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## **GASTRONOMIC TOURISM AS A STRATEGIC FACTOR OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

The aim of this study is to analyze the role of gastronomic tourism in the system of international tourism development, to determine its economic, cultural and social significance, and to substantiate its importance as a strategic factor of destination competitiveness in the global tourism market.

In the context of globalization and growing competition among tourist destinations, the search for unique and authentic tourism products has become a priority for many countries. One of the most promising and dynamic segments of modern tourism is gastronomic tourism, which combines cultural, economic and social components. Today, food is no longer perceived merely as a basic necessity – it has transformed into a powerful instrument of cultural representation, destination branding and international communication.

Gastronomic tourism can be defined as travel motivated by the desire to experience authentic local cuisine, beverages and culinary traditions of a particular region. It includes visits to traditional restaurants, farms, wineries, craft production facilities, food markets, as well as participation in culinary festivals, tastings and master classes. Scholars emphasize that gastronomy significantly enhances the overall tourist experience, forming strong emotional impressions and long-lasting memories [4, p. 25]. In this regard, food becomes an essential element of the tourism product and an important competitive advantage of a destination.

The economic impact of gastronomic tourism is substantial. This segment stimulates the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, supports local producers and farmers, and increases employment in related sectors such as agriculture, hospitality and transportation. According to tourism researchers, the integration of gastronomic elements into tourism routes contributes to the diversification of regional economies and reduces dependence on seasonal tourism flows [2, p. 121]. Moreover, tourists who travel for culinary purposes often demonstrate higher levels of spending compared to mass tourists.

An equally important dimension of gastronomic tourism is its role in preserving intangible cultural heritage. Traditional recipes, cooking methods, festive meals and food-related customs reflect historical processes, geographical conditions and social structures of a region. Through gastronomic tourism, these traditions are preserved, revitalized and transmitted to future generations. Culinary heritage thus becomes a means of strengthening national identity and promoting intercultural dialogue.

In addition, gastronomic tourism is closely connected with the principles of sustainable development. The growing popularity of organic products, local ingredients and environmentally friendly production reflects tourists' increasing awareness of responsible consumption. By supporting local producers and minimizing the use of imported goods, gastronomic tourism reduces environmental impact and contributes to sustainable regional development [3, p. 60]. Consequently, it aligns with global

sustainable development strategies and enhances the social responsibility of tourism businesses.

Digitalization also plays a crucial role in the development of gastronomic tourism. Social media platforms, travel blogs and online review systems significantly influence tourists' decisions. Attractive visual content and storytelling about local cuisine shape the image of destinations in the international market. Effective digital marketing strategies allow tourism organizations to promote regional culinary brands worldwide, increasing their visibility and competitiveness.

Practical experience confirms the growing demand for gastronomic tourism products. Yu. Baran, one of the authors of these theses, repeatedly conducts gastronomic excursions as a guide in the travel agency Nika-Tour-Voyage. These excursions include visits to local restaurants and craft producers, tastings of traditional dishes, and presentations about the historical development of regional cuisine. Particular attention is paid to interactive elements – communication with chefs and producers, participation in cooking processes, and thematic storytelling. Such an approach significantly increases tourists' engagement and satisfaction.

Observations from guiding practice indicate that gastronomic tours attract diverse target groups: young people, families with children, foreign visitors interested in authentic cultural experiences, as well as domestic tourists seeking new impressions within their own country. The success of these excursions demonstrates that gastronomy can serve as an independent motive for travel rather than merely a supplementary service.

However, despite its advantages, gastronomic tourism also faces certain challenges. These include the risk of commercialization and loss of authenticity, insufficient infrastructure in rural areas, and limited cooperation between stakeholders. To ensure sustainable development of this segment, it is necessary to implement strategic planning, support local producers, invest in professional training of guides and hospitality staff, and develop effective marketing strategies [1, p.165].

In conclusion, gastronomic tourism represents a strategic factor in the development of international tourism. It integrates economic benefits, cultural preservation, sustainable principles and innovative marketing approaches. The practical experience of organizing gastronomic excursions confirms the high demand for authentic culinary products and interactive formats. Therefore, further scientific research and institutional support are required to strengthen the role of gastronomic tourism in the global tourism system and to enhance its contribution to regional and international development.

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