

Special Interest Tourism in the Czech Republic: Introduction and Overview

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Novotná, M., Frantál, B., Kunc, J., & Kubíčková, H. (2019). Special Interest Tourism in the Czech Republic: Introduction and Overview. *Czech Journal of Tourism*, 8(1), 49–63. DOI: 10.2478/cjot-2019-0004.

Abstract

The increasing importance of tourism and the growing number of tourists put pressure on tourist destinations. To support competitive and sustainable tourism development, it is advisable to focus on alternative forms of tourism in order to diversify tourism options in the destinations. From this point of view, it seems appropriate to deal with the issue of 'Special Interest Tourism' as a form of 'alternative', 'ethical', or 'environmentally responsible' tourism. The paper reflects the urgent need for sustainable tourism research. The aim of the paper is to provide the introduction and overview of the issue and outline perspectives that may open the way to future, more systematic research. The situation in the Czech Republic is based on the mapping of the current spatial distribution of selected special interest tourism attractions. The findings identify the possibilities for diversification of general (mass) tourism offers. The metadata from the Czech and foreign metainformation systems and databases are used.

Keywords

adventure, creativity, entertainment, industrial heritage, sustainability, tourism

JEL classification: O13, Z32

Introduction

Tourism, as one of the largest global industries, is a significant energy consumer and a contributor to the increase in carbon emissions and climate change (Becken & Simmons, 2002; Becken et al. 2003; Whittlesea & Owen, 2012). Apart from the negative global environmental consequences (Gössling, 2002; Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2013), tourism as an energy consumer causes local environmental impacts, such as deforestation or water deficiency, which are critical especially for remote or island communities (e.g., Tabatchnaia-Tamirisa, Loke, Leung, & Tucker, 1997; Nepal, 2008). The inflows of tourists can put significant pressure on transport infrastructure, water resources, and on public finances (OECD, 2018). In the last three decades, tourism has been also significantly affected by the displays of economic and cultural globalization (Gössling, 2002; Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2013). The impacts brought other serious environmental, social, and economic problems. The most frequently mentioned impacts are the negative effects of increased concentration of people in small space, traffic overexposure, increased consumption and energy inconvenience, problems with supply and cleaning of garbage, and also irreversible changes in natural and cultural landscape (e.g., Tabatchnaia-Tamirisa et al., 1997; Nepal, 2008). In response to this unsustainable tourism development, the international tourism organizations have focused on key policy and governance reforms in tourism.

As a result of consumer demand and managerial concerns based on ethics as well as economics, the tourism industry has come under pressure in recent years to become more environmentally friendly (Baker, Davis, & Weaver, 2014; Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2013). In this sense, tourism has come to the fore in promoting some innovative clean energy solutions, such as applying energy-saving systems in accommodation facilities, implementing solar heating and air-conditioning technologies (Michalena & Tripanagnostopoulos, 2010), or using waste from tourist attractions for renewable energy production (Shi et al., 2013).

Similarly, the current EU's tourism initiatives are closely linked to supporting competitive and sustainable growth in the tourism sector and the co-financing of sustainable tourism projects to diversify tourism options in Europe (e.g., DESTI-SMART project addressing challenges for efficient sustainable tourism). From this point of view, the paper is designed to reflect the urgent need for sustainable tourism research and broaden the existing knowledge about special interest tourism as an alternative form of tourism in the Czech Republic. The aim of the paper is not to give a comprehensive conceptualization of the phenomenon nor to map all existing forms and regional resources of the special interest tourism in the Czech Republic, but rather to provide the introduction and overview of the issue and outline perspectives that may open the way to future, more systematic research.

Theoretical background

The destinations face challenges in managing tourism flows and preventing or mitigating the negative impact of tourism on cities, beaches and other natural wonders, and on quality of life of host communities (Page, 2014; Dioko & So, 2017; Gössling et al., 2018). In this context, the buzzwords such as ‘overtourism’, ‘tourismphobia’, ‘airbnbsation’ or ‘demarketing’ have become commonly used in the research studies on tourism, reflecting the problems of unsustainable tourism development, excess of the destination carrying capacity, the destruction of the physical, economic, and socio-cultural environment, or imbalance between the interests of local residents and tourists (e.g., Postma & Schmuecker, 2017; Guttentag & Smith, 2017; Butler, 2018; Seraphin et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the rapidly growing tourism industry still creates different opportunities for destinations, their visitors, and businesses. To overcome the mentioned problems of some destinations, it is advisable to focus on new activities and alternative forms of tourism (Wall et al., 2017). Concerning this claim, the potential for sustainable tourism development and further research directions lies beyond the mass tourism typical of its large-scale sold standardized products. Here is space for the focus on alternative forms of tourism, based on highly individualized services and the satisfaction of unique experiences (Benur & Bramwell, 2015), which to some extent derive from the principles of sustainable tourism, characterized by an environmentally friendly way of travelling, the authenticity of experiences, and positive relationship with the host community (Sims, 2009).

Bridging the gap between those ‘pains of tourism development’ and research interest in alternative tourism approaches, it seems appropriate to study new tourism patterns and motivations and deal with the issue of Special Interest Tourism as a form of ‘alternative’, ‘ethical’ or ‘environmentally responsible’ tourism (Hall & Weiler, 1992). According to Hall and Weiler (1992), special interest tourism occurs when the tourists’ motivation and decision-making are primarily determined by a particular special interest with a focus either on activities and/or destinations and settings. Smith, Macleod, and Robertson (2010) defined special interest tourism as travelling with the primary motivation of practising or enjoying a special interest. It also reflects new tourism consumption patterns, increasing the diversity of interests of the late-modern leisure society (Douglas, Douglas, & Derret, 2001; Sousa, 2018) and highly differentiated tourists’ needs and motivations (Dwyer et al. 2008). It takes into account new social values, such as the increased importance of outdoor activities, awareness of ecological problems, educational advances, aesthetic judgement and improvement of self and society (Hall & Weiler, 1992; Trauer, 2006).

The ‘special interest tourists’ are also experienced, extroverted and adventuresome people in search of novel experiences and destinations. Unlike the mass tourists, they travel in smaller groups, participate in more activities, are members of middle to upper-income groups, and have lower price sensitivity (Brotherton & Himmetoglu, 1997). Several studies have reported that the majority of tourists are willing to tolerate additional fees for technologies and services that might help offset the environmental impacts of

their activities (Dalton, Lockington, & Baldock, 2008; Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010; Kelly et al., 2007; Kostakis & Sardinou, 2012). However, others have found that despite the tourists' declared positive attitudes towards sustainable tourism, only a few act accordingly by buying responsible products and choosing environmentally friendly transportation (Budeanu, 2007; Dolnicar, Crouch, & Long, 2008). Baker, Davis, and Weaver (2014) also suggest that tourists usually behave with greater environmental responsibility at home than they do when staying at a hotel.

Exploring tourists' and operators' motivations and the barriers to adopting innovative technologies and practices to reduce the number of natural resources and energy consumed (and wastes and pollutants discharged) in the production of tourism services remains one of the major challenges in tourism studies (Becken, 2013). The recent study of Ma, Kirilenko, and Stepchenkova (2020) emphasized that large share of tourists involved in what is understood as special interest activities actually exhibit behaviour and profile characteristic of mass tourists seeking novelty but conscious about risks and comforts.

Geographical context, methods and data

In recent 20 years, the importance of tourism as a social and economic phenomenon has been rising in the Czech Republic (Vystoupil & Kunc, 2009). The open-market economy has offered a range of opportunities for further development. On the other hand, the most attractive places (e.g., Prague, Český Krumlov) suffer from congestion and overcrowding.

From this point of view, it is necessary to reflect challenges of managing growing tourism flows and initiate the activities in basic research, as well as in the theoretical and methodological approaches. Therefore, the paper aims at mapping the current spatial distribution of special interest tourism potential in the Czech Republic. It promotes tourism diversification which prevents economic, social, and environmental conflicts related to the negative impacts of tourism. Tourism Atlas of the Czech Republic (Vystoupil et al., 2006) takes into consideration geographical prerequisites, natural and cultural attractiveness and tourism potential for the main forms of tourism (urban tourism, waterside recreation, mountain tourism, or spa tourism). The results of this paper contribute to extending the current knowledge on tourism attractiveness focusing on the potential for development of new alternative forms of recreation and tourism in the Czech conditions.

Data from the Czech Statistical Office, and from the databases of the National Heritage Institute, the National Information and Consulting Centre for Culture, Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic, and other tourism-related websites are used for a regional comparative analysis. Based on the synthesis of the data and the given broad definition of the special interest tourism phenomenon, only five main types and their alternative examples are presented in detail below:

- Entertainment tourism;
- Adventure tourism;
- Nature tourism;

- Cultural tourism;
- Industrial tourism.

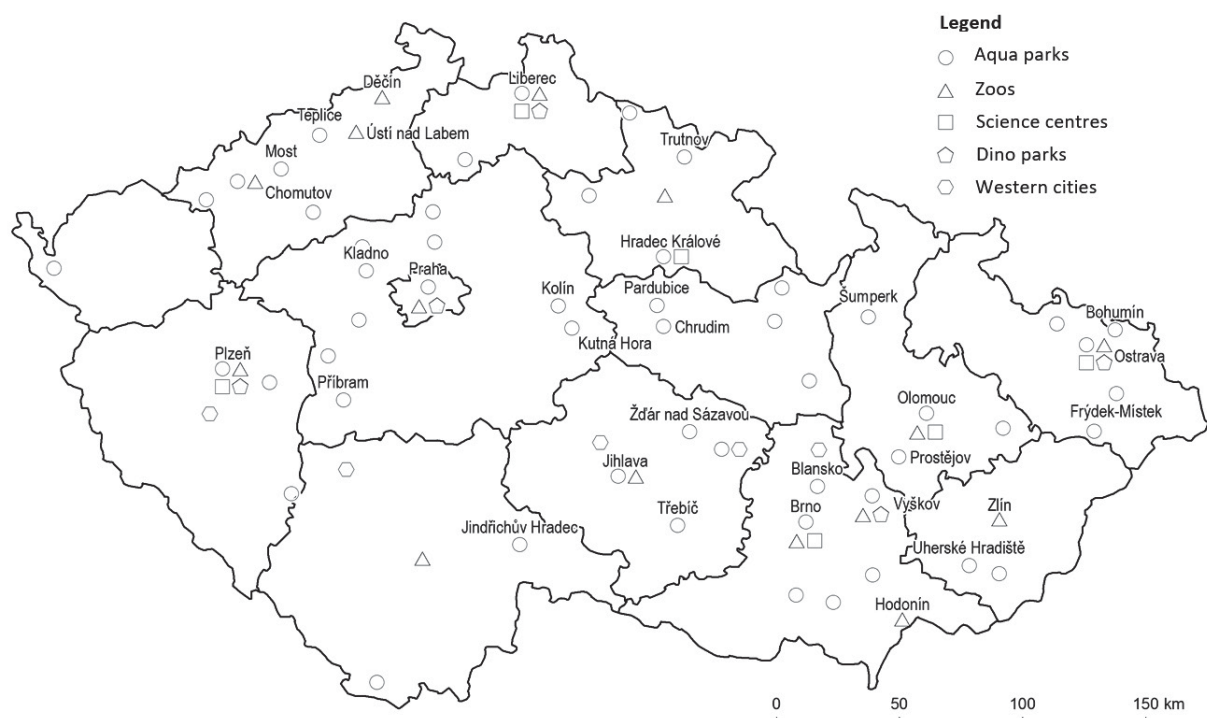
Potential and attractions of special interest tourism in the Czech Republic

Entertainment tourism

Special interest tourism involves the forms of tourism that focus on specific cultural and/or natural resources and attractions. The special interest tourists also have certain specific characteristics and their attention turns to more fulfilling leisure. This trend is invoked, for example, by entertainment industries. The entertainment industry in the Czech Republic is in the beginning (Howie, 2003). The number as well as the size of the amusement parks and their facilities and level differ from Western Europe.

The Czech Republic is characterized by a number of zoos, aqua parks, science centres, entertainment resorts in the style of the Wild West (so-called western cities), and a series of small amusement parks, of which the so-called Dinoparks are the most popular. On the other hand, there is a potential for further development and expansion of these parks. The expansion of the entertainment industry in the Czech Republic can be supported by a number of brownfields that may be suitable for the future construction of amusement parks (Novotná et al., 2018). Figure 1 depicts the spatial distribution of the entertainment industry in the Czech Republic.

Figure 1 Potential of entertainment industry in the Czech Republic



Source: Novotná et al. (2018)

Adventure tourism

The search for entertainment can lead the special interest tourists to performing extraordinary adventurous activities. This adventurous tourist motivation is about gaining new experiences (Smith, Macleod, & Robertson, 2010). Hot air balloon flying could be considered as a non-standardised and unusual activity, which attracts a small number of visitors. The development of similar niche products contributes to diversification and capturing new and more profitable markets (Novelli, 2005). This form of flying is usually occasional, takes place in various places and mostly in the vicinity of important tourist destinations (Karlštejn Castle in the Czech Republic, the rock city of Cappadocia in Turkey, the Pyramids of Giza or the Palace of Luxor, Egypt).

Sightseeing flights using a smaller balloon with a capacity of, for example, 6 seats (as opposed to large-capacity balloons with seats for up to 24 people), which take place in less touristified regions can be also associated with other, gentle forms of tourism. For those, who are interested in this activity, the specialised centres offer all the services needed for ballooning. They are as follows:

- Garage or parking area where the balloon trolley can be left;
- Refuelling station;
- Accommodation and catering;
- Basic spare parts and tools for maintenance and minor repairs;
- Auxiliary crew, if necessary.

There are currently two centres in the Czech Republic in operation during the flight season and they provide the above-mentioned services:

- ‘Balon centrum Břestek’: baloncentrum.eu; at the foot of the Chřibý Mountains, part of the Central Moravian Carpathians;
- ‘Balonový zámek Radešín’: balonovyzamek.cz; chateau in the Vysočina Region, part of the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands.

Subsequently, several operators ensure passenger sightseeing flights, but they have potential for being a full-service centre in the future. They are as follows:

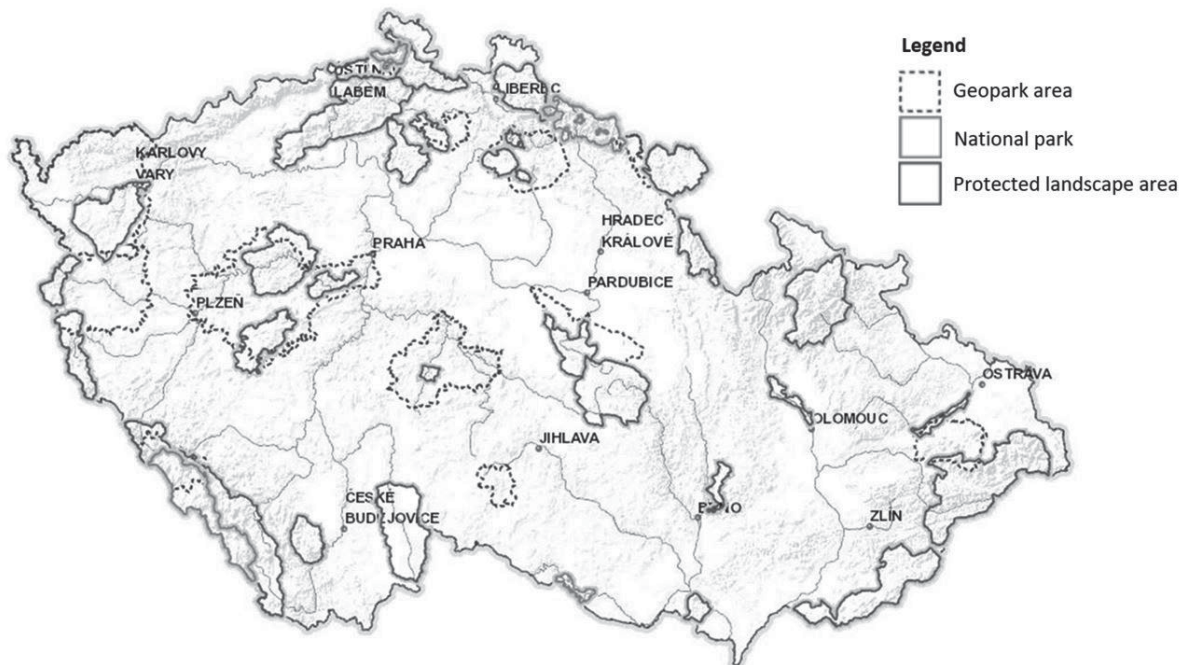
- ‘Ballon Penzion’: balloonpenzion.cz; in Pálava Protected Landscape Area, within a UNESCO biosphere reserve located in Moravia;
- Slapy Balloon Fiesta in Chotilsko: ic-chotilsko.cz; in the Central Bohemian Region;
- Company Aeronautik Praha operating in Krusičany village: aeronautik.cz; in the Central Bohemian Region on Sázava river.

The above examples show that these balloon centres are located in less populated areas and enable customers to see less touristified destinations and admire natural beauty.

Nature tourism

Natural areas have become popular for people who want to take a break from their busy urban lives. The natural potential as a critical localization factor for recreation activities is determined by geomorphological, climatic, hydrological, and biogeographical conditions. The recreational potential of natural areas is suitable for the development of health tourism and for satisfying people's physical, mental, social, cultural, economic, and physiological needs (Cetin & Sevik, 2015). In the Czech Republic, most of the natural attractions are protected by some degree of protection. Natural parks, protected landscape areas, and other places attract visitors, cyclists, and pedestrians. The recreational potential of the nature-based tourist destinations is depicted in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Recreational potential of nature-based tourist destinations



Source: Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic (2019)

The geoparks help to protect geoheritage by promoting its values and importance. The geoparks not only promote geological heritage, but also increase public awareness of Earth sciences and support special tourism and regional sustainable development (Dowling, 2013). The Czech Republic contains a wide range of geological, mineralogical and archaeological areas and contains some of the most interesting landscapes (Kubalíková, 2018). The Czech Geoparks network includes the following areas:

- Bohemian paradise geopark as the only National geopark that became the first Czech member Global Geopark Networks;
- Železné hory Geopark; in English, the Iron Mountains Geopark, situated in the Pardubice Region, and partly in the Vysočina Region, provides natural resources, cultural and historical sights, unique museums and numerous possibilities for sport and recreation;
- GeoLocí Geopark; a part of the international Czech-Bavarian Geopark, with a high heat flow, thermal springs and seismic activity;
- Egeria Geopark is also a part of the international Czech-Bavarian Geopark, benefiting from mining history, geological places of interest, mineral springs, balneology, mineralogical localities, and palaeontological findings;
- Blaník Knights County Geopark; promoting a famous legend of the army of knights sleeping inside Blaník mountain and enhancing local products and services;
- Podbeskydí Geopark; located in the Western Carpathians; with geologically, geomorphologically and historically rich potential;
- Ralsko Geopark; increases the recreational function of this area, situated in the underdeveloped region, focusing on historical mining, iron production, and the interpretation of geological heritage and sustainable tourism;
- Broumovsko Geopark; with large rock cities and unique sacral and folk architecture, aiming at dispersing visitors because of suffering from overtourism in some sites;
- Vysočina Geopark; located in the Czech-Moravian Highlands; with varied rock outcrops, stone seas, abandoned and active granite quarries, promoting the sustainable approach to landscape and cultural heritage.

Cultural tourism

Cultural heritage is very often used for tourism consumption. From this perspective, tourism puts pressure on cultural potential of cultural sites and historical centres. Especially in Europe, overtourism is a perceived threat to cultural heritage. This threat is generally higher in cities in comparison with rural areas (Adie, Falk, & Savioli, 2019). The special interest tourists do not usually attend traditional sightseeing tours because they prefer being involved into the destination's daily life. From this point of view, authenticity and creativity represent the main resources for sustainable tourism development. The cultural and creative sectors are one of the most dynamic branches of the EU economy, fostering innovation, growth and job creation as well as social cohesion (Montalto et al., 2019). The creative industries have been at the forefront of many regeneration programmes in urban areas, as contributor to the regeneration and branding of creative cities (OECD, 2014).

The cultural and creative assets of the Czech Republic are:

- Prague, leading in vibrancy, offering hundreds of concert halls, museums, galleries, movie theatres, music clubs, and internationally acclaimed festivals;

- Brno with a rich cultural life and a number of cultural venues and facilities;
- Ostrava, a European Capital of Culture in 2015, hosting the biggest international music festival in the Czech Republic;
- Karlovy Vary, a multicultural city, hosting the International Film Festival, which is a leading film event in Central and Eastern Europe;
- Pilsen, taking the opportunity to make derelict or under-used industrialised spaces in the city available to cultural and creative professionals and both start-ups and established companies.

Industrial tourism

The socio-economic transformation has led to the desire of discovering a new cultural heritage relating to the industrial era, including heavy and mining industries (Jelen, 2018). From this point of view, industrial sites could be included within the broader framework of heritage tourism (Edwards & Coit, 1996). Mining tourism is related to geotourism and often it is an important issue of geopark's tourist offer (Conlin & Jolliffe, 2010).

Many former industrial and mining areas have lost their industrial function and are now trying to attract tourists' interest. Some researchers believe that the development of industrial heritage tourism increases the chances of the sustainability (Jonsen-Verbeke, 1999). Industrial heritage tourism, as an alternative form of tourism, can diversify the tourist product and meaningfully extend the tourist season.

According to previous surveys with industrial companies (e.g., Otgaar, 2012), the most important reasons for firms to offer tours for tourists are (1) to improve their image (especially for industries trying to counter negative publicity) and get closer to customers, understanding better what they want and gaining a stronger brand loyalty, (2) to help attract new employees and improve the working morale of current employees, and (3) to generate extra income (via ticket sales, gift shop merchandising, restaurants, etc.).

The industrialisation of the Czech lands started in the middle of the 19th century. The landowners not only modernised the agricultural production but also established the food industry, the brewing industry, and invested in the textile, mining, and iron industries (ERIH, 2019). The European Route of Industrial Heritage (ERIH), tourism information network of industrial heritage in Europe, reflects the importance of industrial heritage tourism as a special interest tourism form. On its websites, it presents over 1,850 sites from all European countries, incl. about 40 Czech industrial heritage sites of historical importance, offering a high quality visitor experience. Table 1 below provides a list of the presented Czech attractions.

Table 1 The European Route of Industrial Heritage in the Czech Republic

REGION	ATTRACTION
Central Bohemian Region	Czech Museum of Silver in Kutná Hora
	Local Brewery and a Baroque Castle in Lobeč
	Škoda Auto Museum in Mladá Boleslav
	Museum of Mining in Příbram
	Mining Exhibition Chrštenice Shaft in Loděnice u Berouna
	Open Air Museum of the Solvay Quarries in Loděnice u Berouna
	Railway Museum in the Village Zlonice
	Mayrau Open Air Museum of Mining in Vinařice
	Czech Railways Museum in Lužná u Rakovníka
Hradec Králové Region	Textile Museum in Česká Skalice
	The Railway Museum at Jaroměř
	Buhumir Copper Mine in Žacléř
Karlovy Vary Region	Mariánské Lázně Town Museum
	Moser Glass Factory & Museum in Karlovy Vary
	Museum of the Mining Region Sokolov
	Mining Museum in Krásno in the Slavkov Forest
Liberec Region	Jizera Mountains Technical Museum in Hejnice
	Museum of Glass & Jewellery in Jablonec nad Nisou
Moravian-Silesian Region	Tatra Technical Museum in Kopřivice
	Michal Mining Museum and Cultural Centre in Ostrava
	Mining Museum Landek Park in Ostrava
	Science and Technology Centre in Dolní Vítkovice
Olomouc Region	Paper Mill in Velké Losiny in the Jeseník Mountains
Plzeň Region	Pilsner Urquell Brewery and Museum in Plzeň
Prague	Old Waste Water Treatment Plant in Prague in the Střešovice Depot
	Prague Public Transport Museum
	Prague Waterworks Museum on the Bank of the Vltava River
	National Agricultural Museum
	National Technical Museum
South Bohemian Region	Power Plant Museum in Písek
	Graphite Museum in Český Krumlov
	Budweis Horse-drawn Railway in České Budějovice
	Schwarzenberg Navigation Museum in Chvalšiny
	Water Mill Slup in Jaroslavice

REGION	ATTRACTION
South Bohemian Region	Old Ironworks in Adamov
	Technical Museum in Brno
Ústí nad Labem Region	Teplice Spa with the Botanic Gardens
	Hop Museum in Žatec
Zlín Region	Museum of Shoemaking in Zlín

Source: ERIH (2019)

Discussion and conclusions

Special interest tourism and its relatively broad definition represent a white spot, providing opportunities for further research. The future special interest tourism research agenda includes a lot challenging issues, such as – for example – What is the potential of special interest tourism to become a significant niche within tourism industry?; How (whether really) special interest tourists differ from mass tourists?; What are the tourist operators' and companies' strategies to present their products and attract potential customers?; What is the impact of visiting special tourism attractions on individuals' experiences, attitudes and future travel behaviours?, etc.

Even though many special interest tourism attractions in Europe and specifically in the Czech Republic draw considerable numbers of tourists, it is a question whether they are able to generate a bigger contribution to local economies by motivating tourists to extend their stay and spend more money in the region or locality (e.g., Frantál & Urbánková, 2017). The cooperation between companies, tourist agencies and regional and local authorities seems to be a critical point for a more effective exploitation of special interest tourism potential in regions. Analysing the constraints of industrial tourism development, Otgaar (2012) emphasized that the interests of public and private actors are often fundamentally different or even conflictual concerning the number, composition, and spread of the flow of tourists and visitors.

McKercher and Chan (2005) even pointed out that much of the research documenting the size and importance of special interest tourism is based on secondary analysis of visitor survey data and presupposes the existence of a direct correlation between actions and motivations. They illustrated that the true importance of special interest tourism is many times overrated.

The paper provided the introduction and overview of the regional resources of the special interest tourism in the Czech Republic, that may open the way to future, more systematic research. The synthesis of the results could help to diversify general tourism offers and mitigate the over-dependence on 'traditional mass' tourism activities. The findings focused in detail on five selected types of special interest tourism: entertainment, adventure, nature, cultural, and industrial tourism.

The paper indirectly highlighted the importance of Vysočina Region in the context of nature and adventure tourism. Here is the potential of the Vysočina Region to become a competitive tourist destination. On the other hand, Prague, as a traditional destination for many tourists, can diversify its supply and ensure balanced tourism growth. Similarly, industrial heritage tourism in Central Bohemian Region, Moravian-Silesian Region, and South Bohemian Region provides cultural values with the aspect of sustainability.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by an internal grant of the Faculty of Economics and Administration, Masaryk University, entitled “Destination Sustainability under the Pressure of Global Tourism Trends” (MUNI/A/1166/2018).

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