be packaged and offered for visitors as a complete holistic experience. The proposed route is linear, yet participants are free to shorten the route or make a small circle and still have a memorable journey. The route can also be connected to the European Cemetery Route. This is a non-invasive development, building on and mixing existing natural and cultural resources and the final tourism product offered here is niche in nature. This case study shows the viability of a two - country cooperation in the field of sustainable rural tourism, which can also be integrated into a larger European initiative.

Key Words: rural tourism, sustainable tourism, Slovakian tourism, Hungarian tourism, cemetery routes

Introduction

We are living in a more and more urbanised world. The number of city dwellers overtook the number of rural residents in 2007 and by 2050 it is projected that 68 percent of the world's population will live in urban settings (Ritchie & Roser, 2018). So, country areas are fighting a losing battle as they face challenges related to demographic changes, workforce development, capital access, infrastructure, health, land use, environment and community preservation coupled with a lack of tourism – according to the latest comprehensive study carried out by the National Conference of State Legislature in the USA (National Conference of State Legislature, 2020).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about changes in the use of landscape for tourism and recreation. The limitations on travel have caused stress and anxiety for the global community (Bao *et al.*, 2020) and one way to cope with the crisis could be to engage with outdoor recreation (Rung *et al.*, 2011; Samuelsson *et al.*, 2020).

This phenomenon is addressed by several scholars (Rice *et al.*, 2020) exploring the impact of the virus on urban outdoor enthusiasts.

While during the pre-pandemic period tourists flocked to iconic destinations and attractions, they are losing their importance these days as people tend to go to lesser-known places with low level of visitation. It also seems that tourism in the post-COVID era will focus more and more on a slower and deeper exploration of the natural environment outside major tourist attractions (Santos *et al.*, 2020).

That trend will open up great opportunities for smaller sites (such as cemeteries) in the countryside, surrounded by nature, containing unique elements of the local cultural identity. As we are more aware of our fragility, witnessing up-close the loss of friends and family, and bombarded with the latest news on the pandemic, it is fair to say that more people will see cemeteries as a place for solace and quiet contemplation. Hopefully, those visits

will also help people reconnect with nature and their own rural heritage which can be beneficial for their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Numerous European research projects and initiatives have already demonstrated the great potential of rural tourism. Lane, Weston, Davies *et al.*, (2013) in their research commissioned by the European parliament (2013), recognised the importance of developing heritage routes and regions. The Euracademy (2003) also compiled a thematic guide containing eight topical case studies with special focus on sustainable development, while the InRuTou Project (Innovation in Rural Tourism) selected several mountain communities in six European countries to facilitate sustainable tourism development.

Besides pan-European efforts, several governments and regional authorities have embraced rural tourism to bring new investment into rural regions, stimulating growth, providing employment opportunities, and thus tackling rural decline (Dashper, 2015). There are only estimations when it comes to assessing global demand for rural tourism and most data are outdated. However, existing data reveal that rural tourism is still an underutilised approach with regard to tourism development and yields meagre economic benefit. According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2020), only 3% of international tourists travelled for the purpose of rural tourism in 2018. The data of the European Parliament (Lane, Weston, Davies *et al.*, 2013) related to the supply side, shows that 400,000 rural lodgings with a capacity of 3.6 million people are available for visitors. It is also suggested that in 2013 rural tourism supported 900,000 direct and indirect jobs in Europe and generated €150 billion in gross income.

In the USA, the approach to tackle rural problems differs from the European perspective as American academic research places more emphasis on local population growth and the prosperity of small businesses. They single out recreational facilities and services as potential drivers to attract both tourists and would-be residents to given settlements. Based on empirical evidence, country areas with recreational opportunities have the potential to lure wealthier tourists to visit (Lawson, 2019), boosting entrepreneurship in the village, generating regular income for locals and improving the overall picture of the village, which then can attract even more visitors to the area. The report of Headwaters Economics (Lawson, 2019) goes beyond that claiming that recreational amenities with

a tourist appeal can bring long-term economic benefits as tourists can become permanent residents or second homeowners.

But despite these projects and studies, there is a research gap in relation to the value of rural cemeteries as elements of tourism packages. Furthermore, from the perspective of good practice, only one certified European cultural route features the countryside and only one thematic route covers urban cemeteries. However neither Hungary nor Slovakia are members of these networks. There is also criticism that routes in general are missing a sense of narrative, and fail to provide a link between people, communities, places, institutions and times (Council of Europe, 2020b).

In this study a two-country thematic route is designed to showcase the uniqueness of the so far overlooked rural cemeteries, with the combination of water-based activities in Hungary and forest-based tourism in Slovakia. The unusual mix of natural and cultural elements provides a fertile ground for sustainable tourism development because the synergy between the culturally loaded rural cemeteries and the gentle recreational activities offers a non-invasive product development alternative, beneficial for both residents and tourists. Drawing upon the strength of the two countries, the thematic route which is designed, also proves how two countries with different natural resources can cooperate and complement their offerings, making a more competitive but sustainable offer (as defined by Landorf, 2009) emphasising the preservation of ecological processes, human heritage and biodiversity through holistic planning. Furthermore, embedding the route into the existing European Cemeteries Route would be in line with the current trend of preferring less crowded, rural areas over congested urban settings.

Literature Review

The concept of rural tourism

The OECD's Rural Development Programme defined rural tourism in the early 1990s as including the following elements:

Rural tourism is located in rural areas, built upon the rural world's special features of small-scale enterprise, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, 'traditional' societies and 'traditional' practices. It grows slowly and organically and connects with local

families. It will often be controlled locally and developed for the long-term good of the area. It represents the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history, and location (OECD, 1994).

Entrepreneurship and localities are echoed in several concepts, according to Yachin and Ioannides (2020) rural tourism entrepreneurship builds on local nature and culture, and the locality constitutes a fundamental part of their business. Their strategy highlights the attractiveness of locality for visitors.

The European Union describes rural tourism as a fragmented type, still with little cooperation or coordination, yet facing increasing competition both internally and externally. Although it is essentially a private sector phenomenon and as such primarily driven by economic goals and employment creation, jobs are often part-time / pluriactivity jobs. In terms of income and employment, it provides between 10 and 20% of the total rural income and employment. Rural tourism can provide a complete tourism package, including accommodation, natural and cultural attractions as well as memorable experiences. Therefore, it can develop place attachment and visitor loyalty resulting in repeat visitation. It is unique in a way that it is not resort-based tourism (Lane, Weston, Davies *et al.*, 2013).

These complex and varied concepts illustrate the difficulty to determine the types of holiday that can take place in a rural environment. According to Agroinform (2020), a Hungarian Agricultural Information Site, country tourism that includes rural tourism can offer a range of touristic activities to provide a structured, well-diversified offerings, based on traditions and authenticity. Types of activities can include among others: leisure, recreational, culinary, farm, horse riding, hunting, water, cultural, hiking, adventure, cycling, wine, golf, ski, heritage, art, study, castle, eco, bio, wellness, religious activities. So, rural tourism is more like an umbrella term and specifies the environment where tourism occurs and the nature of hospitality facilities and services they can offer.

Dömeová and Jindrová (2011) defined three types of domestic rural tourists according to their motivation: traditional, active, and passive. Passive tourists mainly belong to the silver generation with the preference of longer stays and search for tranquillity and relaxation.

Traditional tourists favour visiting natural and cultural landmarks while active tourists are interested in a plethora of activities, including sports and social events. They are definitely a younger demographic and tend to go on shorter, more frequent vacations.

Rural tourism in Hungary and Slovakia

Rural tourism in post-socialist countries is not particularly based on agriculture, as it is in other European countries. Unfortunately, private ownership and the continuity of agricultural production were interrupted in the former socialist countries for almost half a century. Not surprisingly, therefore, Dömeová and Jindrová (2011) found that rural tourism in the Czech Republic represents a young and very dynamic branch, the majority of those participating in the research were in business for 9 years or less and only 27% of respondents could be linked directly or indirectly to agriculture.

In case of Hungary, out of the 3150 settlements in the country, about 2800 are villages with less than 1000 inhabitants (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2020). Around 28% of people reside in rural environments which have plenty to offer for urbanised tourists seeking both active tourism and quiet relaxation. From a historical perspective, the Hungarian Weekend Association formed in 1929, along with the Hungarian Hospitality Association, established in 1929, they were the first bodies who played a key role in the development of rural tourism (Rehák, 2011). The aim was to attract the urban middle-class to stay within the country, enjoy rural life while generating revenue for the rural communities involved. The initiative achieved great success and soon about 30% of domestic guests opted for rural accommodation. The association provided complete packages including travel discount for trains and accommodation (Csizmadia, Kádas, Kenéz *et al.*, 1992). However, during the socialist era the motivation changed, and most people travelled to rural areas for the purpose of visiting friends and relatives, so the economic benefit yielded from rural tourism was negligible (Michalkó, 2012). In the 1980s a small boom could be witnessed as more and more rural residents started offering a homestay to earn some additional income.

After the change of the political system in the early 1990s, for many rural residents, particularly women who had lost their job, embarking on a tourism business could mean the closest thing to having a proper job. It was

strongly believed that rural tourism would be the panacea for many ailments of the countryside, however this has not materialised yet. The number of rural inns has been declining since 2009 even though a great deal of financial resources has been allocated to rural tourism (Molnár & Remenyik, 2017).

As for Slovakia, more than two-thirds of the country is non-urban and out of the 21 tourist regions, rural tourism is the main form of tourism in two thirds of them. Despite the rural and mountainous landscape of the country, tourism including rural tourism on the whole is not as developed as it should be, and it is mainly popular for urban inhabitants and families with children (Mura & Ključnikov, 2018).

At the outset, tourism and recreation in Slovakia were closely connected with alpine tourism, mountaineering, skiing or visiting spa towns (Sárinec, 2013). After 1948 holidays became part of the 'socialist way of life' in Czechoslovakia where state-subsidised holidays were provided by employers that owned their own recreational facilities built during the 70s and 80s (Williams & Baláž, 2001). In 1987, only 17% of domestic holidays were realised at commercial accommodation in Slovakia while about a quarter (24%) stayed at facilities belonging to employers, trade unions or various non-profit organisations. The same proportion of holidaymakers stayed at privately owned second homes (25%) and in similar numbers they spent their vacation with relatives and friends (24%) (Williams & Baláž, 2001). The phenomenon of second home ownership in Slovakia played a key role in the development of rural tourism, partly as it related to the rapid and intensive process of industrialisation from the 1950s to 1980s (Sárinec, 2013; Williams & Baláž, 2001).

After the transition to market economy in the 1990s, privatisation and restitution created two significant players in tourism in Slovakia - thanks to the gradual decentralisation, the private sector came to the fore while more and more competencies were transferred to local governments. Because of this, regional tourism actors slowly emerged (Cákoci, Kasagranda & Tolmáči, 2014). The development of rural tourism went hand in hand with private ownership as the possibility of establishing private businesses in tourism was too attractive to dismiss. After 1989 renting cottages, country houses and the construction of guest houses in the countryside were booming. Most of the current tourist facilities in Slovakia were established between 1990 and 2000, which led to the transformation of agricultural activities into tourism products (Mura & Ključnikov, 2018). The villages of southern Slovakia with thermal springs are typical examples of rural destinations in Slovakia (Oremusová, Kramáreková, Žoncová & Dubcová, 2016).

Thematic routes in Europe

Thematic routes and trails are often used as a strategic development tool in tourism planning as they fit with the trend of experience tourism and they often come with a cultural focus. An important contribution to the development of sustainable and responsible cultural tourism in Europe are the 'Cultural Routes' of the Council of Europe, launched in 1987 (Table 1). Up to 2019, 38 Cultural Routes were certified by the European Institute for Cultural Routes (EICR), showcasing both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

As seen in Table 1, Hungary has joined eight European cultural routes, while Slovakia is part of four networks. As for themes, the cultural routes in Hungary and Slovakia are mainly concerned with architecture

Table 1. Thematic Cultural Routes in Hungary and the Slovak Republic

Cultural Routes	Certification date	Hungary	Slovakia
European Mozart Ways	2004		x
Saint Martin of Tours Route	2005	x	x
Transromanica	2007		x
Iter Vitis Route	2009	x	
European Route of Historic Thermal Towns	2010	x	
Réseau Art Nouveau Network	2014	x	
Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route	2015	x	
European Route of Industrial Heritage	2019	x	
Iron Curtain Trail	2019	x	x
Routes of Reformation	2019	x	

Source: Council of Europe, 2020a

(Réseau Art Nouveau Network, Routes of Reformation, Transromania), viticulture (Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route, Iter Vitis Route) and industrial heritage buildings (European Route of Industrial Heritage). Both countries are members of the Iron Curtain Trail and the Saint Martin of Tours Route. From a spatial perspective, the routes often connect with the capitals - Budapest and Bratislava or other urban main areas (European Route of Historic Thermal Towns, European Mozart Ways, Réseau Art Nouveau Network), and only one features the countryside (Routes of Reformation).

Only two cultural routes pass through both countries and none of the European cultural routes that Hungary or the Slovak Republic take part in, are focused on the countryside and its diverse resources, even though both are areas with immense natural wealth.

A further issue is that most of the existing routes are not embedded into the participating countries' tourism offerings. By checking the visibility of the Iron Curtain Trail for example, in which both countries take part, the buzz generated at the outset was minimal, and today the route is almost non-existent on social media. Very small amounts of feedback and comments have been posted on TripAdvisor, YouTube or Facebook. According to a study commissioned by the Council of Europe (2020b), routes in general are missing a sense of narrative and fail to provide a link between people, communities, places, institutions and times. Pilgrimage routes such as the Camino de Santiago are good examples of creating narratives and these stories and legends come to life in literature, non-fiction, lectures, casual conversations and in peoples' memories. This kind of narrative should be an essential element of all the themed routes, otherwise they remain a mere collection of attractions put together without any unique experience proposition (UEP) being offered for visitors. Furthermore, routes are of a grand scale, which makes the composition of a unified narrative even more difficult if not entirely impossible. Thus, it is proposed here that smaller routes involving fewer countries with similarity in terms of history and culture, would make more sense both in terms of sustainability and ROI. Due to the fact that people tend to embark on shorter holidays, extra long routes are more niche and exclusive, which is not in line with the original aim of establishing themed routes for people keen to learn more about European heritage, and definitely not a good fit for rural tourism.

The case study presented here attempts to integrate a two-country route into the European Cemeteries Route that was established in 2010 with 20 members. The proposed route is concerned with famous urban cemeteries that are already part of European Cultural Heritage, therefore an extension with ten rural cemeteries with a strong theme of forest and water would make a highly attractive offer for pilgrims.

Methods

While completing the case study several research techniques were used to minimise the subjectivity of the various qualitative methods. The criteria of selecting the cemeteries in this research emerged from the literature review and field studies were carried out during June 2020, using an auto-ethnographic research approach with self-reflection, field notes and photo documentation. This perspective presents itself when contemplating route-based tourism, as it allows researchers to live through the same experience as visitors would. The challenge to face here is the awareness of having two different roles (researcher and tourist) and to carefully navigate between them. If the researchers explore their own environment, which is partly the case here, emotional attachment can cloud objectivity that has to be eliminated by setting up rigorous criteria. However, the main advantage of this approach lies in its flexibility, since during fieldwork there is a possibility to change the shape of subtopics, refine them, abandon certain research sites and include others. The success of fieldwork greatly depends and based on the systematic review of secondary data and academic literature beforehand, therefore the theoretical discussions are justified in this case.

Results and Discussion

Choosing a theme: the synergy of cemetery, forest and water

Many cultural and heritage routes lack uniqueness and creativity, and thus, many duplications can be detected in terms of supply (Park, 2014). It is commonplace to offer the same type of attractions and experiences in different countries, so if you have seen one, you have seen all of them. The novelty of the thematic route designed in this study lies in the fact that it goes back to themes that have been attractive for centuries, yet remained unthematized and unblended with other tourism products. The burial sites of famous leaders, places with healing powers or

locations where miracles happened have been the most coveted destinations since the earliest pilgrimages routes and most religious sites are natural features such as grottos, rivers, caves or forests (Timothy, 2012). Therefore, the combination of three elements, one cultural – cemeteries, and two natural - forests and water will surely provide the synergy which many modern spiritual travellers long for. Occasionally, urban cemeteries as cultural attractions are in the centre of scholarly debate (Pécsek, 2015), however, rural burial grounds have been mostly ignored in academic discourse; even though they are at least as varied in terms of greenery, history and architecture as their urban version and possess similar values, including educational, environmental, and artistic perspectives.

When it comes to water, bathing has always played an essential role in tourism and thanks to the Romans, Japanese and Chinese, bathing culture can be traced back 2000-3000 years. Furthermore, hot springs have always been considered places of healing and worship all over the world. Almost 2,500 years ago, Hippocrates suggested that the root cause of all diseases lay in an imbalance of bodily fluids, therefore, to regain balance a change of habits and environment was advised, with plenty of bathing, perspiration, walking, and massage (Looman & Pillen, 1989). For Romans, spas served not only for recuperation of wounded soldiers but also as resting and recreational centres for healthy soldiers and citizens (Van Tubergen & Van der Linden, 2002). Beside hot springs and medicinal water, freshwater lakes and rivers can also have a sacred aura around them, the former are readily found for instance in Tibet and Bali, while the river Ganges is the most holy water in India, and sacred falls are scattered around the world in places like Hawaii and Haiti. Fresh water is used in many rituals across cultures, and even atheists acknowledge the innate connectedness to water, since it is absolutely essential while also, one of the most feared natural elements. From a tourism perspective the fascination with water has not changed to the present day in a great many countries, including Hungary where it is important for health tourism (medical and wellness), while SSS (sea, sun and sand) holidays are still the most popular and prevalent type of tourism.

Besides water, fresh air is also a frequent motivation for travel and in the era of urbanisation, rural landscapes are associated with relaxation and fresh air. The rice terraces in Southeast Asia, the pastures in the Alps and the wineries in France are as valuable in terms of heritage sites as urban based attractions. Although most people enjoy walking in

woods, forest tourism is more niche than water tourism and is usually connected to National Parks in Europe. The national park movement began in the USA in 1872 and has spread all over the world since then (Timothy, 2012). Holy forests are prevalent in Japan where the term *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) was coined by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1980 (Longhurst, 2018) and its benefit is well documented through a range of medical research carried out by the Forest Therapy Study Group among others (Oh, Lee & Zaslowski *et al.*, 2017; Livni, 2016). One of the most recent comprehensive pieces of research was performed by Hansen *et al.* (Hansen, Jones & Tocchini, 2017), who reviewed 127 scientific papers related to the topic. At an industry level, the European forest strategy was adopted in 1998 with the aim of improving management, restoration and rejuvenation as specified in the project titled Life and European Project (European Commissions, 2006). However, the undeniable link between forest and rural tourism has not been established yet in European scholarly work.

The purpose of designing this route is to draw attention to the uniqueness of the rural landscapes in Hungary and Slovakia, to lure culture-savvy tourists away from the big cities and offer more diversified experiences for them. If tourism can develop at some of these destinations, rural communities can earn extra revenue from existing resources without compromising landscape quality. Table 2 presents a set of selection criteria that were compiled, to help with the selection of the most fitting cemeteries for inclusion in this route.

Selection criteria	Features
Setting	rural environment, far from metropolitan areas
Cemetery UEP	cemeteries, unique qualities in terms of architecture and/or history
Natural resources	close to water in Hungary, and to forest in Slovakia
Narrative	the destination can be packaged in a comprehensive narrative
Route	linear, multi-theme, flexible
Experience	holistic
Focus	ordinary, relatable impressions
Scale	two countries, routes can be shortened

Source: own research

It was essential to select cemeteries in rural settings since the ultimate aim was to enhance the reputation of the countryside in the tourism context. The chosen cemeteries boast a unique experience proposition that is worth exploring for cultural visitors longing for authentic, rather than commodified experiences in nature. Unlike other cultural heritage such as castles, cathedrals or monuments, rural cemeteries represent the everyday for people, they are part of the architectural landscape of the neighbourhood and most people can relate to cemeteries as each human ends up there. So, it is part of the everyday past, present and future and it is not part of the landscape of the elite (Timothy, 2012). This can also mean that most rural cemeteries might not have a touristic appeal on their own, so there have to be other attractions and features to lure potential tourists to the area.

The multi-theme of this route limited the circle of cemeteries available to some extent, however, it allowed the selection of those where water-based and forest-based activities can be branded and which can provide a unique dynamic of experiences. These experiences will then mould into different narratives related to cleansing the body and mind, which fit the current international trends in a more sustainable way. From the management angle, routes of larger scale are much more difficult to manage due to the sheer number of stakeholders (Timothy, 2012). The scale of this route, therefore, is smaller, covering

only some parts of the two countries and the journey can be broken into several meaningful shorter trips. The border is crossed twice, therefore, even those who are not willing to include each stop can experience both water and forest together with some unique burial grounds.

The Route, the stops and the experiences

Figure 1 and Table 3 show that the route covers 839 kilometres with 10 sites, five in each country. The starting point is Lake Balaton, the most popular summer destination in Hungary, and as tourists progress, they can include two urban stops as well: Budapest and Košice. The flexibility of the route allows participants to choose one of the cities as the point of departure and blend urban experiences with the more holistic rural sites. Table 4 shows the cemeteries included in the route; illustrating the four categories made up specifically for the purpose of this research.

Scenic rural cemeteries

Scenic cemeteries are the most common subtype of traditional rural cemeteries, located either on a hill at the edge of a village, or in the centre of a village near the

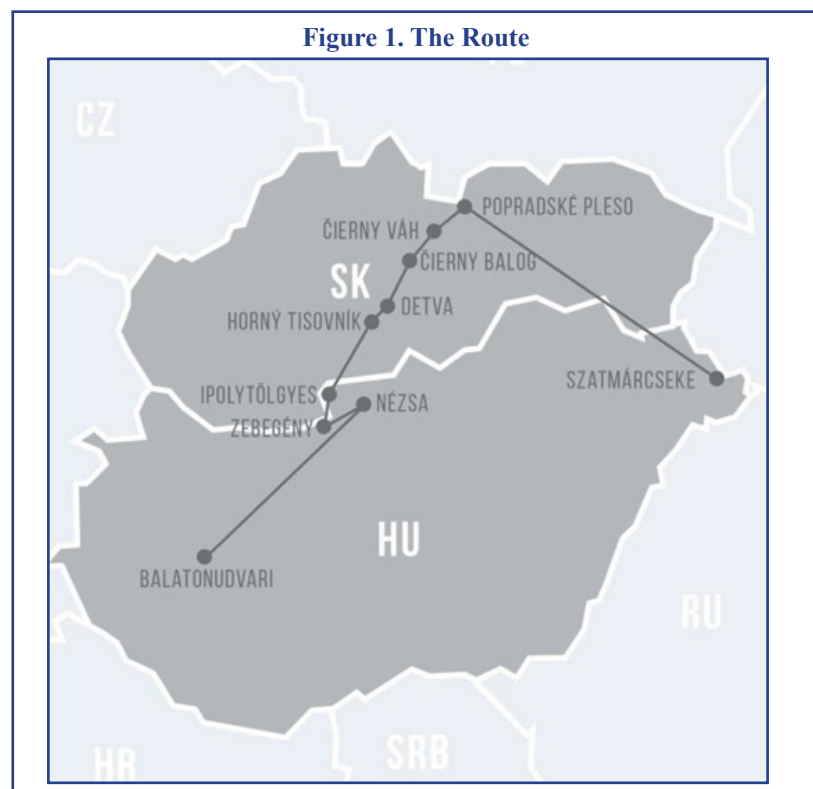


Table 3: Distances Between Sites

Balatonudvari to Nézsza	196 km
Nézsza to Zebegény	63 km
Zebegény to Ipolytölgyes	20 km
Ipolytölgyes to Horný Tisovník	101 km
Horný Tisovník to Detva	23 km
Detva to Čierny Balog	45 km
Čierny Balog to Čierny Váh	61 km
Čierny Váh to Popradské pleso	29 km
Popradské pleso to Szatmárcseke	301 km

Table 4. Typology of Selected Cemeteries

<i>Scenic rural</i>	Zebegény (HU)
	Ipolytölgyes (HU)
<i>Folk grave markers</i>	Horný Tisovník (SK)
	Detva (SK)
	Balatonudvari (HU)
	Szatmárcseke (HU)
	Nézsza (HU)
<i>Symbolic</i>	Popradské pleso (SK)
	Čierny Balog (SK)
<i>Thematic</i>	Čierny Váh (SK)
Source: own research	

Figure 2: Cemetery in Zebegény

(source: Váci Egyházmegye)

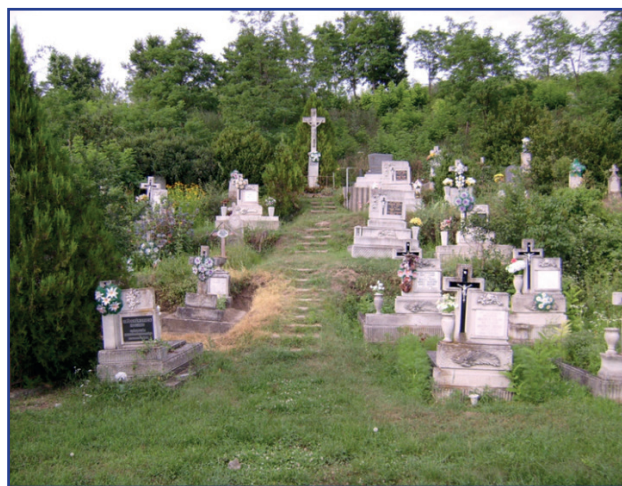
church. The beauty of these cemeteries is not the forms or shapes of the tombs or graves but the natural environment or the panorama that can be enjoyed. In many cases, there is a calvary lined up along the site and three crosses with a chapel dominate the top of the hill. The graves are situated in regular rows and trees are used as solitaires or in small groups at landmarks (church, cross), or around the perimeter of the cemetery. Two Hungarian cemeteries are featured in this category.

Zebegény on the Danube bend

Zebegény (Figure 2), nicknamed ‘The marble of the Danube Bend’ is a picturesque village located 60 km north of Budapest on the Danube Bend, near the Duna-Ipoly National Park. It is a beloved destination for rural tourists, who enjoy peace and quiet due to its nice beaches, mountains, forests and cycling routes. The cultural life (galleries, festivals, museums, sport facilities) is second to none, the village holds an Open University of Arts each year. Amrita Sher-Gil, a Hungarian-Indian painter considered one of the greatest avant-garde women artists of the early 20th century and a pioneer in modern Indian art resided in the village for an extensive period. Within walking distance there are three caves that used to be inhabited by monks during the Middle Ages. On the Calvary Hills the chapel, the Hero’s Monument and the National Flag Memorial are also worth a visit. Zebegény is a popular stop for kayak trips on the Danube Bend.

Ipolytölgyes, small centre of spiritual and water tourism

A peaceful village, Ipolytölgyes (Figure 3) at the foot of the Börzsöny mountains and located on the river Ipoly, is famous for its natural beauty and a favourite stop for kayak and canoe trips. Its cemetery is a truly traditional burial ground, with wooden stairs leading up to the 200-year-old Old Cross. The leafy cemetery with its white tombstones oozes peace and tranquillity. The village also boasts several religious sites including the yellow church, a charming chapel and some fine statues of Saints: Saint Wendel and Saint John of Nepomuk. The charming settlement provides an ideal place for discovering or

Figure 3: Cemetery in Ipolytölgyes

(source: Authors)

awakening one's spiritual side, then an eco-tour on Ipoly river mostly flowing along the Hungarian-Slovakian border, can complete the experience.

Cemeteries with folk grave markers

Folk tombstones are quite common in rural cemeteries and their shapes and forms were influenced by the availability of natural materials, their treatment and symbolism. This resulted in a diverse range of folk tombstones, which are always typical of the given region or village. The cemetery route showcases a variety of grave markers from a lapidary of wooden painted crosses in Slovakia to wooden boat-shaped grave markers in Hungary. Folk tombstones are a celebration of simple people, their life and faith. Their beauty stems from the simplicity of the material world and the spiritual richness. This category makes up half of the collection included in the thematic route.

Horný Tisovník, tombstones of the Novohrad region

Horný Tisovník is a small village near Detva in the Novohrad region, which is extremely important due to the occurrence of wooden grave markers and tombstones (Figure 4). Old wooden slab grave markers had an anthropomorphic appearance, but they were rarely preserved due to their low durability. Mainly, tombstones have been preserved, which have an upper part richly decorated with ornaments and inscriptions in the lower

Figure 4: Cemetery in Horný Tisovník



(source: Authors)

part. The ornaments are polychromatic red, blue, green and black. The tombstones are exceptional, they are an excellent collection of signs and symbols from the traditional farming environment - anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, plant and geometric ornaments. The folk poetry used on the tombstone is also worth noting (Aláč, 2015). In 2004, the village restored the old cemetery, where 80 stone tombstones were uncovered, creating an display of Novohrad folk tombstones, supplemented with new replicas of 30 wooden tombstones. The northern part of Novohrad offers a well-preserved agricultural landscape with high forest cover for walking and relaxing.

Figure 5: Cemetery in Detva



(source: Authors)

Detva, folk baroque

Painted wooden carved crosses are a unique part of cultural heritage in the village of Detva (Figure 5), and along with others found in the Podpoľanie region they were enlisted in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2017. These are hand-made by local woodcarvers, using oak wood, and decorated with one or more colours. The origin of the crosses goes back to the middle of the 18th century, when the crosses stood by the roads and near the churches, while the smaller forms of these crosses marked Catholic graves in the cemetery. At present, the crosses are located in the cemetery and on the Calvary near the cemetery. While older crosses were simpler, without colours, newer ones are tall, richly decorated with a church theme. The municipality together with local artisans has been trying to ensure the proper restoration of the crosses and to revive its traditional techniques in cooperation with the Poľana Folklore Festival and the Detvian Art Colony. The dominant geographical feature of the region is the Poľana Mountains with one of the largest extinct volcanoes in Europe, currently covered with forest.

The Calvinist cemetery in Szatmárcseke

Szatmárcseke is a village located in East-Hungary, famous for its Calvinist cemetery (Figure 6), containing 600 grave markers carved from dark oak in the shape of upturned boats with human-like faces. Legend has it that the boats symbolise the old belief of death being part of a journey. According to another theory the dead bodies were floated to their burial sites on vessels which were then carved and used as headstones. It is still a living

Figure 6: Cemetery in Szatmárcseke

(source: Authors)

Figure 7: Cemetery in Nézsa

(source: Authors)

tradition and an important part of the local culture. Before residents die, they pick the tree and give specific instructions to the woodworker. The boat-shaped pieces of wood must meet a strict set of criteria: they must be made of oak, between about five feet and 6.5 feet high, and face west. The cemetery also boasts the marble tombs of the Kölcsey family, including that of Ferenc Kölcsey, a Hungarian poet and politician who wrote the country's national anthem and died in the village in 1838. Other attractions of the village revolve around the famous Hungarian poet. The village lies near the Tisza river, the second biggest river in Hungary, however, kayaking on the smaller Túr river is the real romantic experience.

Nézsa cemetery, calvary and fishing

Nézsa is a village in Nógrád County, Hungary with about 1100 inhabitants. The village cemetery (Figure 7) offers a wide range of religious buildings, including the calvary built between 1825 and 1826 in classical style and houses the chapel beneath it. Most of the cemetery ground is covered with traditional tombstones, however, a great deal of grave markers from the 19th century are to be found. Unfortunately, only a handful of them have been identified to date. As for the water-based activities, Nézsa boasts one of the most spectacular fishing lakes, Ezersziget, lying at the edge of the settlement, surrounded by a leafy environment, which is a real paradise for anglers and home to several types of fish. 'The island of peace and quiet' as the regulars call it, where even non-anglers can recharge.

The heart-shaped tombs by the lake, in Balatonudvari

Lake Balaton is a mass tourism destination for domestic tourists, and the village of Balatonudvari is located along Main Road 71 close to Tihany and Balatonfüred.

Figure 8: Cemetery in Balatonudvari

(source: Authors)

The latter is the elegant capital of the northern shore, an ideal getaway and starting point for those who yearn for more spiritual experiences (Figure 8). Historians and researchers agree that most of the stones were erected between 1810 and 1840, with one exception, the gravestone of the Calvinist teacher, János Varga's wife, who was born at the time of the first wave of the round gravestones, in 1834. Her headstone was put up forty years later, in 1876. According to the legend a daughter of a fisherman drowned during a storm in Balaton and her stonemason lover made her a heart-shaped tombstone and soon the locals started to follow suit. There is no cross on the graves, only a short inscription with the year of death with the name and the age of the deceased.

Symbolic cemeteries

Symbolic cemeteries are special memorial places for the victims of various tragedies of humanity. These are most often victims of military conflicts, terrorist attacks, traffic accidents or victims of the mountain. Cemeteries with symbolic tombstones are usually located at the site of the tragedy, however, the deceased are not buried in these cemeteries. Symbolic cemeteries for mountain victims are the most common in Slovakia, and the oldest one in the High Tatras is featured here along with Čierny Balog - Vydrovo dedicated to forest workers who died while working in the forest.

Symbolic cemetery at Popradské pleso – 'In memory of the dead - a warning for the living'

The symbolic cemetery at Popradské pleso (Poprad Mountain-lake) in the High Tatras National Park (Figure 9) was built in the memory of victims of the mountains. The original idea was to collect memorial plaques of

Figure 9: Cemetery in the High Tatras

(source: Authors)

the victims that were scattered in different parts of the mountains, in one accessible and dignified place. The idea came in 1922 from the painter Otakar Štáfl and from Alojz Lutonský, secretary of the Club of Czechoslovak Tourists. However, it did not come to fruition until 1936, when a cemetery began to be built under the Ostrva hill near Popradské pleso at an altitude of 1525m, surrounded by the Tatra. Each victim was given a carved, colourful cross from Detva. In 1938, Štáfl built 50 crosses, carved by Jozef Fekiač Surovec-Šumný from Detva (1905 - 1944). The chapel was modelled on the Spiš chapels. The symbolic cemetery was consecrated and opened to the public on August 11, 1940. At present, there are more than 350 plaques with more than 495 names, the oldest is from 1909. At the time of its creation, the symbolic cemetery was probably the only one of its kind in the

Figure 10: Cemetery in Čierny Balog for Forest Workers

(source: Authors)

world. The cemetery is situated in one of the most visited spots in the High Tatras, right on the main hiking route.

Čierny Balog - 'Forests sing for them forever ...'

The village of Čierny Balog is part of the settlement of Kráľová Lehota, connected to wood processing. The symbolic forestry cemetery (Figure 10) was established in 2004 on the grounds of the Open-Air Forestry Museum in Vydrovská Valley near Čierny Balog, for the memory of the foresters who died while working in the forest. The village is also the birthplace of the greatest personality of forestry, Jozef Dekret Matejovic. The central place of the cemetery is a moss-covered hill, with a cascading waterfall. On the hill there is an inscription 'Forests sing for them forever ...' and a tree-shaped metal cross transferred from the forest cemetery, Čierny Váh. A five-meter high Detrovian wooden cross stands together with a bell tower at the entrance of the cemetery. The Open-Air Forestry Museum was established in 2002 with the aim of bringing the work of foresters close to the public. The area covers 140 hectares and includes several nature trails with over 70 thematic stops. The open-air museum is easily accessed by the attractive, scenic Čiernohronská Forest Railway line (1908), zigzagging through the valleys of the river Čierny Hron. In 1982 it was declared a national cultural monument of the Slovak Republic.

Thematic cemetery

Thematic cemeteries are dedicated to a certain group of people, based on age, religion or profession. In larger, metropolitan cemeteries usually a separate grave field is dedicated to police officers, firefighters, soldiers or children among others. In case of smaller, rural cemeteries the whole cemetery becomes the final resting place for the given group. When it comes to this particular route, a forest cemetery was chosen, where forest workers and their family members were buried.

Forest cemetery in Čierny Váh

The forest cemetery in Čierny Váh (Figure 11) is located above the forest settlement established at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries on the site of the first gamekeeper's house in the Low Tatras. The cemetery spreads around the brick church of the Holy Trinity, and an older wooden bell tower from 1803 in which there is also a rare one-handed clock with a fir wood dial. Forest workers and their family members were buried there, the oldest grave dates from 1812. The graves are marked with iron crosses, two of them are tree-shaped. Under the cemetery stands

Figure 11: Cemetery in Čierny Váh



(source: Authors)

a memorial pillar in the honour of Palatine Joseph's visit on August 29, 1804. The whole complex was declared a national cultural monument in 1990 and since 2007 it has been an important heritage site related to forestry. The settlement of Čierny Váh lies in the valley surrounded by mountains and forests, on the river Čierny Váh, at an altitude of 741m above sea level. Until the end of the last century, wood from the surrounding forests was floated on the river, but since 1914 the wood has been transported by the Považská Forest Railway, of which only the wooden building of the railway station has been preserved. Čierny Váh Reservoir is a popular place for tourists, especially the Upper Reservoir, offering a panoramic view of the High Tatras. A scenic cycling route leads to the Upper Reservoir, and a tourist path also goes through the settlement, which extends to the main ridge of the Low Tatras.

Integration of the Route into the European Cemetery Route

The European Cemetery Route is merely a collection of famous cemeteries on a dedicated website (<https://cemeteriesroute.eu/european-cemeteries-route.aspx>) with loads of factual information on heritage and culture. The website for this route is an excellent source for researchers and scholars about thematic conferences, workshops and programs organised at the individual cemeteries. However, there has not been an attempt to prepare a map and offer several member cemeteries as themed packages. There have not even been any efforts made for making accessible routes for potential visitors. The Hungarian – Slovak initiative would be the first to offer a comprehensive experience, packaged for

Figure 12: Integration of the Thematic Route With two Neighbouring Countries

(source: Authors)

interested tourists. Thus, it could serve as an example for the wider group of cemetery members to seek out cooperation among themselves. The proposed route would blend seamlessly as a loop between Varazdin and Krakow leaving out only Szatmarcseke (Figure 12).

Conclusions

This research aimed to propose a two-country, multi-theme, thematic route covering parts of the Hungarian and Slovakian rural areas. In the process of analysing the literature and during the fieldwork carried out in the different research settings, several themes and selection criteria presented themselves. The subsequent examination suggested water-based and forest-based activities to complement rural cemetery visits. The ten mostly peripheral cemeteries were classified into five

categories, providing a great variety of experiences for travellers. Special attention was given to the possible integration in an existing transnational cemetery route.

This case study has approached the issue from a sustainable tourism development perspective and considerations regarding local sentiment were not discussed here. The reason for this was due to the fact that the route would ensure environmental sustainability and historic preservation, since the novelty lies in the unusual combination of existing heritage with the utilisation of natural resources such as water and forest offered as a holistic experience. The tourism experience being proposed here is of a niche character, thus, it is highly unlikely that the number of visitors would make the destinations overcrowded, thus unmanageable.

The research took place during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, making it even more topical. As tourism has been moving more and more towards providing unique and authentic experiences. Further research can embark on building upon existing resources and values (natural, tangible, intangible) that a destination already has instead of damaging the landscape with overdevelopment to draw in the masses. The proposed integration of the two-country route into the existing European Cemetery Route shows a way forward for the static, multinational initiative in terms of adding these environmentally sustainable themes and developing a concrete offer for tourists.

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