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# COMMENCING THE GUIDED HIKE

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Background information about creating holiday packages along the Sultans Trail.



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THE SULTANS TRAIL FOUNDATION  
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## 1. Benefits of a partnership

### **Marketing cooperation.**

Cooperative marketing is when two different companies collaborate to develop a market together that is beneficial to both parties. Abou-Shouk (2019) describes this as an effective marketing strategy that aims to capitalize on business jointly. A joint marketing strategy is part of a strategic alliance that aims to work together on multiple levels. The generated value is for the whole group instead of one individual party.

Cooperating marketing efforts of companies could be particularly beneficial in the tourism industry and is an effective way to achieve both individual and shared goals (Abou-Shouk, 2019). Tourism products are fragmented by nature because holiday packages are created by combining products and services of multiple different tourism suppliers. Providers of flights, hotels, tourism attractions, and services are all part of the same value chain because they complement each other while being different independent companies. A strategic alliance could work for tourism products, promotion, sales, and/or distribution channels. It could increase the competitiveness and lower the marketing costs of individual parties. A collaboration like that could be especially beneficial for smaller companies due to the scarcity of resources. (Abou-Shouk, 2019).

A travel agency with the aim to extend their business efforts with a (thematic) hiking route could help the Sultans Trail with the promotion of its itinerary. In return, the Sultans Trail can provide the travel agency with a unique and potentially popular tourism product.

## 2. Components of a hiking holiday

### **Package description**

There are generally two types of holiday packages for hikers, a short hiking trip and a long hiking trip. The short trip is tends to be between 6 and 10 days, the duration of the long hiking trip is generally between 3 and 4 weeks, and occasionally longer. This falls in line with what most other tour operators offer and fit the different stages of the Sultans Trail well. An experienced hiker walks around 150km per week. This includes a day of rest, some time to explore appealing locations, and travel days. Because of the length of the segments of the Sultans Trail, a holiday package of 10 days most likely fits the market best. Most segments of the Sultans Trail are about 150km in length or a multiplication of it. Therefore, the foundation can provide the travel agency with a variety of potential holiday packages. According to Marin-Pantelescu (2019), a hiking holiday consists of the following components in order to provide a valuable tourism experience.

#### **1. Travel information for the tourist (Travel agency)**

Providing an extended and a clear description of how the tourist can reach his accommodation at the start point of the hiking holiday. Providing flight information and time schedules for busses and trains should be included if this is needed. If the package does not include travel, the travel agency should mention this on its website (Travel information, 2022).

**2. Quality accommodation with breakfast** (Travel agency)

The hiker walks on average between 20 and 25km per day and needs a relaxing and comfortable accommodation when he or she is not hiking. In order to ensure a comfortable room, the provided accommodation ought to be of high quality. Where this is possible, an equivalent of a 2 or 3-star hotel is preferable. Furthermore, breakfast is included to lower the burden for the hiker in the morning (Macs Adventure, 2022)

**3. Luggage transfer** (Travel agency)

The hiker shouldn't have to worry about unnecessary luggage during the hike. Besides a small backpack with the supplies and equipment for the hike, the hiker's baggage is delivered to the next possible accommodation. Companies specialized in luggage transfer are often available in popular hiking regions (Marco, 2020). Hikers without a holiday package can book a luggage transfer service for themselves, but the relative cost for the hiker is often lower when the service is part of a booked holiday.

**4. Welcome briefing with instructions** (Hiking organization & Travel agency)

Clear communication about what to expect during the holiday gives space for the guests to adjust their expectations which is essential for a high product valuation. Subsequently, this will reduce the possibility of concern and avoid a decrease in perceived quality. Quality assessment of the product and the perceived value by the consumer depends largely on the balance of benefit and sacrifice. Also, product valuation is the outcome of comparing tourist expectations with the received value (Sánchez, 2004). The valuation of the holiday will be lower when the tourist expectations aren't met and will be higher when the provided quality exceeds these expectations. Information before booking and a briefing before the holiday starts are essential for the hiker to create expectations that could be realized during the holiday. Preferably in multiple languages depending on the tourism market (Macs Adventure, 2022).

**5. Route information and GPS coordinates** (Hiking organization)

A route description, information signs along the path, paths, and track coordinates are tools for the hiker to reach the next destination. The purpose of the hiking holiday is to

provide the hiker with a unique experience in a comfortable environment. A well-defined description of the route makes this possible.

**6. Service hotline** (Travel agency)

A service hotline can be called for when the hiker encounters an emergency during the trip. It also gives the hiker a feeling of control over his vacation and reduces the risk for hikers to get missing during the hike. The message of the service hotline is also that the hiker can use the holiday to explore his or her limits because he always has the possibility to reach someone for assistance when necessary.

**7. Transfers** (Travel agency)

While the return transfer is optional for the travel agency to offer, it increases the hiker's flexibility to change plans if desired. Therefore, since hiking holidays can be unpredictable, the hiker has the possibility to arrange transportation to bring him to the next accommodation or back to the starting point. The service is generally not part of the package due to logistic concerns and must be booked separately.

**8. Additional tourist attractions** (Travel agency)

Occasionally the hiker visits a place and wants to stay a day longer or more to visit local tourist attractions. To make this possible, most travel agencies offer the possibility to extend your stay with extra days to explore the city. Guided tours, visiting a museum or exploring the city are an essential part of the overall tourism experience. Therefore, travel agencies should offer this possibility to increase the valuation of the holiday (Bering Travel, 2022).

Overall, what is necessary for the hiker to enjoy the holiday, and what can be arranged by the travel agency depends on multiple factors. Things as the hiking path, route popularity, hiking season, environment, and more influences demand and price. Normally, the travel agency provides customers a period in which the hiking holiday can be booked (EuroHike, 2022).

**Potential benefits**

Hiking organizations do not have ownership over the hiking route itself. Therefore, travel agencies can offer hiking tours without permission from the Sultans Trail. One of the most important strategic advantages of the hiking trail is its brandname which attracts hikers. For example, in exchange for developing a feasible holiday package for hikers, the Sultans Trail can offer advertisement space. This way, potential hikers of the Sultans Trail will be forwarded to the travel agency offering tours on this path. Offering together workshops and projects to enhance

each other's network is another form of collaborating in which both parties can benefit (Khovanova-Rubicondo, 2013).

### **Role of Travel agency**

While the Sultans Trail maintains the hiking route and functions as a supporting organization for what the travel agency offers, the travel agency has the expertise and resources to transform a segment of the long-distance hiking route into a holiday package. It knows how to negotiate efficiently with suppliers to get the best prices, how to attract the target group, how to sell to this customer, and how to create the best service experience for the customer. High customer satisfaction creates word-of-mouth marketing which is critical for the tourism industry. Hikers who are satisfied with the trail and service will recommend the activity in their social groups (Soleimani, 2018). Therefore, the travel agency should do most of the design of the tourism package based on the route and route information provided by the hiking organization. When the hiking trail is ready to be used for tourists, the travel agency can approach local entrepreneurs on the route to develop a tourism package (Khovanova-Rubicondo, 2013).

### **Role of the Sultans Trail**

The luxury offered by the travel agency is an extension of the hiking experience and therefore built upon the functionality of the existing hiking route. Foremost important, the Sultans Trail should have a segment of the hiking route which has the potential to be exploited by the travel agency. To do so, route information such as GPS coordinates, route description must be made available for the travel agency. Furthermore, the track must be ready to be hiked, and therefore, waymarking, a maintained path and information points are essentials for a finished hiking track (Eryurt, 2020). When the holiday is created by the travel agency, the role of the Sultans Trail is to maintain the paths, provide route information, and promote the hiking route and the travel agency on its website (Camino de Santiago, 2022) & (Via Francigena, 2022).

## **3. Hiking segments of the Sultans Trail**

### **Necessities per stage**

The proficiency of travel agencies in developing self-guided hikes is crucial for the Sultans. to have if the organization wants to have self-guided tours on its paths. Below is a short overview of the hiker's perspective of what is necessary to experience a high-quality holiday on the Sultans Trail. In this example, the route between Vienna and Bratislava is used as it is already a popular route for hikers and cyclists. Nonetheless, the perspective of the travel agency can be different due to internal structures and processes, such as border control and international crises. Also, while the Sultans Trail knows its hikers the best, they are likely to differ from the kind of customers the travel agency will attract. Because, people who book a self-guided hike online instead of walking the trail for themselves have a reason to do so. Probably this is because self-guided hikes are for

less experienced walkers or hikers who want comfort and service while hiking. For example, professional hikers of the Sultans Trail walk around 150km a week, while the distance of self-guided hikes offered by travel agencies depends on the difficulty of the segment. Below are three different tables giving the description of the five hiking difficulties coming from travel agencies that offer self-guided hikes in Europe. While the grades of difficulty are arbitrary, they show that the hiking routes have different degrees of difficulty. Based on this, the hiking route from Vienna to Bratislava would be a level 3 hiking trail.

Table 1

<b>Difficulty</b>	<b>Max distance per day</b>	<b>Per seven days</b>	<b>Max duration per day</b>	<b>Climbing/descending per day</b>
1/5	15km	105km	3-4 hours	100-400
2/5	20km	140km	4-5 hours	400-800
3/5	20km	140km	5-6 hours	800-1000m
4/5	25km	175km	6-7 hours	800-1200m
5/5	25km	175km	7-8 hours	1000-1500m

Source: (InnWalking, 2022)

Table 2

<b>Difficulty</b>	<b>Max distance per day</b>	<b>Per seven days</b>	<b>Max duration per day</b>	<b>Climbing/descending per day</b>
1/5	12km	84km	3-5 hours	-
2/5	15km	105km	4-6 hours	-
3/5	20km	140km	5-7 hours	-
4/5	30km	210km	6-9	-
5/5	> 30km	> 210km	8-10	-

Source: (The Natural Adventure, 2022)

Table 3

<b>Difficulty</b>	<b>Max distance per day</b>	<b>Per seven days</b>	<b>Max duration per day</b>	<b>Climbing/descending per day</b>
1/5	10-12km	70-84km	< 5 hours	500m
2/5	16-18km	112-126km	5-8 hours	1000m
3/5	25km	175km	8-9 hours	1000m
4/5	20km	140km	10 hours	1000m
5/5	20km	140km	12 hours	1500m

Source: (Adventures, 2022)

Furthermore, the decision-making process for investing in local entrepreneurs depends on many different factors, such as the kind of businesses, the valuation process of potential investments, the spatiality of local power, availability of resources, and more. (Gorbuntsova, 2018). Often, some locals of rural societies are excited about the idea of tourism for the purpose of diversifying

income and starting a small business for these people is easy. But according Gorbuntsova (2018), “They are critical that the government is purposefully in opposition citing hidden bureaucratization, lack of advertising, and the absence of internet in some localities as ‘strategies’ to limit their success in obtaining grants.”. To counter this problem, participants in such localities emphasise “the importance of friendship and kinship networks and resources in grants’ acquisition.”. It must be remarked that this research has been conducted on Russian soil. In more open and ‘western’ economies, investors such as travel agencies might replace the role of the desired grants to grow a business.

#### Route segments of the Sultans Trail from Vienna to Istanbul

Segment	Route	Walking Distance	Duration (based on 150km per week)
1	Vienna → Bratislava	130km	1 week
2	Bratislava → Budapest	125km	1 week
3	Budapest → Mohacs	300km	2 weeks
4	Mohacs → Belgrade	300km	2 weeks
5	Belgrade → Sofía	550km	4 weeks
6	Sofía → Edirne	640km	4.5 weeks
7	Edirne → Istanbul	340km	2.5 weeks
<b>Total</b>	<b>Vienna → Istanbul</b>	<b>2 115 km</b>	<b>17 weeks</b>

#### To be arranged by the travel agency

- Transportation from the port of entry (usually the international airport) to the first accommodation, and from the last accommodation to the port of departure (optional);
- A person on-site to welcome the hikers and help with questions, general support, and a briefing regarding their hike;
- A service hotline which is 24/7 available during the offered period;
- Arrangement of travel documents such as passport, visa, and QR-code. This won't be a problem for the Schengen area but could be for non-EU members;
- Arrangement of accommodation along the route;
- Luggage transfer between accommodations;
- Depending on the travel agency and the area, transfers may be needed from one place to another, if necessary for any reason;
- Guided tours, museum visits, sightseeing, etc, depending on the region. Details need to be discussed between the Sultans Trail and the travel agency (optional but recommended);

- An Information Package created by the Sultans Trail should be given by the travel agency to hikers who booked a self-guided hike. This package includes hiking tracks data, GPS locations, clear route description, tips and tricks, travel information;
- After completing the last section be with an airplane, bus, or a transfer back to the starting point if hikers arrived by their own method of transport.

For the segments crossing the Schengen borders, additional travel documents could be necessary to cross borders, and maybe a car or bus to take the hiker(s) across the border to a village or town on the other side. These segments are:

1. Mohacs → Belgrade – 300km (crossing the border between Hungary and Serbia.)  
Thus far, crossing the border on foot is not a problem.
2. Belgrade → Sofia – 550km (crossing the border between Serbia and Bulgaria.)  
Transportation between Dimitrovgrad in Serbia and Dragoman in Bulgaria could become necessary, due to the upgrade of the existing E-80 into a four lane highway. A detour by ‘Strecimirovci’ could be considered, this would add some 80km to the trail.
3. Sofia → Edirne – 640km (crossing the Turkish border)  
While hikers can cross the border on foot, between Kastanies (Greece) and Edirne, between Svilengrad (Bulgaria) and Edirne this is problematic. To secure a comfortable crossing, a mode of transportation between Svilengrad in Bulgaria and Edirne in Turkey is advisable.

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