

**Theses of the PhD Dissertation**

The Doctoral School of Earth Science

**Analysis of tourist offerings and tourist mobility in the Sopron-Fertő Region**

**Attila Barcza**

University of Pécs  
Faculty of Natural Sciences

Pécs, 2022

**Name and address of doctoral school:** University of Pécs  
Doctoral School of Earth Sciences  
7624 Pécs, Ifjúság útja 6.

**Head of the doctoral school:** Dr. Istvan Geresdi, Full professor  
PTE TTK Geography and Earth Sciences Institute  
Geology and Meteorology Department

**Doctoral program name:** Social Geography

**Head of doctoral program:** Dr. András Trócsányi, Associate professor  
PTE TTK Geography and Earth Sciences Institute  
Social Geography and Urban Studies Department

**Thesis discipline:** Tourism Geography

**Thesis supervisor:** Dr. Antal Aubert CSc, Full professor  
PTE TTK Geography and Earth Sciences Institute  
Tourism Department

## Introduction

Understanding Sopron-Fertő area's tourism space is subject to specific circumstances and conditions. The intensification of tourism development in the area connects to several historical events related to spatiality. After Trianon, Sopron's tourism values – such as its climatic health resort character, location as a border town, cultural and historical attractions, and image as a 'city of loyalty' – were enhanced. After the Second World War, the city and its region became a spatial dividing line between the communist and capitalist world systems, a veritable stage in the Iron Curtain drama. New spatial relations formed after the regime change in 1989. The interconnection of natural attractions, previously separated by borders, appeared with the creation of a joint national park on Austro-Hungarian territory (1994) and the later granting of World Heritage status (2001). Accession to the EU (2004) and the Schengen area (2007) also opened up new dimensions in tourism in the wider area. These changes have had a decisive impact on tourism development in the city and its region.

Consequently, the Sopron-Fertő area currently offers a diverse range of tourism products. Most concentrate in the city of Sopron, but the relatively short distances and visit times in the region ensure a wider range of attractions, albeit according to the varying levels and intensity of attractiveness offered by the individual settlements. Sopron is regarded as the "gateway to the West", and its proximity to Austria is an attractive incentive for leisure tourism, shopping, and transit tourism. The city and its surroundings are rich in heritage tourism, monuments, cultural, and wine tourism attractions (the historic city center, the Fire Tower, the Museum Quarter, the Haydn and Liszt memorials, and Blue Frankish (kékfrankos) wine. Thanks to private and public development projects, many health tourism attractions and other attractions (hospital development, park forest, Ligneum, adventure park, museum educational developments, adventure mine, swimming pool development, chocolate factory, etc.) have recently complemented the traditional attractions. The Esterházy Palace in Fertőd, which is currently renewing its architectural assets and tourist offerings – is the leading tourist attraction in the Sopron-Fertő area. The Széchenyi Palace in Nagycenk could gain a new position among Hungarian palace tourism offerings. The natural assets and tourist offerings of the Fertő-Hanság National Park and the Fertő Region's World Heritage status are active factors in the development of cycling and ecotourism in the region. The unique attractions of the Fertőrákos Cave Theater and Quarry are of particular value. The domestic water tourism opportunities Lake Fertő offers may evolve, though these evolving opportunities depend on future developments.

The Hungarian Tourism Agency defines the area as the Sopron-Fertő tourist region. The region is a traditional destination and host area in Hungarian tourism. However, it has recently experienced a significant decline in tourism turnover and market share, most noticeably in the city of Sopron, where, according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), the total number of guest nights (commercial and business, other) decreased from 481,171 in 2010 to 404,088 in 2019. This comprehensive research study is justified because it aims to draw attention to the region's many offerings while exploring opportunities to reverse the downtrend in tourism.

My family has operated a guesthouse in the region for over 20 years, so I had the opportunity to learn about the practical side of hospitality first-hand from a very young age. In 2013, I became the founding professional manager of the Sopron Region Tourism Centre (TDM), where I managed the development of the entire network. As a Sopron municipal councilor, I chaired the Youth Sports and Tourism Committee. From 2016 to 2018, I served as Sopron's councilor of development.

I think Sopron and the Fertő Region is the most beautiful region in Hungary. I am grateful for the opportunity to complement my tourism studies with my doctoral research at the Doctoral School of Earth Sciences at the University of Pécs. I strive to apply my practical knowledge and experience to work for the region's tourism development.

## Objectives

This thesis examines the Sopron-Fertő area from a complex destination perspective. I consider it important that my research and related results contribute to the competitive development of the region and become a driving force for the region, which is a model area to expand the symbiosis of culture and nature and promote a transnational World Heritage site.

In line with the above objectives, this thesis focused on the following issues:

- Examining and revising the destination delimitation of the Sopron-Fertő area as an important starting point for destination development and its long-term success in the tourism market. The thesis presents the theoretical and spatial delimitation of the destination by considering several aspects. In the analysis, I have highlighted Sopron and its region as a destination that is both a territorial category identifiable by geographical boundaries and a complex tourism product with cross-border effects. The spatial delimitation and its updating was a novel research objective aimed at promoting a more efficient market operation of the destination and a competitive market presence, both domestically and abroad.
- Examining the performance of the Sopron-Fertő Region from a destination perspective by identifying the product profile and critical points for development. I believe that identifying tourism potential in the

region and promoting cross-border cooperation warrants greater attention. To this end, the thesis comprehensively analyzes the study area by presenting tourism supply and demand.

- Successful destination development requires an overview of tourism history and tourism offerings. However, it also requires knowledge regarding the characteristics of the tourists arriving in the area and how they move around and use the space (visiting the destination, traveling to and away from the destination). Analyzing tourist spatial use also makes it possible to show the spatial structure of the destination, which helps clarify the spatial dimension of the various tourism products and the influence of the various experience elements on Sopron and the Fertő Region along the lines of tourist attractions.

The following hypotheses and assumptions were formulated in relation to the topic:

***Hypothesis 1:***

*The identifiable tourism product profile in the destination area is an integral part of the landscape and historical characteristics of the Sopron-Fertő area.*

***Hypothesis 2:***

*Tourist perceptions of the destination do not conform to the officially defined destination (tourist development area).*

***Hypothesis 3:***

*The border has lost its relevance in terms of destination and tourist spatial mobility.*

***Hypothesis 4:***

*Tourist mobility is not only influenced by supply characteristics but also by demand characteristics.*

I believe the scientific value of the research and its scientific results is evident in the complex, destination-based approach of the study and its concrete results, which are:

- the first scientific comparison of the Sopron-Fertő Tourist Area (formerly known as a Priority Tourist Development Area) with the actual recording of tourist movements in the area. I believe that a more precise destination delimitation can facilitate a more efficient tourism market operation and the development of cooperation in the region, which can improve the position of the Sopron-Fertő Region in the destination market both in Hungary and abroad in the long term. Cooperation and networks developed with a destination management approach will help optimize tourist consumption, one of the foundations of which is knowledge of the actual movement of tourists in the area.
- the scientific basis for a cross-border destination approach,
- investigating the determinants of tourist mobility activity within a destination.

## **Research methods**

The research used a complex methodology involving both secondary source processing and primary research. The research objectives, related questions, and the specific circumstances of the region (historical background, border location, the question of destination delimitation, etc.) justified the use of varied research methods. For the Fertő Region, which I interpreted as a single tourist destination, I examined tourist characteristics and spatial movements within the destination and the factors influencing these.

The sample population consisted of a quota sample of 2,000 people interviewed via a paper-based and partially online questionnaire in Hungarian, German, and English. The questionnaire was distributed to accommodation providers and attractions in the study area. The sampling occurred in selected Sopron-Fertő area municipalities between January and December 2019. The six-page questionnaire contained 28 questions. Fifteen related to travel, five to leisure habits, and eight to the respondents' personal characteristics. The number of closed questions was 15. The questionnaires were processed using SPSS computer data processing software with cross-analysis. The results were presented in text and graphics.

The starting point for determining the sample distribution was the number of registered overnight stays. However, the number of registered admission tickets and, in the case of admission-free attractions and events, the officially estimated number of visitors was another significant criterion. A correction was justified in several municipalities within the study area. When aggregating the number of visitors, the importance of the visit category was a key criterion. The number of overnight stays was multiplied by three, the number of registered visits by two, and additional visits by one. The total number of 2,000 items in the questionnaire survey can be considered representative when the distribution of total visitor arrivals per municipality is calculated in this manner.

*Table 1: Distribution data of the quota measurement based on tourism data for the study area, 2018*

Municipality	Number of commercial overnight stays number 2018	Registered guests (persons, tickets)/ 2018	Other visits (visitors)/ 2018	Total (visitors)/ 2018	Distribution (%)/ 2019	Number of questionnaires 2019
<b>Sopron and Sopron-Balf</b>	379,187	273,850	53,000	1,738,261	50.34	1,006
<b>Fertőrákos</b>	6,196	149,352	18,000	335,292	9.71	194
<b>Fertőboz</b>	1,211	0	12,000	15,633	0.45	9
<b>Hidegség</b>	2,482	300	9,000	17,046	0.49	10
<b>Fertőhomok</b>	1,784	0	4,000	9,352	0.27	5
<b>Hegykő</b>	126,870	216,335	6,000	819,280	23.73	475
<b>Nagycenk</b>	0	36,808	21,000	94,616	2.74	55
<b>Fertőszéplak</b>	3,103	1,318	8,000	19,945	0.58	12
<b>Fertőd</b>	9,318	72,364	130,000	302,682	8.77	175
<b>Sarród</b>	5,861	14,254	55,000	101,091	2.93	59
<b>Total</b>	<b>536,012</b>	<b>764,581</b>	<b>316,000</b>	<b>3,453,198</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2,000</b>

*Source: own source*

The study results rely heavily on the questionnaire survey, but personal interviews with key tourism stakeholders (six in total) in the area also add information to the analysis of the objectives and research questions. Field visits to the research area and information gained as a region resident were also of great significance in the preparation of the work. The thesis reflects the experience gained through local knowledge and active tourism work in the area.

Secondary data and information compilation relied on two main sources: documentary analysis, involving a review of national and international literature, and the processing of secondary statistical data. The sources were local and national databases (KSH Information Database).

### Summary of results

The thesis provides a complex analysis of the region under study. A key objective was to review the tourism product profile of the Sopron-Fertő area, and the destination approach is given a prominent role, with a special focus on the characteristics and spatial movements of arriving tourists.

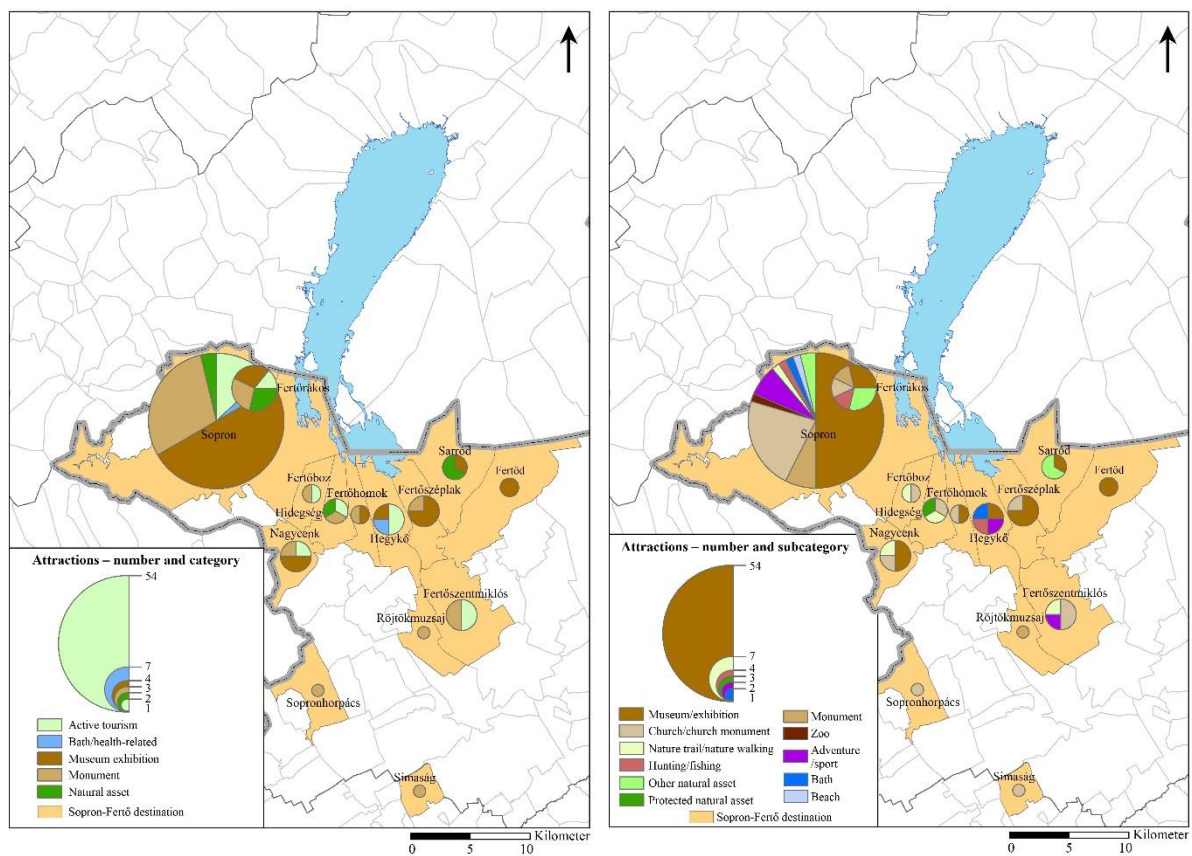
As part of the situation analysis, I examined the area's tourism product profile as it relates to my first hypothesis. I believe the product profile is the result of organic, thoughtful product development, but the profile needs to be promoted and redefined to meet present demands and improve the destination's tourism performance. The following phenomena emerged from the study:

- Until the introduction of the world passport, the defining element of Sopron's USP was the spatial structure and the use of space as a "western gateway" to the different social structures of Western Europe. These features acted as a USP and as an almost automatic and intensive marketing tool for the city, complementing its climatic, natural, historical, and heritage tourism attractions. Regime change, EU accession, the increase in border crossings, the Schengen process, and labor market liberalization rendered this USP increasingly insignificant as a motivation for travelling to the area. Consequently, the area no longer offered a distinctive and favorable position in the tourism competition between domestic cities and the constantly changing domestic and international tourism markets.
- The main elements of the destination's tourism product profile include cultural, heritage, and monument tourism featuring renewed or renovated facilities (Sopron: the Goat Church, St. Michael's Church and Visitor Centre, the historic city center, the Museum Quarter, the Várkerület, and museum developments). The tourism product profiles of the Hungarian and Austrian border regions share a high degree of similarity (Esterházy architectural heritage, World Heritage Site, and National Park status), which are seen as spatial extensions of the destination. However, significant differences in the complementary product offerings of the individual attractions and the status of heritage tourism and architectural assets exist, although these differences are narrowing due to recent developments. Resources for the renovation, conservation, and development of existing assets were scarce in Hungary before the regime change, which led to a significant deterioration in the attractions. Due to their historic character, the resources required

to restore and reconstruct historical attractions are enormous, both in terms of time and money (e.g. the palaces at Nagyecenk and Fertőd, Sopron city center). Thanks to national and EU funds, reconstruction work at these attractions has recently entered a more intensive phase. Adapting existing tourism products to new market requirements (multi-experience, active tourism) also requires external resources.

- The ecotourism and active tourism offerings are also a dominant part of the destination's product profile; the Hungarian and Austrian offerings present unity in these fields. Recent Hungarian ecotourism developments (House of Forests, tourist house development program, national park developments) and active tourism investments (infrastructure development of the Fertő cycling path) have significantly brought the Hungarian and Austrian infrastructure and superstructure standards closer together and have increased the competitiveness of the domestic side. In addition, the distribution of the number, category, and subcategory of attractions exhibits the destination's versatility and future potential. However, the destination's strong seasonality makes it difficult to exploit the offerings more intensively throughout the year. The implementation of the Lake Fertő Leisure Center could enable Hungary to exploit the tourism potential of Fertő Lake and raise it to today's standards.

**Figure 1: Distribution of the number, category (a.), and subcategory (b.) of Sopron-Fertő Tourist Area attractions**



*Design by A. Barcza, technical editing by Z. Horváth (2021)*

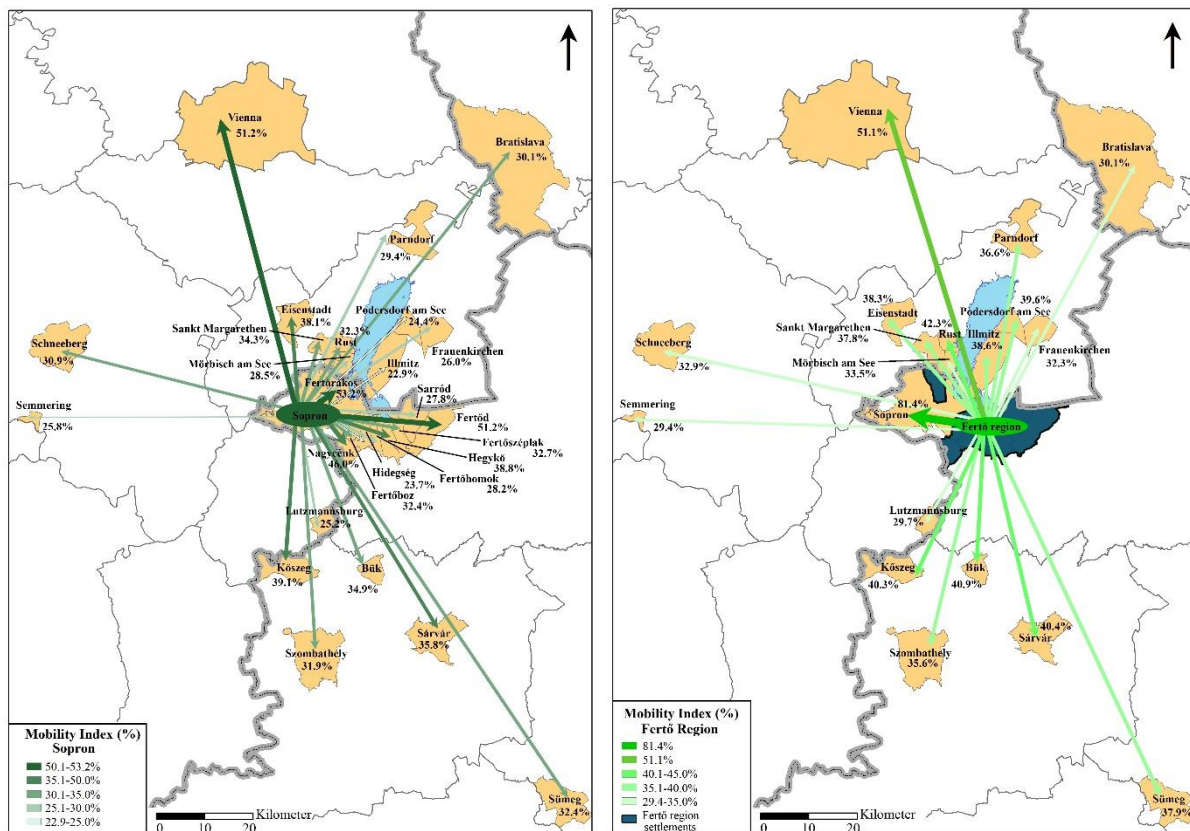
*Source: own survey*

- The private sector plays the leading role in health tourism in the destination, but recent developments in public institutions have created the conditions for future international exploitation that consider the international age composition of the population.
- Festival-, event-, and music tourism is an important profile element with immense potential, but further development of this element requires it to be in line with demand and consider as well as continuously monitor competitor offerings.
- The potential for wine and gastronomy tourism in the region is sound, but a change in attitude will depend upon decisions from business owners. Subsidies could help facilitate these decisions.
- The destination has a variety of accommodation offerings; however, in recent years, Sopron has been steadily losing ground in terms of demand statistics due to changing travel trends, competitor

developments, a lack of quality accommodation developments, and other factors. Developments implemented with the support of the Kisfaludy 2030 program have affected a significant part of the destination's accommodation facilities, thus providing a qualitative improvement in accommodation quality and competitiveness.

- The tourism website created by the TDM organization in Sopron and its surroundings is of high quality in terms of form, content, and interactivity. However, the website's visibility and networking could be improved substantially. Austria's organizational background and the associated digital infocommunications and marketing background all operate as a well-functioning system. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Hungary where networking, recognizing the benefits of cooperation, and the appropriate use of web presence are not yet common among the players in the tourism sector. Based on website content and the lack of event coordination, the tourism approach of the municipalities in the destination is problematic and has negative effects. The complex tourism offerings that Sopron and its surroundings offer are both an asset and a liability to building a new position with a strong image and a unique brand among competitors. The studies focusing on spatiality connected to the *second and third hypotheses* form an essential part of the thesis. I addressed the problem of destination delimitation by drawing on secondary sources and primary research questions concerning tourist understandings of destination and tourist activity and movement in the area.
- I reviewed several delimitations in the dissertation, such as the official, tourism-organizational, management-area delimitation of the destination, and the diverse and complex processes determined by factors that affected the Sopron-Fertő area in terms of how tourism use and the mere accessibility and physical availability of the areas developed in the different historical periods. This destination is also unique in the sense that many of the most touristic attractions in the area have suffered varying degrees of isolation over longer and shorter periods.
- The study has outlined the characteristics of each period concerning the problem of demarcation, on the basis of which the single geographical landscape before Trianon can now be traversed without borders. I have referred to the processes leading from the isolation of the Iron Curtain through the Lake Fertő Landscape Protection Area to the creation of the Fertő-Hanság National Park, the formation of the joint Hungarian-Austrian National Park, and the opportunity for the creation of the Neusiedler See-Fertő-Region Cultural Landscape World Heritage Site in the shared landscape. These main spatial aspects of change have helped ensure that tourist use of space is increasingly characterized by the extension of the destination to a single geographical landscape. The border no longer acts as an obstructing, dividing force. In fact, thanks to the developments, the region functions less as a gateway with filtering functions and more as a bridge connecting people, cultures, and languages. The area offers a complex tourism product with a cross-border impact.
- The primary research results in this thesis confirmed this finding. The questionnaire survey focused on tourist spatial mobility in the Sopron-Fertő area, which clearly shows the attractiveness of Sopron and its region. The survey also helped reveal the dimensions of tourist activities within the settlements in a domestic and cross-border context. The regime change has opened space in the Sopron-Fertő destination.
- I have examined this issue in relation to the second hypothesis by comparing the official and tourist interpretations of the destination.
- Concerning the third hypothesis, the interpretation of tourist spatial movements revealed the changing significance of the national border in the destination.
- The spatial tourist activity in the given sample confirms that the border is no longer an issue. Tourists interpret the attractions they can visit in the Austrian region during their Hungarian destination-motivated trips as a practical extension of the destination itself.

Figure 2: Spatial tourism activity (mobility indicator) of visitors staying in Sopron (a.) and on the Fertő Region (b.) %



Design by A. Barcza, technical editing by Z. Horváth (2021)

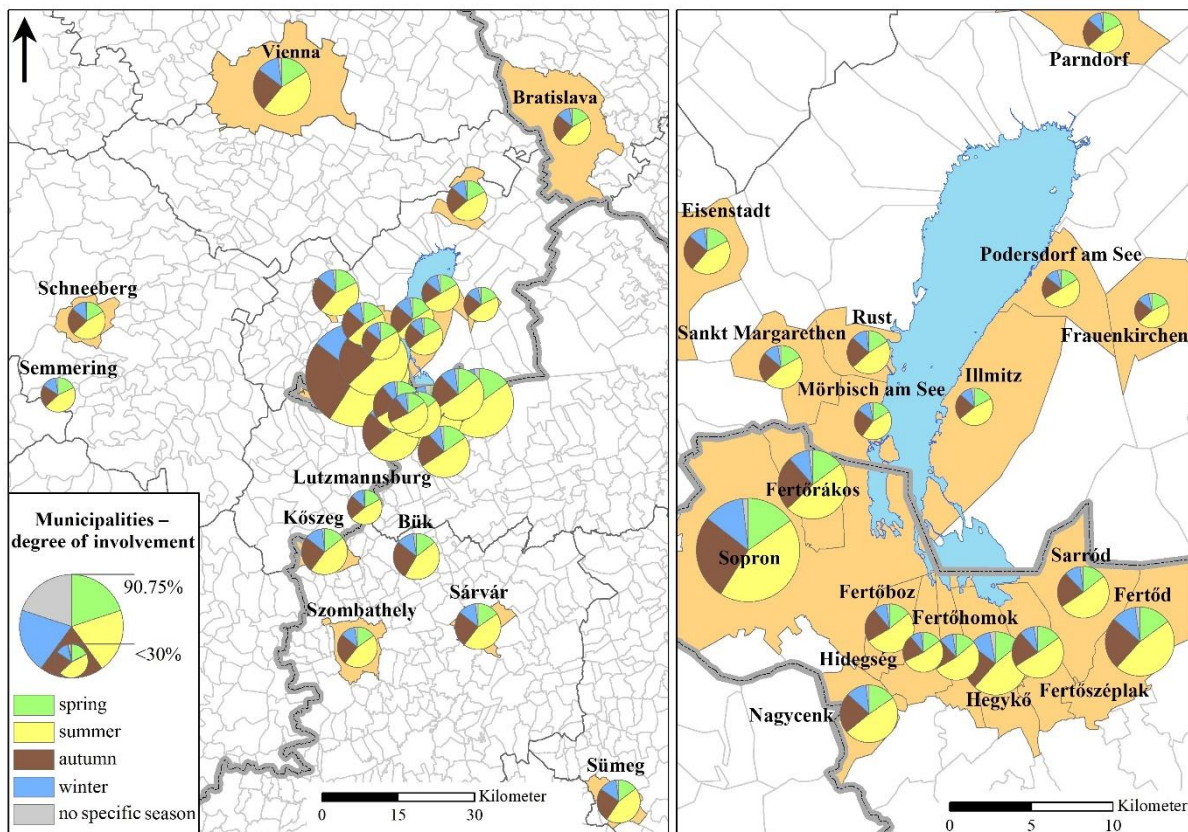
Source: own survey

An essential questionnaire survey result – *related to the fourth hypothesis* – was the identification of the tourist mobility characteristics in the region, which in parallel revealed the travel habit determinants (e.g. length of stay, means of transport used), motivations, and information about the tourists arriving to the region on the given sample. The computer analysis allowed the data to be interpreted in a variety of contexts.

- The demographic characteristics and tourism habits of Sopron-Fertő area visitors presented a significant result in the questionnaire survey. A cross-analysis of the surveyed issues also revealed several significant correlations providing useful information for the region's long-term destination management activities. The study covered the main information sources that respondents use within pre-trip and during-trip dimensions.
- The survey on tourist mobility confirmed the importance of digitalization and infocommunication tools and content as factors determining the success of destinations. The Sopron-Fertő destination area still has much work to accomplish in the field of infocommunications, much of which has been concretized in development proposals.
- The results for the given sample indicate good tourist mobility activity in relation to the destination's offerings; however, the graphs and data present quantitative differences in terms of distances. The mobility data also demonstrates the importance of an adequate level of transport infrastructure.
- The study also covered stay lengths and travel times. When looking at travel time according to season, the mobility rate is lower during the winter and autumn and higher in the spring and summer. The highest mobility rates for the studied municipalities occurred mostly in summer.



**Figure 3: Degree of seasonal involvement of municipalities (%)**



*Design by A. Barcza, technical editing by Z. Horváth (2021)*  
*Source: own survey*

The survey also examined tourist opinions and perceptions of certain elements of the experience. These tended to be more positive, but the picture becomes more differentiated at the level of individual sites/program elements.

The map illustrations related to the examined issues made central and peripheral areas visible and clear. At the same time, they confirmed the validity of a destination approach that does not consider the examination of overnight indicators as the decisive indicator but calls instead for a more detailed examination of guest flows by considering other aspects. The lack of overnight stays in Nagycenk, which has some developing accommodations but currently offers minimal accommodation opportunities, could be one of the testimonies of this new approach.

The research results revealed that the regional concentration of development resources triggered several processes in the destination’s product profile – especially in the development of the Fertőd Palace, the Museum Quarter in Sopron, the primary and secondary cycling tourism superstructure, accommodation development, and transport network development. These resources can help strengthen the destination’s role in domestic and international tourism and help it match its competitors.

However, the investigation also identified phenomena that require strategic measures to make the appropriate future positioning of the “strengthened” destination more effective.

A critical point in the results regarding the destination appeared in the following – although tourists coming to the region have adequate discretionary income, the willingness to spend in the Austrian area is greater than in the Hungarian area. The reason for this rests not only in the quality differences in the offerings but is also attributable to the superior professional marketing activity experienced in the Austrian area. Although a destination-based interpretation of tourism does not focus on spending, this finding should not be ignored and requires further research to help determine how this process could be improved for Hungarian service providers and promote the “launch” of the Hungarian side of the destination.

## List of publications on this topic

### Journal publications

Marton G. – Raffay Z. – Varga Szalai K. – **Barcza A.** – Gonda T. (2021): Specific problems of tourism development in the Hungarian Areas of the Dráva Regions. *Podravina: Casopis Za Multidisciplinarna Istrazivanja* 20(39) pp. 179-191. – **Q4**

**Barcza A.** – Csapó J. – Hinek M. – Marton G. (2020): Sopron turisztikai szezonálisitására és a turizmusfejlesztés szükséges irányainak vizsgálatára. *Földrajzi Közlemények* 144(1) pp. 65–78. DOI: 10.32643/fk.144.1.5

**Barcza A.** (2020): Sopron örökségturisztikai értékeinek vizsgálata a turisták térhasználata alapján. *Turisztikai és Vidékfejlesztési Tanulmányok* 5(4) pp. 56–71. DOI: 10.15170/TVT.2020.05.04.04

**Barcza A.** – Locsmáncsi Sz. (2017): Destination: Europe 2020 transforming parks to promote cities as valuable tourist destinations. *World Leisure Journal* 59(1) pp. 61–68. DOI: 10.1080/16078055.2017.1393879 – **Q1**

Aubert A. – **Barcza A.** – Gonda T. – Horváth Z. – Pálfi A. (2017): Paradigmaváltás(ok) a magyarországi turisztikai desztinációk fejlesztésében és menedzselésében. *Turizmus Bulletin* 18(1–2). pp. 15–25.

Pálfi A. – **Barcza A.** – Aubert A. (2017): TDM-szervezetek szerepe a desztinációk imázsának és arculatának kialakításában. *Prosperitas* 4(2) pp. 57–70.

### Publications published elsewhere

**Barcza A.** – Pálfi A. – Magyar-Papp J. – Aubert A. (2017): A tér és a környezet transzformációs hatásainak vizsgálata Pécs és Sopron példáján. In: Régi T. – Rátz T. – Michalkó G. (szerk.): *Turizmus és transzformáció*. Magyar Földrajzi Társaság. pp. 164–179.

**Barcza A.** (2013): A Fertő-táj magyar–osztrák határtérség turizmusának sajátosságai a rekreációs lehetőségek szemszögéből. In: Balogh Réka – Schmidt Petra: *A földtudományi kutatások új aspektusai – Tanítványok és mestereik a Kárpát-medence földtudományi kutatásában*. Geographia Pannonica Nova, 17. IDResearch Kft. – Publikon, Pécs pp. 106–117.

**Barcza A.** (2013): Sarród turizmusának fejlődése. In: Barcza A. (szerk.): *Sarród 700*. Savaria University Press, Szombathely. pp. 201–206.

### Conference publications

Pálfi A. – **Barcza A.** – Aubert A. (2017): The practice of brand and image development of TDM organizations in Hungary. In: Pavkov Hrvojević M. (szerk.): *17th Contemporary Trends in Tourism and Hospitality: New Spaces In Cultural Tourism*. University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Sciences, Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, Novi Sad. pp. 77–85

**Barcza A.** (2012): Rekreálódás határok nélkül: A magyar–osztrák határ menti térség rekreációs turisztikai lehetőségeinek egyes aspektusai a kapcsolatok térbeli és időbeli változásainak tükrében. In: Berghauer S. – Miroslav D. – Fodor Gy. – Gönczy S. – Izsák T. – Molnár J. – Molnár D. I. (szerk.): *Társadalomföldrajzi kihívások a XXI. század Kelet-Közép-Európájában*. II. Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Főiskola, PoliPrint Kiadó, Beregszász. pp. 123–131.

**Barcza A.** (2012): Rekreációs turisztikai lehetőségek térbeli és időbeli változásai. In: Nagy Melinda (szerk.) *A Selye János Egyetem 2012-es „Művelődés – Identitás – Egészség” Nemzetközi Tudományos Konferenciájának Tanulmánykötete*. Selye János Egyetem, Komárom. pp. 536–549.

**Barcza A.** (2011): Rekreációs lehetőségek azonos és eltérő vonásai a magyar–osztrák határtérségben. In: Lőrincz I. (szerk.): *XV. Apáczai-napok Nemzetközi Tudományos Konferencia, 2011. A gazdasági és társadalmi átalakulás perspektívái Magyarországon*. Tanulmánykötet. Nyugat-magyarországi Egyetem Apáczai Csere János Kar, Győr.