

ASPECTS REGARDING THE MAXIMIZATION OF RIVER CRUISE POTENTIAL: AN EVENT MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: My paper sets out to explore several recent developments in river cruise ship industry as well as the revitalizing potential provided by appropriate event management solutions. Against this backdrop the study illustrates ways in which the decreasing number of charter requests, mainly as a result of imminent natural hazards and huge ship maintenance costs may be effectively counterbalanced by resorting to several innovative managerial solutions such as floating conferences, expositions, and “themed” private parties that may both offset the company’s losses and revive the cruise tourism potential of the Danube River.

Keywords: management, tourism, profit, event management, cruise

Introduction.

The ever blooming worldwide industry named tourism consists of several activity segments, one of them being represented by the sun of the “blue economy” named river and sea cruise ship tourism. The river, sea and cost line tourism generate over 183 billion Euros each year for the EU economy. More than 3.2 million people (EU) work within this industry branch. In 2013, the tip of the iceberg was reached with over 2, 6 billion booked nights in hotels or similar accommodations (including cruise ships) only in the EU region alone. The river cruise tourism is an excellent way to discover rivers like the Danube which covers 2888 km from Germany to the Black See (Romania).

Issues for Europe’s second largest river: the Danube. The “Queen of Europe’s River” as Napoleon referred to brings together a total of 19 countries which form the Danube River Basin. The Danube River Basin which is the world’s most international river basin is also home

for approximately 81 million people of different cultures and languages. From source: the Black Forest (Germany) - to mouth: Black See (Romania), the Danube river passes a total of 10 countries, draws water from 19 national states, 4 capitals and several different religions and cultures all brought together by Europe’s second largest river:” the blue Danube”. This makes the diversified Danube River Basin the most international one on the face of the Earth. Each of the 10 European countries crossed by the Danube is defined by a unique landscape, climate and specific regional geographical characteristics.

Over 25%	15-10%	Less than 10%
Romania (29, 9%)	Hungary (11.7%) Austria (10.2%) Serbia (10.3%)	Germany (7.5%) Slovakia (5.8%) Bulgaria (5.2%) Croatia (4.5%) Ukraine (3.8%) Republic Moldavia (0.29%)

Table 1: Length of the Danube River in the 10 Danubian countries (percentages); *Source:* Compania Națională Administrația Porturilor Dunării Maritime SA Galați, (2015)

Unfortunately due to the sudden climate change Europe’s second largest river is slowly drying. The extremely warm summers and the lack of precipitations in some areas drowns the water and reveals hidden islands that block the Danubian navigation routs for several weeks or even months. These natural hazards bring losses of millions of Euros for most Danubian cruise ship- transportation companies and their partners. Even within a clever, perfectly organized and well-structured River navigation company with good future perspectives nobody seems to be able to control and predict possible damages caused by the unleashed forces of nature. Also, regardless of the cruise industry and its particular destination, the source of the economic contributions represents the total cruise tourism costs for passengers, crew and cruise lines (Business Research and Economic Advisors, 2015).

In the summer of 2015, the Danube navigation was blocked at the passage of "Luta"(km 560-575 km in the Region Zimnicea, Romania) for several weeks in a row, freezing the entire transportation and cruise ship industry. Unfortunately, the bad port infrastructure in the lower part of the Danube River and the inefficient maintenance works are challenged by the constantly growing number of ships built every year (Compania Națională Administrația Porturilor Dunării Maritime SA Galați, 2015).

The Danube River dredging program is used for establishing the minimum allowed depth for a safe navigation and it is conducted annually in consultation with the port authorities based on relevant historical data of traffic flows. Sadly, the funds for infrastructure and its maintenance are sometimes insufficient especially in the lower region of the Danube River leaving the Danube River navigation in "nature's hands". Difficult navigation conditions on the fairway within the Bulgarian - Romanian sector need immediate funding otherwise most cruise ship companies will stop their journeys at the Iron Gates and need to make a U-turn back towards Germany. If this scenario becomes reality, countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia and the Ukraine could suffer major commercial and tourist losses. This is why for the above-mentioned countries substantial immediate investments in infrastructure are essential so they can resist the ever changing climate of the region and possible future natural hazards and catastrophes. In many areas the Danube River fairway presents problems for the daily navigation both in terms of depth and width according to the standards of the European Danube Commission.

Due to the critical low levels of the Danube in winter (generated by the lack of rain and snow fall), between the 15th of December 2013 and the 9th of January 2014 a number of 21 convoys were divided in order for each one to successfully navigate through the passage of "Luta". In the above mentioned period the Danube reached 2 and 2,3 meters in depth and measured 100 meters in width. For a better understanding of the financial losses in the case of a total blockage of the Danube River navigation for several days or even weeks, the following aspects should be taken into account:

- 1) In summer approximately 20 convoys/ cargo ships and 6 cabin ships usually pass through "Luta" passage (Romania) alone.

- 2) In winter approximately 5 convoys/ cargo ships and 2-3 cabin ships pass through "Luta" passage (Romania) alone.
- 3) in 2013 approximately 93 cabin cruise ships and 266 convoys/ cargo ships weighing more than 290.000 tons of cargo were blocked for several days according to the available data.

Solving the Danube navigation issues based on the already mentioned facts have to represent a top-priority aspect for all directly involved countries.

Maximization of River Cruise Potential through Event Management.

To better understand the concept of event management first of all we have to define it as the implementation of project management in developing and creating large scale events, such as: conventions, conferences, formal parties, festivals or ceremonies. Event Management implies identifying the target audience, exploring the brand, and detailed planning of the logistics, analyzing all the technical features and in the end devising the event concept (Ramsborg et al, 2008).

Nowadays, the new trend in the cruise ship industry is represented by the so-called large scale events, such as: congresses, symposia, conferences, private parties and ceremonies, where each event has to be carefully planned. Basically, the event planning phenomenon consists out of two foundations: planning the event and coordinating the event. Event planning includes also: acquiring necessary permits, scheduling, budgeting, site selection, logistics (includes transportation and parking), catering, emergency plans, arranging for speakers, preparing decorations, booking event security and the list goes on (Bowdin and Harris, 2012). Event planning can be implemented in all activity fields and branches, ranging from national Football games to small business lunches. Also firms, intern groups, politicians and charitable organizations hold events in hope of reassigning funds, building business relationships, networking, proper marketing themselves or simply celebrating the company's success. A proper organized event with big impact on the public has to be organized by professional event managers. Professional event managers usually have special degrees which attest their knowledge and professional skills such as: Certified in Exhibition Management (CEM), Certified Trade Show Marketer (CTSM), and Global Certification in Meeting Management (CMM),

Certified Meeting Professional (CMP), Certified Manager of Exhibits (CME) and Global Certificate in Event Design (EDC).

Looking back on the natural hazards, the force major situation and the sometimes poor port infrastructure along the Danube River mentioned earlier, a new marketing approach based on new event management perspectives in the tourism branch must be taken into consideration. In the cruise ship industry event managers usually organize large-scale events that require a consistent dose of passion, madness and unique precision. To underline the importance of a good event management, several important events that can be organized on a river cruise ship are worth considering:

A) Conferences, Conventions and Team-buildings: It is well known that a ship is similar to a mobile resort, which transports passengers from one point to another. Nowadays cruise ships are viewed more as floating hotels than as means of transport (Ross, 2006). Nowadays groups, firms, nongovernmental organizations, governmental organizations, political parties and others are known to charter whole ships and organize team-buildings for their employees, political conventions or theme oriented conferences. The most successful River cruise ship conference of the year 2015 was the so-called *Danube floating conference 2015* and was organized by the Danube Competence Center (DCC) with the support of GIZ regional project for the further development of the cross -border tourism in the middle and Lower Danube region. This project started back in 2011 as an innovative type of conference. The floating conference of 2015 was a mixture of workshops, meetings, interesting brainstorming activities and special topics all brought together on a beautiful Danube River Ship (MS Delta Star) with a 100% personalized cruising schedule and route. The Danube floating conference 2015 started from the Russe Port (Bulgaria) and ended in the Vienna Port (Austria). It lasted 10 days, beginning the 15 of June, and included 6 sections: EUSDR PA3 Conference, Alpbach Conference, 3rd Conference of Parliamentarians of the Danube Region, 15 years of Serbian-German Cooperation, Youth Conference on the Danube, Meeting of the EUSDR National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators.

B) Formal or private parties: Nowadays, when it comes to theme parties, the upper class of the 21st century is used to a certain standard. Chartering (renting) entire ships or yachts for both private and formal parties seems to be quite a trend these days. The cruise ship owners are

satisfied because they don't have to collect money from 170 passengers (for instance, by selling all-inclusive cruises the host collects the money from 20 persons who prefer an entire ship all for themselves and not be disturbed by "outsiders" even if they pay at least the same amount as for a fully booked ship with 170 passengers). Once the ship is privately chartered by a certain company for their very own ball night, Christmas party or maybe by a group of friends for an anniversary, the event manager is able to use his/ her imagination to organize the perfect formal or private party.

C) Ceremonies: The most popular ceremonies on cruise ships: "marriage ceremonies", represent a real economic boost but also an image and marketing blast for the entire company. Marriage proposals, engagement parties, marriage ceremonies but also marriage anniversaries are a way for smaller cruise ship companies to compensate the lack of tourists from during the season that tend to book their holidays through the big players of the industry .If a ceremony is well organized and way on budget clients will highly recommend this experience also to other potential clients (Philip, 2006).

Conclusions.

The river cruise ship industry is full of unpredictable challenges. Big companies that own more than 10 cruise ships and built yearly one or two new ships cover all passengers request and offer all sorts of packages for each budget. The smaller companies that usually own less than 3-4 passenger ships struggle to keep up with the constantly growing demands of their passengers and the fierce competition of the industry. This is the reason why smaller companies have to come up with new strategies and smart ideas. Smaller river cruise companies should use event-management in their favor and start organizing a wide range of meaningful events such as: conferences, ceremonies, workshops, team-buildings and private themed parties. In order to find clients willing to charter a passenger ship for such an event each manager has to invest serious money (especially at the beginning) and time in product marketing and promotion. Marketing and promotion strategies should be aimed directly at the target group: multinational corporations, important firms, political groups and non-governmental organizations. With a well-structured long term plan, companies can utilize event management as a highly efficient tool to increase their profit and market shares.

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