Tourism Development along the Bulgarian Danube, Focus Region Ruse

DESTINATION: Danube Region and Ruse, Bulgaria
PARTNER: Bulgarian Ministry of Economy and Energy, Danube Competence Center (DCC), Belgrade

Background
The potential for tourism in Bulgaria’s Danube region and Ruse as an important economic factor was only recognized in the last few years. Meanwhile first efforts are being made to put these to value. However, the majority of tourism infrastructure in Bulgaria is still limited or under construction.

Tourism along the Bulgarian Danube region, especially the cruise sector might be growing quickly, but so far, tourism flows have focused on just a few touristic attractions and the length of stay of tourists in the Danube region is still rather short. This has resulted in a limited value-chain and therefore the majority of the communities along the Danube do not benefit enough from tourism.

The city of Ruse is situated at the edge of the Danube bordering Romania. It is situated 320 km away from the capital Sofia and 200 km away from Varna. With around 170,000 inhabitants Ruse is the fifth biggest city in Bulgaria. Its location by the Danube River has been a key determinant to the development of the city. The Danube poses a central but barely used potential for tourism development. Furthermore the region has a lot of natural and cultural attractions like the Nature Park Rusenski Lom with diverse biodiversity and UNESCO World Heritage Site, the rock-hewn churches of Ivanovo.

The future objective is to make use of such touristic potential, develop marketable products and create added value for the local community. Making use of the Danube’s natural resources, tourism products may include cultural-historic bicycle or trekking routes along the Danube and niche products such as bird or nature watching.

The Project
Since 2012, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) has been working on behalf of Germany’s Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to support the tourism development along the Bulgarian Danube. Together with the Bulgarian Ministry of Economy and Energy a flexible institutional setup entitled ‘Focal Point Destination Danube’ (FPDD) has been established. The FPDD is meant to strategically support sustainable and coordinated tourism development along the Bulgarian Danube. It facilitates communication and coordination for Bulgarian tourism stakeholders and stimulates ownership-driven change management. The long term objectives are to create synergies and strengthen the competitiveness of the entire Bulgarian Danube destination.

The FPDD consists of two strategic units: the ‘Focal Point – Policy and Coordination Unit’ in Sofia and the ‘Focal Point Service Unit’ in Ruse. In addition to the above mentioned tasks, the office in Sofia supports the coordination, monitoring and implementation of the EU Danube strategy as well as the Bulgarian tourism strategy. In Ruse the ‘Focal Point Service Unit’ works with the
tourism actors on site on the implementation of the tourism strategy for the entire Danube region. With support of the GIZ the FPDD carries out the following tasks:

- Fostering sustainable destination development
- Building a tourism network through encouraging dialogue and cooperation between individual stakeholders
- Support product development inter alia, linked and bordercrossing products
- Support marketing of the region, especially to foreign source markets
- Business consultancy services from experts
- Capacity building and training

To manage these tasks the FPDD in Ruse with support from GIZ has organized various networking events and workshops. This has facilitated tourism stakeholders to identify and communicate mutual interests, goals and needs. First joint projects and product ideas have already been generated.

In 2013 the FPDD financed and organized a Human Capacity Development measure for representatives from different tourism related organisations and several cities along the Bulgarian Danube; including representatives from two main actors in the Ruse region, the Rusenski Lom Nature Park and the Municipality. The participants visited best practice destinations and tourism organizations in Germany and Italy. With support from GIZ experts and external consultants, every participant had to construct a SWOT-Analysis of their region as well as their organization to deduce strategic suggestions. The participants were able to broaden their touristic expertise and will be given the opportunity to implement it in their organisations and regions.

In the course of cooperation with the Nature Park Rusenski Lom, the FPDD organized ‘Voluntary Camps’. Here many tourism stakeholders in the region are meant to get involved to lay the foundation of a new cooperation. Furthermore the FPDD and the GIZ consult the Nature Park with strategic decisions that affect tourism. Hence, the Park can benefit from the broad GIZ network that constitutes of diverse experts and associations.

Effects

The Municipality of Ruse is another important partner on site. With support of the FPDD and GIZ new ideas for touristic products with key focus on the Danube have been generated based on best-practice examples from other Danube cities.

The first successes of the projects of the FPDD are already visible and attest to the effectiveness of political and economic efforts. Due to such activities and trans-frontier conferences the FPDD is increasingly gaining recognition in the Bulgarian Danube region and increased acceptance of its goals. It has strengthened the competitiveness of Ruse and simultaneously further stimulated dialogue with other cities and regions along the Danube. Along the whole Danube FPDD partners want to work more closely together to transform the Danube region into a successful destination with attractive products.