



# Development of a Tourist Experience Model with the Aim of Increasing Economic Efficiency – On the Example of the Destination Sofia

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Received: August 30, 2023  
Revised: November 28, 2023  
Accepted: December 20, 2023  
Published: March 16, 2024

## Keywords:

Model;  
Economic efficiency;  
Development;  
Experiences;  
Sofia;  
Destination



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**Abstract:** *The research examines current trends in destination development and the increasing demand for services that create experiential value through additional services and travel opportunities. This pursuit of experiences aims to facilitate rejuvenation, capitalizing on the abundant tourism resources, exemplified by Sofia city.*

*Objective: This study aims to construct a comprehensive tourism experiential model for the given destination, employing an integrated approach that harnesses the untapped potential of various resources within the tourist area. The primary goal is to enhance the destination's economic efficiency. This approach envisions multifaceted benefits, including bolstering the tourism sector, contributing to GDP growth, and fostering sustainable advancement for urban destinations. Furthermore, it aims to foster year-round growth in demand and supply for tourist products and services in Sofia. The focal point lies in exploiting the destination's developmental prospects, fueled by evolving consumer preferences, driven by the quest for authentic and distinct travel experiences.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study delves into the diverse array of tourist resources in Bulgaria's capital, offering an avenue to overcome the seasonal constraints of tourism and reinforce the destination's unique identity. Within the purview of economic evaluation, a comprehensive endeavor is undertaken to unveil the rationale underlying the attainment of economic efficiency. This is achieved through the creation of a destination-specific model for tourist experiences utilizing an integrated approach. **Methodology:** To accomplish the stipulated objectives and attendant tasks, this study employs a systematic approach in conjunction with various research methods. These include historical, comparative, analysis and synthesis methods, observation, grouping, survey, differentiated, analytical, and combined methods. The research's contribution aligns with the established objective, focusing on fostering the growth of urban destinations as Smart Destinations. Furthermore, it raises the inquiry into augmenting tourism revenue and enhancing GDP contributions through long-term industry management strategies within an urban milieu.

By adopting an approach that identifies and integrates diverse tools for destination marketing management, with an emphasis on experiences and branding, Sofia aspires to establish itself as a recognizable four-season destination catering to emotional tourism and experiences. The integrated destination management approach engenders an environment conducive to enhancing its allure by capitalizing on its diverse tourism resources. The dimension of experience generation

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now extends beyond an artistic pursuit to an economic one. This evolution is underscored by the introduction of emerging technologies and the increasingly intricate and interconnected channels for delivering experiences, often tied to goods and services production. **Findings:** The application of the developed model is contingent on the holistic development and strategic management of the destination (as exemplified by Sofia). The model's specialized focus resides in the realm of the experience economy. Despite its substantial potential, Destination Sofia's resources in fields like business, health, sports, shopping, and balneological tourism remain underdeveloped. An opportunity exists to synergize these domains and position Sofia as a year-round, economically viable tourism destination.

## 2. URBAN TOURISM – DESTINATION SOFIA

On a global scale, urban tourism presents itself as a multifaceted phenomenon. It addresses the leisure-oriented desires of travelers who seek to explore diverse cities worldwide, immerse in novel cultures, and partake in recreational endeavours (Emilova, 2017). The concept of urban tourism embodies the unimpeded engagement in cognitive, business, and recreational pursuits within urban boundaries (Ashworth, 2008). This concept captures the administrative and statistical aspects of tourism offerings within urban settings. Urban tourism, functioning as a demographic, social, and economic process, correlates with the escalating prominence of cities. These urban centers, housing a substantial portion of the population, offer tourism services at elevated quality standards (Emilova, 2017).

The term "urban tourism" envelops the entirety of tourist journeys to prominent global cities, many of which have transformed into tourist hotspots. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) characterizes urban tourism as encompassing all voyages embarked upon by tourists to cities or locations characterized by high population density. Typically, such trips are of brief duration, lasting between one to three days, thus establishing a clear link between urban tourism and the realm of short-term travel (Emilova, 2017).

As urban travel advances, a corresponding evolution in tourist consumption patterns emerges. Present-day consumer demands exhibit entirely distinct dimensions. To fulfill these demands within the realm of tourist consumption, it becomes imperative to offer experiences that are both authentic and distinctive. Achieving this necessitates an innovative and creative approach to crafting tourist products within destinations that align with contemporary consumer expectations (Emilova, 2020).

Placing experiences at the epicenter of tourist consumption brings to light the imperative to discern economic efficiency and its potential to be harnessed within the urban context, leveraging the available tourist resources and scrutinizing the prevailing consumption of tourist products. Economic efficiency serves as the yardstick for gauging development levels and evaluating sectoral quality attributes. It revolves around orchestrating the creation of a tourist product that optimally integrates and allocates limited resources to ensure profitability within market dynamics. The rational utilization of resources materializes through an allocation strategy that maximizes outcomes. Efficiency is quantified by juxtaposing the economic outcomes of tourism activities against the costs or resources invested to achieve them.

**Clarification of Tourist Resources in Sofia Destination:** The tourist destination of Sofia boasts a rich array of both natural and human-made attractions. Among the natural resources

are the nearby mountain ranges, mineral springs, diverse flora and fauna, as well as tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These resources are elucidated in greater detail below:

- **Natural Abundance:** In the context of tourism, the proximity of Vitosha Mountain emerges as a pivotal feature. Its highest summit, Cherni vrah (2290 m), offers opportunities for both hiking and skiing tourism. Vitosha Nature Park is officially designated as a local climatic mountain resort. Encompassed within its borders are two reserves, "Torfeno Branishte" and "Bistrishko Branishte," along with several natural marvels including Boyanski Waterfall, Samokovishte—a waterfall on the Bistrica River—and the extensive Duhlata Cave (the longest cave in Bulgaria, located in the Pernik region). Additional mountains within the municipality offer traditional ecotourism routes. These routes intertwine recreational pursuits with cognitive, cultural, and pilgrimage tourism, attracting predominantly the metropolitan population. However, these areas hold untapped potential for sports and attractions, awaiting more comprehensive utilization. This clarification underscores the multifaceted natural resources present within Sofia, underpinning its appeal to a diverse range of tourists.
- **Mineral Waters and Springs:** The Sofia destination boasts an extraordinary wealth of mineral waters, encompassing a remarkable assemblage of 30 springs, each characterized by a diverse array of properties and untapped potential. Prominent springs are found in locations including Bankya, Zheleznitsa, Pancharevo, Sofia-center, Svoboda, Kniazhevo, and Gorna Banya deposits. Particularly noteworthy are the springs in the heart of Sofia, Bankya, and Pancharevo. Notably, Bankya holds the status of a spa resort of national importance, while Pancharevo is designated as a spa resort of local significance. Notably, within the city's precincts is the National Specialized Hospital for Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation. This historic medical institution stands as the oldest of its kind in the region, serving as the bedrock for advancements in physical medicine, rehabilitation, and resort science within Bulgaria (Ianeva et al., 2022). Augmenting these resources are the water bodies within the Capital Municipality. The Iskar Dam and Pancharev Lake present ideal settings for water sports enthusiasts, offering opportunities for rowing, windsurfing, and sport fishing. These locales further provide favorable circumstances for merging recreation and treatment, capitalizing on mineral waters, a mountain microclimate, and well-suited walking and cycling routes. In synthesis, the diversified climatic, geological, and hydrological conditions, along with the distinctive flora and fauna, contribute to the rich array of landscapes, biological species, communities, and essential natural habitats. This collective treasure trove represents an invaluable reservoir for tourism development and the preservation of biodiversity of pan-European significance (NSRD (National Strategy for Regional Development) 2012-2022, 2012).
- **Cultural Heritage:** Within the confines of the Metropolitan Municipality, a mosaic of cultural heritage encompasses over 1,400 immovable cultural assets, registered following the Law on Cultural Heritage (State Gazette No. 19, 13.03.2009). This treasure trove spans various epochs, with a significant portion comprising architectural and construction marvels from the Renaissance through to the mid-20th century. Among the most salient are archaeological gems, including registered settlements spanning prehistory to the late Middle Ages. These encompass sanctuaries, fortresses, temples, necropolises, and numerous burial mounds.

Among these, 13 individual objects (such as Vrana Palace, Seslav Monastery, Boyan Church, and more) and 2 group sites (Central Historical Core of Sofia and Borisova Garden) have earned inclusion in the Register of the World and national importance—a total of 165 such sites in

Bulgaria. Of special note are the well-preserved remnants of ancient Serdika and medieval Sredets, some of which have been meticulously restored and displayed within the city's central precincts. The most iconic site, St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, emblematic of the capital, also beckons tourists.

Moreover, three reserves, including "Serdika – Sredets," Boyanska Church, and Borisova Garden, feature on the landscape as territories meriting heightened territorial planning protection. Among these, the Church of Boyana, listed as No. 42 on UNESCO's World Cultural and Natural Heritage roster, is the sole representative of the Capital Municipality. The frescoes adorning the Rotunda "St. George" and the Kremikovsky Monastery church stand out as exceptionally preserved specimens of medieval Bulgarian artistry.

In addition, public gardens like Alexandrovska (now the city garden) and Borisova Garden, as well as the "Vrana" park, are all cultural heritage entities, emblematic of the late 19th-century urban evolution. The [Metropolitan Municipality \(2009\)](#) is also home to a constellation of 27 museums, 4 state cultural institutes centered on music and dance, 6 institutes devoted to theatrical arts, and 4 municipal theaters. The cultural landscape is further enriched by 4 national, 3 municipal galleries, and numerous private art galleries, alongside a vibrant network of over 120 community centers. Within the realm of intangible cultural heritage, the group known as the "Bistryka grandmothers" is a distinctive presence.

In sum, the cultural heritage of Sofia is an intricate tapestry woven through centuries, offering a myriad of enriching experiences for tourists and locals alike.

**Fostering Sofia as an Emblematic Smart Destination:** The evolution of Sofia as a distinct urban and cultural tourism hub necessitates the cultivation and promotion of iconic urban locales rooted in its wealth of tourism resources. Establishing a resonant, genuine, and favorable image of Sofia stands as a foundational prerequisite for competitive positioning within global tourist markets. The overarching aspiration is for Sofia to ascend as a preeminent regional and international tourist magnet—offering resonant and transformative tourist encounters, underpinned by a rich historical and cultural backdrop, coupled with elevated service standards.

This vision seamlessly aligns with the concept of Smart Destination, as delineated by the European Union. At its core, this approach entails facilitating tourism and hospitality offerings, spaces, and experiences through the strategic deployment of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Such investment bolsters the city's intellectual capabilities and augments visitor engagement, ultimately benefiting businesses and individuals by fostering more streamlined infrastructure and service delivery.

Notably, the centrality of experiences in driving the tourism sector and shaping tourists' contentment and intent to revisit is paramount. This aspect poses a critical challenge for destination management organizations, necessitating a profound exploration of the underlying motives prompting travel. This elucidation forms the bedrock for enhancing the provisioning of positive tourism experiences ([Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015](#)).

Contrary to conventional paradigms, experiential value doesn't solely emanate from service providers or tourists themselves. It finds its genesis within a broader social and spatial framework ([Hoarau & Kline, 2014](#)). Additionally, experiences can germinate during the service process,

but remain beyond an organization's direct control (Juttner et al., 2013), maturing at any juncture during the interactive engagement (Mascarenhas et al., 2006).

Furthermore, travel transpires as a creative process, enabling tourists to amplify their experiences by immersing in local cultures (Richards & Wilson, 2007). These encountered locales and cultures serve as conduits linking tourists to various stakeholders – ranging from service providers and governments to local communities. Collectively, they mediate the experiential process, intertwined with tourists' visits, by actively participating in tourism management (Wang et al., 2012).

In a rapidly evolving landscape, the trajectory of tourism remains unpredictable—an amalgamation of technology, communication, velocity, and sentiment. It is technology that propels this swift metamorphosis. Tourist cities, endowed with multifarious experiential prospects during visits, pave the way for myriad developmental avenues worth exploration (Emilova, 2021). This journey toward elevated urban tourism, backed by technological progress, stands emblematic of the remarkable transformation currently unfolding in Sofia.

**The Imperative for Comprehensive Resource Analysis in Facilitating Tourist Experiences in Sofia:** From the discourse thus far, it becomes evident that meticulous and rigorous scrutiny of Sofia's potential resources and avenues for delivering immersive tourist experiences is paramount. This necessitates an in-depth exploration of the diverse opportunities Sofia can harness to cater to tourists seeking captivating encounters.

With regard to dissecting visits to Sofia, insights from the *Global Metrics research (2021)* underscore that a substantial majority of foreign tourists (70%) partake in a solitary visit to the destination, with a mere 5% to 14% venturing back for repeated visits (ranging between one to three times). This dynamic suggests a susceptibility to sustaining interest and cultivating return visits—an incongruity vis-à-vis contemporary destination development trends that underscore the significance of nurturing tourist loyalty and boosting economic efficacy. Moreover, Sofia continues to maintain a comparatively budget-friendly standing in comparison to other European Union capitals, gauged by average overnight prices.

Preceding the pandemic's onset, the trend conspicuously portrayed a predominance of tourists embarking on leisure and sightseeing trips. However, in the post-pandemic epoch, there has been an observable shift, with a growing share of tourists pursuing visits or transit. Notably, a profound potential is discernible in attracting business-oriented tourists, and Sofia possesses substantial infrastructure assets to this end. Enriching access to mountainous terrain and mineral springs could also contribute to enhancing the diversity of experiences for business travelers. The city's allure lies in its exceptional fusion of historical artifacts spanning diverse epochs, architecture exemplifying manifold styles, urban and suburban attractions, and auditory and gustatory pleasures—ultimately culminating in a harmonious amalgamation of ancient heritage and contemporary vitality, a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures.

In summation, the venture to craft profound, memorable, and diverse experiences for tourists in Sofia necessitates a scrupulous analysis of the city's inherent potential. This approach entails not only the accentuation of Sofia's captivating historical and cultural richness but also an intricate weaving of contemporary amenities and accessibility into the visitor experience—a journey that aligns with the aspirations of the city to perpetuate its reputation as an iconic, magnetic, and unforgettable destination.

**The Multifaceted Tapestry of Sofia's Urban Spaces – A Canvas for Authentic Experiences:** Viewed through the prism of Sofia's spatial diversity, a rich tapestry of parks and gardens, some adorned with remarkable flora, beckons. This verdant landscape intersects with the strata of diverse cultures that bear witness to the ancient history that has shaped the city. Additionally, the city is ensconced by mountains, offering vistas that beckon exploration, although accessibility remains an avenue for potential enhancement. Further accentuating this panorama are the myriad contemporary dining and entertainment establishments, fostering a vibrant nightlife and gastronomic exploration. The retail landscape adds to this allure, offering ample opportunities for shopping tourism. Through this nuanced analysis, it becomes evident that Sofia represents a captivating blend of epochs and styles, unveiling breathtaking vistas that facilitate boundless opportunities for authentic experiences within an urban milieu.

Sofia's allure as a tourist hotspot, in turn, substantially influences its appeal for scientific and business pursuits. The cityscape boasts a slew of business hotels, primarily nestled in the heart of the metropolis, while numerous international corporations also maintain their presence within the country. An imperative herein is the implementation of incentivizing measures to prolong tourist stays, augment individual expenditures, and elevate the city's profile. In the context of economic efficiency, it becomes crucial to outline a vision for the city's management in the sphere of sustainable tourism development. This might involve contemplating the balance between catering to a larger influx of mass tourists or focusing on a smaller, yet higher-spending demographic characterized by prolonged stays. Notably, the fundamental tenets outlined in the sectoral Strategy for Sofia's tourism development spanning 2017 to 2030 ([National Development Programme Bulgaria 2030, 2020, p. 111](#)) are closely tied to the pursuit of long-term economic efficacy. These guiding principles underscore the importance of sustainable practices, environmental stewardship, social compatibility, democratic participation, transparent decision-making, partnerships, and fostering a distinctive local identity, interwoven with community and regional values.

In sum, the mosaic of Sofia's urban spaces encompasses not only geographical landscapes but also cultural narratives, echoing epochs and legacies, making it an alluring tableau for a diverse array of experiences. The city's potential as a thriving tourism destination intrinsically intertwines with its appeal as a hub for scholarly pursuits and business endeavors, emphasizing the need for strategic vision to ensure that the pursuits of all these facets harmonize and amplify Sofia's allure on the global stage.

**Harnessing Bulgaria's Tourism Potential – A Blueprint for Sustainable Growth:** Undoubtedly, the National Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria 2014-2030 demands our attention, as it charts a course for the nation's tourism trajectory. This blueprint underscores the pivotal role played by Bulgaria's multifaceted tourism opportunities in fueling its progress. Foremost among its imperatives is the cultivation of distinct identities for individual locales through branding. This approach is envisioned to bolster the recognition of each region among current and prospective tourists, fostering a deep-seated emotional bond between the locale, the nation, and the visitor.

This strategic focus on positioning and marketing holds the potential to catalyze a profound connection, nurturing a sense of place and cultural resonance. Notably, it stands to enhance the efficacy of both strategic planning and tactical initiatives in advertising and promotion. By tailoring these efforts to specific tourism niches and targeting discerning market segments, a

harmonious interplay between destination appeal and visitor preference can be achieved. This finely calibrated approach accommodates segmentation both by country and by interests, thus aligning tourism offerings with diverse consumer needs.

In this continuum of strategic initiatives, the marketing strategy for the Sofia tourist region for 2021-2024 unfurls an ambitious vision ([National Development Programme Bulgaria 2030, 2020, p. 111](#)). This vision outlines the pursuit of a prominent standing on the European and global cultural calendar. The overarching goal is to establish the Sofia tourist region as an irresistible cultural and distinctive destination, characterized by year-round availability of both business and cultural tourism. Central to this identity is Sofia's captivating amalgamation of diverse eras, styles, landscapes, resonant sounds, and flavors.

In essence, these strategies underscore a meticulous orchestration, whereby Bulgaria's tourism potential is harnessed through strategic branding and targeted marketing. This integrated approach seeks not only to showcase the nation's cultural richness but also to foster an enduring connection between visitors and the myriad treasures Bulgaria offers, thus propelling sustainable tourism growth on both the regional and global stages.

### **3. THE POWER OF EXPERIENCES IN MODERN TOURISM**

In the contemporary landscape of tourism, destinations are actively embarking on initiatives to craft compelling attractions aimed at luring visitors. This strategic pursuit is geared towards diversifying the tourist experience and curating a distinct product that resonates with consumers. In a world characterized by globalization, the quest for a unique identity and unparalleled encounters has impelled destinations to innovate, fabricate, and establish novel concepts, sites, facilities, and experiences that are readily identifiable and enticing. In today's context, it is paramount for destinations to offer an exclusive tourism offering that can only be "experienced" within their specific boundaries ([Misheva, 2019](#)).

Gone are the times when tourism revolved solely around leisure or business ventures. In the contemporary milieu, the driving forces behind travel motivation are intrinsically linked to the pursuit of authentic, unfiltered experiences. Tourist journeys have transcended the conventional notion of visiting desired landmarks; they have evolved into vehicles for uncovering the unfamiliar, embracing the exotic, and empathizing with foreign cultures and societies. Modern visitors increasingly yearn to actively partake in the everyday lives of local inhabitants, immersing themselves in their customs and lifestyles. This shift necessitates an innovative, creative approach to tourism management, particularly within the realm of experiential travel. Here, the emphasis lies in forging diverse avenues, business models, and lasting assets for the industry.

Integral to this paradigm is the concept of experience, which is intimately interwoven with knowledge, memories, and emotions. Often eluding precise description, the experience transcends mere physical and sensory perception, making it a profound and cherished aspect of travel. It is profoundly influenced by the quality of the product and how it is conceived. From interactions with local culture and guides to impressions of the destination, these elements coalesce to shape an experience that imparts added value to the journey. The tactile engagement with artifacts, the reenactment of historical events, the narratives shared by locals, and their traditional crafts – all contribute to etching lasting memories in the minds of travelers. Crafting these experiences is a multifaceted and subjective endeavor that lies at the core of the tourism product ([Emilova, 2021](#)).

In essence, the contemporary tourism landscape is undergoing a transformative shift towards a more experiential dimension. Destinations are no longer mere locales to visit; they are immersive playgrounds for cultivating memories, forging connections, and engaging with cultures. This strategic pivot underscores the profound impact of experiential travel on the industry, where the intangible and the unforgettable take precedence over conventional tourism paradigms.

**Constructing a Conceptual Model of Tourism Product Core in Sofia: Embracing Experiences (Fig. 1):** The development of a robust conceptual model that forms the nucleus of Sofia's tourism product, firmly rooted in enriching visitor experiences (refer to Figure 1), thrives on the dynamic interaction and collaborative efforts of all vested stakeholders, each wielding a direct and/or indirect impact on the city's tourism evolution.

Central to this construct is the branding of the tourist destination and the seamless digitization of the tourism product. This pivotal foundation draws inspiration from an array of strategic blueprints and initiatives, orchestrated by the public sector including the Ministry of Tourism, allied tourist associations and organizations, and the bustling local tourism industry. The seamless integration of these facets is pivotal in engineering a compelling identity for Sofia within the global tourism marketplace.

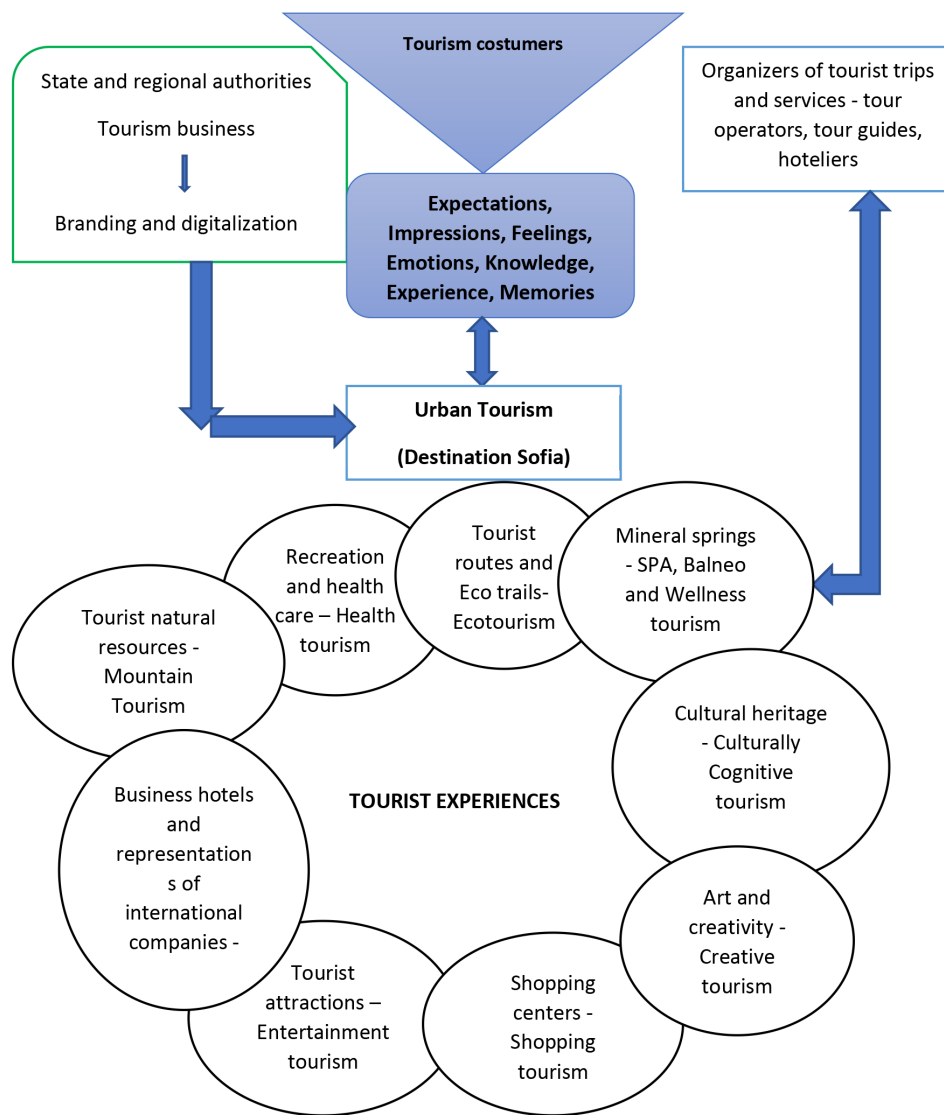
Crucially, the triumphant positioning of Sofia as an irresistible destination on the international stage is intricately intertwined with the shifting inclinations and desires of contemporary travelers, particularly Generation Z. This cohort is characterized by their penchant for immersive explorations, extended stays, and a pronounced impact on destination image through their extensive engagement on social media platforms. Notably, digital nomads, often extending their tenure in locales, play a dual role by actively partaking in destination promotion while simultaneously luring other travellers to follow suit.

**Constructing the Core of Sofia's Tourism Product through Experiences and Collaboration:** At the heart of this dynamic model lies the mutual collaboration between multifaceted contributors – the public sector, local businesses, technology-driven platforms, and the evolving preferences of travelers. Their interplay shapes Sofia into an alluring magnet for travelers who seek more than mere sightseeing – they yearn for memorable, immersive encounters that resonate deeply, influencing both the destination and its visitors.

To ensure the utmost satisfaction during a sojourn in a particular destination, it is imperative to engage all facets of a tourist's senses and, concomitantly, evoke a symphony of emotions. By orchestrating this sensorial symposium, an unparalleled voyage is curated, nurturing both an unforgettable experiential odyssey and a flourishing, financially viable tourist enterprise.

The essence of tourism experiences transcends mere fleeting moments; rather, they unfold across multiple strata, akin to an intricately woven tapestry. This art of crafting experiences typically unfolds across three pivotal stages: the emotional crescendo leading up to the journey, the immersive encounters during the expedition, and the poignant epilogue as the expedition concludes. Collectively, this journey through emotional landscapes constitutes the complete tapestry of the tourist's experience. Intriguingly, it is often observed that travellers often hold these experiences in greater esteem after they return to their abodes, reminiscing and relishing in the tapestry of memories woven.





**Figure. 1.** Conceptual model of the tourist experience in destination Sofia

Source: Authors

Notably, these experiences serve as a reservoir of impressions, akin to a sonic record, enabling tourists to juxtapose, contrast, and contextualize their encounters. It is these records that sculpt their expectations and mold their travel aspirations, acting as the catalyst for future voyages. Provoking a whirlwind of emotions in tourists, through compelling narratives, profound connections, indelible memories, and surprises, encapsulates the bedrock of crafting compelling tourist experiences. As they journey back home with these intangible treasures, they become storytellers in their own right, sharing their authentic, unfiltered impressions with friends and family, cementing the allure of their experiences.

**Crafting a Multisensory and Emotion-Stirring Tourist Experience:** Intricately intertwining sensory engagement and emotional resonance, the touristic sojourn transforms into a poignant voyage of the senses and sentiments. Such multi-layered experiences, echoing in the hearts and tales of the travelers, epitomize the pinnacle of successful and captivating tourism.

The rapidly evolving experience economy within the realm of tourism services underscores consumers' pursuit of enduring memories, emotions, and symbolism that coalesce into

comprehensive and lasting personal encounters (Prayag et al., 2017). This dynamic signals the obsolescence of traditional marketing paradigms that focus solely on functional attributes and product quality (e.g., Schmitt, 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Emilova, 2020)

It is noteworthy that tourists navigate a unidirectional, pre-structured flow of images and information before, during, and after their experiences. Framed within the purview of travel agencies, the potential unfolds for an entertainment and/or discovery model that inherently acknowledges the active role tourists play in shaping and orchestrating their experiences. Experience design emerges as an interplay involving tourism agencies, entities, municipalities, local authorities, and the very consumers partaking in the tourism journey. A systematic comprehension of tourists' spatial trajectories and the diverse array of activities they engage in becomes pivotal for urban planners in the tourism sector. This encompasses discerning where and when tourists traverse the landscape. While various studies suggest that many tourists predominantly adhere to pre-defined routes delineated in guidebooks, this should not be taken at face value when gauging urban events. Thus, it becomes imperative to scrutinize tourists' behaviors and intentions before, during, and after their experiences. Such scrutiny fosters a symbiotic connection and interaction between the experiential creation (management) and consumption facets of the tourism spectrum (Emilova, 2022).

#### 4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research endeavours stemming from this study could delve into the exploration and establishment of correlations and interdependencies between the offered tourist product within Sofia as a destination and the prospects for expanding the tourist market. This expansion could be facilitated through the introduction of novel destinations by existing airlines or the entry of new carriers operating at Sofia Airport.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The variety of experiences accessible through tourism in Sofia, Bulgaria is fundamentally woven from the rich concentration of natural and cultural tourism resources, an intricate cultural heritage, business and shopping recourses captivating itineraries within the surrounding areas, a multitude of entertainment venues and tourist attractions, and a canvas of opportunities for engaging in creative and health-centric recreational activities.

Our analysis findings have unequivocally underscored the value of diversifying tourism products and experiences to magnetize a diverse spectrum of tourists, consequently fostering robust and sustainable economic outcomes. The integration of tailored tourist routes, events, and programs tailored to specific tourist segments lends itself to optimal resource utilization within the destination and a consequential surge in tourism-generated revenue.

In summary, the integrated approach to crafting tourism experiences within Sofia, Bulgaria emerges as a potent paradigm for augmenting the economic yield of the destination. This synergy between distinctive attractions and tourists' desires serves as a potential blueprint for not only the evolution and enhancement of the tourism sector within other locales but also the orchestration of an intimate relationship between sustainable tourism growth and the preservation of the local cultural and natural milieu.

In closing, the framework of integrated tourism experiences nurtured in Sofia stands as a compelling model for catalyzing the economic potency of a destination by intertwining distinctive allurements with tourist demands. This model stands poised to not only inspire the evolution and enrichment of the tourism sector in other urban and regional settings but also underscore the importance of the symbiotic connection between sustainable tourism expansion and the guardianship of the indigenous cultural and environmental fabric.

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### Additional reading

- Emilova, I. (2023). Socio-cultural dimensions of urban tourism in the context of an experience economy. In Collection of scientific reports from the VI International Scientific and Practical Conference "Sociocultural Codes of Modern Development" - Plovdiv, 2023.
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