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**Article**

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# ROLE OF TRADITIONAL FOOD IN TOURIST DESTINATION IMAGE BUILDING: EXAMPLE OF THE CITY OF MOSTAR

**Almir Pestek<sup>1</sup>**  
**Aleksandra Nikolic**

## **Abstract:**

The existence of tourist offer varieties does not imply the existence of high-quality approach to and management of a tourist destination, nor a quality development of tourist products, which is the case of the City of Mostar. Despite the existing potential, it is necessary to invest a lot of effort and mobilize several players in order to build a modern and attractive tourist destination, integrate the existing and develop new tourist products and develop the City brand. In the context of holistic approach to tourism development in the City of Mostar and its image building, it is necessary to look into the role of indigenous traditional products that can have a significant impact on the overall effects of tourist offer. The goal of the paper is to present an innovative approach to building a modern brand and tourist product of the City of Mostar, as a unique tourist destination that is founded on authentic, traditional products and the way of life. The paper is based on the research conducted in 2010 through in-depth interviews with players involved in tourism development and players in the tourism industry.

*Key words:* tourist destination, branding, image, traditional food.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The new environment and new rules of game in the hyper-competitive and dynamic sector such as tourism impose a shift away from and transition from classical technical understanding of a destination from aspects of content and capacity toward the concept of destination as an integrated identity and portfolio of experiences of the observed site, i.e. space, which contains a promising potential and organizational effort to deliver them to tourists in a conceptual and standardized way and in line with communication. These are two crucial essential and perceptual transitions - from a destination product to a destination experience, and from destination marketing to destination management.

Therefore, it rightfully leads to the need to design and implement new destination models. It is a destination whose leadership, by uniting all players' efforts, timely

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forecasts possible trends and market changes, meeting tourists' requests and needs with high quality and in real time, and systematically raising the efficiency, cost-effectiveness and profitability of all players in the public and private sector.

In order to achieve this, three key components should be identified for a destination as a brand: Point of Differentiation, Positioning, and Destination Brand Personality Dimension.

City of Mostar enters global tourist trends with its tourist offer of excursion, religious and cultural tourism within a broader offer of Adriatic-Mediterranean and continental tourist destination. Its attractiveness as a tourist destination is determined by specific natural, multicultural, multi-religious, historical and demographic factors, where the old core of Mostar, as a monument under UNESCO protection has a special significance. Unfortunately, the high tourism potential of the City of Mostar has not been adequately exploited. The main reasons can be found in the underdeveloped concept of managing the tourist destination and image of the City of Mostar. Underdeveloped material infrastructure, low quality of offer and experience for visitors are reasons for which tourism potentials are only partially used for the increase in employment, GDP, and the City economic and social development in general.

The accelerated tourism development in the City of Mostar requires a strategic about-turn from autarchic to the concept of integrated tourism, and affirmation of the way of managing the City of Mostar tourist destination and, in a later stage, managing the tourism cluster of the City of Mostar. In doing so, Mostar destination branding is a trademark and a symbol of tourist destination distinctiveness and quality, with tourist organizations and accompanying industries acting in a unique value chain for increasingly demanding local and international visitors.

Consequently, the goal of the paper is to offer an innovative approach to building a modern successful brand and tourist product of City of Mostar as a unique tourist destination, the basis of which will be made up of authentic, traditional products and way of life.

The paper is based on the research conducted by authors in September 2010. Besides the analysis of the existing secondary data, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 representatives of City of Mostar, Tourism Association of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, representatives of tourist companies and tourist service providers, and other manufacturing and service companies from City of Mostar.

## **2. GENERAL SITUATION IN CITY OF MOSTAR TOURISM**

City of Mostar tourism is to a great extent integrated in the tourist offer of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton and Federation Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A decrease in the number of arrivals and bed-nights in the City of Mostar has been registered since 2008, which can be seen in the following table. The decreasing trend in the number of arrivals and bed-nights in the City of Mostar is identical to the decreasing trend in the canton. The trend of decreased number of tourist arrivals and bed-nights is particularly evident in the international tourist category, which can be explained by the global trend of decreased number of travels due to economic circumstances, i.e. global economic crisis.

**Table 1:** Number of tourist arrivals and bed-nights, City of Mostar, 2005-2010

Year	Tourist arrivals			Bed-nights		
	Total	Local	Intl.	Total	Local	Intl.
2005	9.542	4.185	5.357	16.910	4.966	11.944
2006	18.997	6.741	12.256	34.839	11.121	23.718
2007	22.520	6.749	15.771	41.540	11.257	30.283
2008	22.226	5.995	16.231	39.986	10.281	29.705
2009	18.765	5.441	13.324	33.088	9.495	23.593
2010	17.382	4.537	12.845	26.922	6.543	20.379

(I-VIII)

Sources: Tourist association of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, 2010, Federal Statistics Office, 2010.

In 2009, international tourists accounted for 71% arrivals and 71.3% bed-nights, which is 7% higher than Canton average. Most tourists came from Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, Italy, Germany, Spain and France. Such a share of international tourists should be developed in the future in order to position tourism as an export-oriented industry.

Based on these indicators, average room occupancy for given capacities can be calculated. The average room occupancy is at the 32.7% level, which leads to the conclusion that there is over-capacity of tourist facilities, which suggests that there is a sufficient number of accommodation facilities that can receive an increased number of tourists.

It should be noted that the average time of stay in Mostar is short (less than two days), which is again at the level of average stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but lower than the Canton average. This in turn points to the nature of tourism in Mostar, which mainly consists of short stays.

Having in mind the short average tourists' stay in Mostar, it can be claimed that Mostar is an interesting destination for excursions (pilgrims to Medjugorje, tourists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro that come for excursions, transit tourists to other destinations). According to USAID data (2008), Mostar is annually visited by 350-450,000 excursionists.

Short stays and the prevalence of excursionists in the number of visitors cannot be considered to be a poor characteristic of tourism situation; however, such a position is unsustainable in a long term from the aspect of use of potentials and resources, profitability and integrated development of tourist offer (and development of Mostar as a whole). Short tourist stays and excursions cannot fully validate the potential Mostar has, and therefore an offer that will integrate all the tourist potentials and ensure tourists' longer stays and higher consumption must be developed.

Having in mind all these indicators, the following can be concluded:

- City of Mostar is an interesting destination for local and international tourists who prefer short stays. Mostar is also a very interesting destination for excursionists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, tourists who come from other neighboring countries for one-day excursions, or transit tourists. However, excursionists prevail in the total number of visits and Mostar can be considered as a prevalently excursion destination.
- Mostar does not make a full use of the tourist potential it has, which should be changed in the future by integrating and exploiting potentials with the aim of creating and positioning the destination.

- International tourists prevail in the tourist structure. Capacity utilization is low (about 33%), and is significantly lower than capacity utilization in the EU.
- Tourism in Mostar is not of a seasonal character, which is a significant advantage compared to well-known destinations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and neighboring countries.

### **3. CHARACTERISTICS OF TOURIST OFFER AND POTENTIALS FOR CITY OF MOSTAR DEVELOPMENT**

Among other things, City of Mostar has the potential for the development of cultural, historical, religious, eco- and agro-tourism, as well as adventure and gastronomical tourism.

The success of tourism of the City of Mostar is primarily based on the tourist offer related to its cultural history heritage, particularly the offer of Old City core (broader area of Old Bridge). This zone, which is under UNESCO protection, is the foundation of the development of cultural and historical Mostar area. In the narrow and broader area adjacent to the old city core, other tourist and hospitality contents are developed, primarily hotels and restaurants.

The city is characterized by a multitude of monuments and sites that make up a true national treasure. In the City area, there are 40 objects declared to be national monuments<sup>2</sup>, and 53 monuments on a temporary list of national monuments.<sup>3</sup> These monuments make up part of the overall tourist offer of the City of Mostar, and many of them are an unavoidable part of sightseeing by tourists.

To an extent, Mostar tourism is part of religious tourism in Medjugorje, and it is necessary to make the best use of the opportunity offered by the existence of tourists – pilgrims in transit to Madjugorje. The nature of Mostar as a multicultural and multi-religious city resulted in the existence of numerous sacral facilities of all religions, which should be used for the development of tourism by unifying a unique sacral and cultural offer.

Having in mind the climate zone Mostar is part of, it has a unique opportunity for the development of winter tourism in the region of Rujiste. Rujiste is a nature park and air spa, situated 25km north of Mostar, in the bed of Prenj and Velez mountains. This mountainous site at 1,050m altitude is an area richest in oxygen in this part of Europe. At the Rujiste plateau there are a number of various plant species, including the plant endemic to the Balkan peninsula called ‘munika’ (*Pinus Heldreichii*), considered to be an endangered species. (Ademovic et al. 2008)

Broader Mostar area offers an opportunity for the development of mountain tourism. Besides Rujiste, extremely interesting areas include mountains of Velez, Prenj, Cvrsnica and Cabulja. Velez, Prenj, Cvrsnica and Cabulja mountains are connected into a geographic whole in the bed of which, on the south side, the City of Mostar is situated, at the level of karst plains Bijelo, Bisca and Malo polje. (Association Altrimondi, 2009) This dolomite and limestone area is rich in diverse plants, medicinal plants and mushrooms, as well as in wild game. The area is unpolluted and offers numerous opportunities for the development of ecotourism, agro-

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<sup>2</sup> Out of a total of 582 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>3</sup> Out of a total of 516 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

tourism, anti-stress and adventure tourism and sports (excursions, photographing, angling).

Ecotourism is considered a market with an intensive growth within tourism as an industry. According to WTO data, with its annual growth of 5% world wide, which accounts for 6% of world gross product, and 11.4% consumption, eco-tourism deserves a special attention. Ecotourism is ecologically responsible travel and visit to relatively preserved regions in order to enjoy nature (and accompanying cultural features – both past and present), with the improvement in environmental protection, small negative influence by visitors, and useful active impact on local population. While tourism oriented to destinations in nature is essentially a simple travel to areas with beautiful nature, ecotourism achieves benefits for local population in ecological, cultural and economic terms. The most important motivations for eco-tourists' travel across the world include enjoying the natural environment, "experience-rich" vacation, and learning through traveling. Agro-tourism is a form of tourism related to rural environment, i.e. to activities that are, or used to be offered by a village. It primarily pertains to accommodation in ambience facilities, and healthy food production. Agro-tourism also pertains to the link to old crafts, nature sights, country life, agriculture and farming. Ecotourism and agro-tourism are closely related and intertwined.

The Podvezlje area is developing agro-tourism – experience of nature, agricultural activities and healthy diet. A broader City area has excellent conditions for the development of agro-tourism, particularly in the context of the trend of developing agricultural production and preserved environment.

It is in the context of agro-tourism development that the Herzegovina Wine Trail project should be viewed – visit and tasting of indigenous Blatina and Zilavka wines in small Herzegovina wineries, including tasting of traditional food in home ambience. The project includes 24 wine cellars in all Herzegovina municipalities. Wine trails introduce tourists to local culture and tradition, since they link a few municipalities and a few sights (Old Bridge in Mostar, Buna spring in Blagaj, 'stecak' necropolis in Radimlja near Stolac, Pocitelj, Roman excavated finds in Mogorjelo near Capljina, Zitomislici monastery, Kravice waterfall near Ljubuski, Hutovo Blato nature park, etc.). Potoci near Mostar traditionally organizes a fair of agriculture, food and tourism called "Cherry Days", the goal of which is the promotion of agro-tourism in ecotourism.

Besides, there are plans for the construction of ethno-village Borina in Zeljusa community, on an eight-hectare area, the contents of which will contribute to the development of agro-tourism.

A great number of people, who are under daily pressure and experience stress situations, tend to use recreation services and undergo various anti-stress programs. The greatest effect in rehabilitation and relaxation has been demonstrated by anti-stress programs related to stay in nature, where City of Mostar has outstanding potentials. These programs are developed at suitable sites, which allow relaxation and visits to nature sights. Food is prepared in the field, which gives a special charm and raises the quality of tourist service to a higher level. These programs are a juncture of adventure, recreation, relaxation, entertainment and gourmand experiences. Due to the configuration of Mostar area, there are possibilities for the development of rafting, hiking, angling, viewing plants and animals, biking, skiing and snowboarding, paragliding, sport aviation, free climbing, alpinism, driving all-terrain vehicles, field

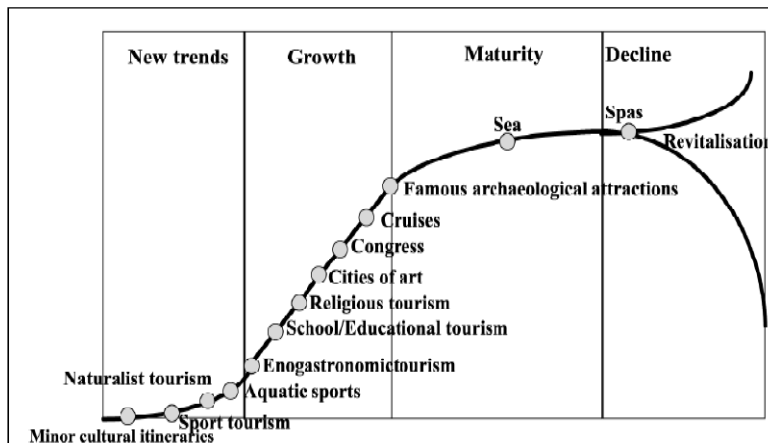
riding, diving, paintball, etc. Adventure and anti-stress tourism is presently being developed at the following sites:

- Rujista – biking (mountain bike), skiing and snowboarding,
- Buna and Blagaj – easy rafting and canoeing,
- Velez, Prenj, Cvrsnica and Cabulja mountains – hiking,
- Podvelezje – biking,
- Podvelezje, Velez and Prenj – hunting.

#### 4. TRADITIONAL FOOD AND BUILDING THE CITY OF MOSTAR TOURIST BRAND

“Fourth generation tourism markets” (Lebe and Milfelner 2006) has been defined by the needs of a “new” consumer, seeking new experiences more suitable to his individual needs (Trunfio et al.2006). It is for this reason that the tourist industry, especially in Europe, evolves towards the “package travel” form (Alvino 2003; Della Corte 2004 re-quoted in Trunfio et al. 2006), offering modular tourist product that will satisfy “new” consumers’ needs and induce emotions, which plays a major role in hedonistic consumption (Irvine and Anderson 2004) and in development of more holistic impressions such as mental pictures and feelings towards a destination, which is a part of destination image (Greaves and Skinner 2010). The needs of new consumers are crafted by demographic changes the “greying” of many populations, with a greater proportion of older people who are relatively well-off; and changing values among younger people, who appear to prefer “experiences” rather than “things” (Jonsson, Kvist and Klefsjo 2006). Therefore, competitive and successful destination brand has to be built on modular product that offers innovative new forms of tourism which are in the introductory phase of their lifecycle, showing high attractiveness but low competitiveness, while the absence of intermediaries requires a specific focus on tour operators (see Picture 1).

**Figure 1.** Forms of tourism according to phase of their life cycle.

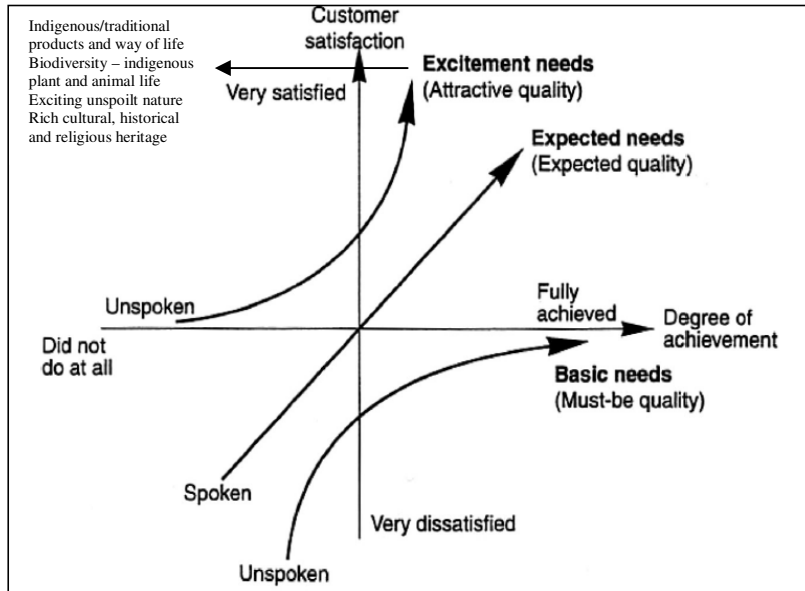


Source: Adapted from Trufino et al., 2006.

To build up key factors of sustainable destination “positioning, quality and efficiency” one has to recognize what makes up the uniqueness, authenticity of space and service, what will satisfy the customer need for excitement, what will emotionally tie them to the area and affect their choice to choose and/or visit the given destination again. It requires an innovative approach and destination the resources of which can form a basis for “diverse, exciting, unique modular tourist product”. This is the basic advantage of the City of Mostar. On a small area, it can offer everything that characterized both the urban tourism (important cultural sights, events and institutions), and the rural tourism (sense of periphery, authenticity, then unspoiled nature, rich and unique biodiversity, exciting diversified landscapes, ancient castles, battlefields and monuments – “lakes and hills which typify the prose and poetry which recount its otherness) (Irvine and Anderson 2004). So, it grants a number of opportunities to be exploited, and makes it possible to provide exciting modular tourist product represented by various and very specific/indigenous heterogeneous products, given by a mix of outputs from different private and public enterprises and of services provided by local infrastructures. Thus, City of Mostar has excellent resources for developing modern quality tourism using specific imagery which somehow reflects prevailing societal values (Williams and Ferguson 2005). However, in order to build a successful brand of such a diverse destination, it is necessary to single out one “topic/service/activity” that will play the role of connective tissue and that will continuously strengthen a sense of indigenoussness and uniqueness of offer, i.e. that will allow the creation of a specific societal space. The selected “topic/service/activity” should create a feeling of “unexpected pleasure”, i.e. satisfy the excitement needs and thus create a loyal customer. Excitement needs refer to the customer obtaining something that is unexpected from the product and the organization. This creates an attractive value to the customer. The customer is not aware of these unexpected needs, and cannot articulate them. By discovering and satisfying these needs, the service provider creates “attractive quality”. Such “excitement needs” are not necessarily restricted to technical innovations; these needs can also be met by services that are well performed or exciting (Jonsson Kvist and Klefsjo 2006). This feeling is the most efficiently built on the unique characteristics of the area which, in the case of City of Mostar include: exceptionally rich indigenous biodiversity, dramatic landscape and living tradition, which gives both people, food and area a “specific, strongly expressed taste and flavor” - an a unique identity for a destination that enables potential visitors to differentiate one destination from another (Greaves and Skinner 2010). Having in mind that: (i) enogastronomic tourism shows a high growth rate at an international level, provided that Italy gains a strong competitive advantage from typicality, which characterizes all the typologies of tourism (Trunfio et al. 2006), (ii) and that tourists devote approximately one-third of their total expenditures to shopping (Hurst and Niehm 2009) and (iii) that affective dimensions of regional specialties relate to the sense of identity and belonging to the region of production or to the evocation of past experiences and emotions such as those experienced on the occasion of holidays spent in the area (Stefani et al. 2006), a logical conclusion follows that indigenous/traditional products and way of life, which reflect the area culture, its specifics and uniqueness should be the basis and connective tissue of the City of Mostar innovative tourist product and brand.



**Figure 2.** Opportunities for City of Mostar to allow the satisfaction of tourists' excitement needs



Source: Adapted from Jonsson Kvist and Klefsjo, 2006

In other words, innovatively designed offer of indigenous/traditional food could emphasize the unknown, attractive distinctiveness of the City of Mostar, i.e. present unforgettable scents of mountains and karst plains (honey, aromatic, medicinal plants), unexpected plant and animal life (protected, indigenous species – e.g. Zlatovcica fish, chamois, etc), sources of beauty and health (indigenous Poljak beans, Alica cherry, bee products, Blatina and Zilavka grapes, forest fruits), and rich cultural-history heritage (the picture of civilization development, particularly the four world-largest religions). This offer primarily implies a clear mapping of endemic, indigenous and attractive biological species, products, settlements, landscape, cultural and historical events, legends and way of life. Further, it implies food production in the traditional/organic way, and the definition of innovative way of food consumption that will arouse a feeling of “uniqueness” and “adventure”, “return to and getting to know ancestors”, i.e. that will be unexpected but that could be organized in the rural and urban environment. The basis of such an offer should consist of tours/gastro- offer: “Preserving kingdom” – visit to Blagaj fortress, scenario and menu that should associate to Austrian soldiers on the watch in Blagaj; then “Connecting worlds” – reminder of caravans that were traveling from east to west, enjoying the fragrant meadows and local food – light walk with lunch; then Mostar ‘sevdalinka’ singing, etc. Such an offer should be accompanied with the availability of food and traditional products in the form of souvenirs that will convey image of the region in terms of natural environment or human factors depending on the raw versus transformed nature of food (Stefani et al., 2006). In this way, we will build a completely new and challenging product that will be “aestheticised cultural goods” which will enable tourist organization to find a niche and

differentiate themselves from their competitors, which will become the basis for survival within a globally competitive market-place (Greaves and Skinner 2010).

According to the WTO (Jonsson, Kvist and Klefsjo 2006), quality in tourism can be defined as: "...the satisfaction of all the legitimate product and service needs, requirements and expectations of the consumer, at an acceptable price, in conformity with the underlying quality determinants such as safety and security, hygiene, accessibility, transparency, authenticity and harmony of the tourism activity concerned with its human and natural environment." Thus, an innovative brand implies building an overall system that will allow tourists' full satisfaction. In this sense, information on the new product must be accessible, all the tourist infrastructure should be available, but people must preserve their specifics since they are the "soul" of the destination, because they are mostly open to contacting visitors and tourists, and the contact should be friendly even with people who have no tourism business of their own (Lebe and Milfelner 2006). Thus, building such a type of tourist offer and brand depends on the success in organizing various stakeholders, building of an innovative organization that will attract all the key participants working together to pursue a meta-mission while also pursuing their individual mission. In other words, it is extremely important to accurately define the common meta-goal that will gather together all the essential participants and motivate them to implement the plan. In a "politically/ethnically" divided city, where there is no trust among people, it will be a true challenge to create such a common goal and establish an organization that will allow efficient cooperation between essential participants in the sector. In addition, such a tourist offer requires specific and sophisticated knowledge and skills, and permanent collection of information on tourist satisfaction and needs. At the moment, City of Mostar does not have adequate human resources nor a mechanism that will provide the described information. This can endanger the efficient building of an innovative tourist product and brand of the City of Mostar, and slow down the reconstruction and development of this essential industry. On the other hand, the awareness of the need for inter-sectoral and partnership cooperation has already been considerably developed within agro-business. In other words, doing business in rural areas and within the agro-business implies the establishment of partnership relation with different players. Such an experience of the sector, which will form the basis for such a tourist product, can contribute to the overcoming of the described weakness of the City and be the basis for its successful development.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The City of Mostar owns a unique mix of resources that can be used for the development of an innovative tourist product, which will have a form of module consisting of activities that originally belong to various tourism types: rural, agro-environmental, aquatic, religious, cultural, etc. Such a product should offer unexpected pleasures to tourists meet their excitement needs and induce emotions that will tie them to the destination and motivate them to come again and/or prolong their stay. Such a product should be "aestheticised cultural goods" that will form a suitable basis for building a distinctive brand/image of the City of Mostar as a desired tourist destination. The basis and connective tissue of such a tourist product of City of Mostar should include the indigenous/traditional products and way of life, which reflect the culture,

specifics and uniqueness of the area. The basis of such an offer should include tours/gastro- offer: “Preserving kingdom” – visit to Blagaj fortress, scenario and menu that should associate to Austrian soldiers on the watch in Blagaj; then “Connecting worlds” – reminder of caravans that were traveling from east to west, enjoying the fragrant meadows and local food – light walk with lunch; then Mostar ‘sevdalinka’ singing, etc.

In order to create such a tourist brand, it is necessary to build trust among different public and private players that deliver different parts of the innovative tourist module. In other words, such a complex and sophisticated product requires a “number of ingredients experienced over time”, and it is therefore impossible to have a single player who has the control over everything. Thus, it is necessary to build an extremely decentralized structure of a great number of partners, who will deliver their shares of product of the agreed quality in a time. The building of such a partnership should use experiences of business organization in rural areas and agro-business. In other words, such a product could serve to establish a fresh and efficient urban-rural communication, i.e. provide integrated and sustainable regional development.

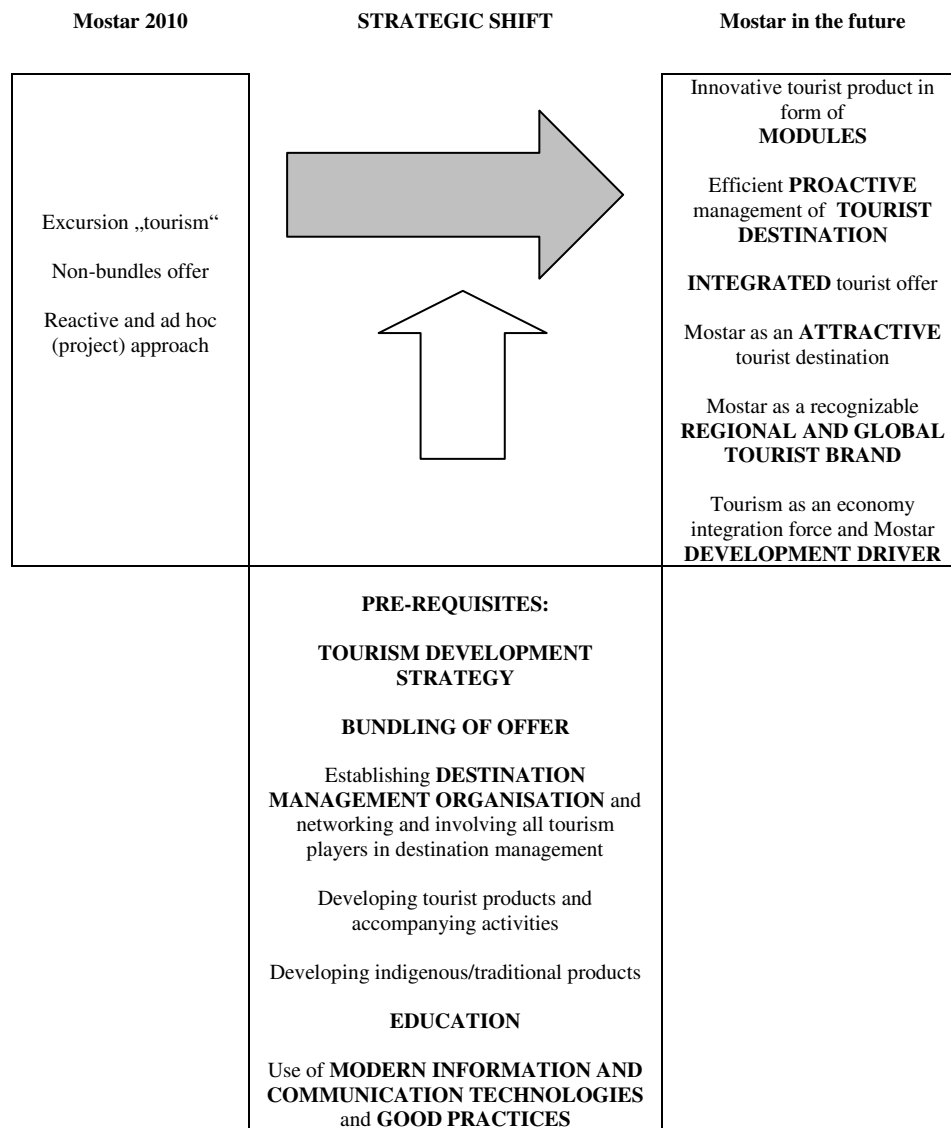
Such tourist products which depend on their portrayal as appropriate places for visitors are vulnerable to any change in perception. As the data demonstrate, the impact of any circumstance which detracts from that attraction has serious economic consequences (Irvine and Anderson 2004)

Thus, challenges posed for all the tourism players in Mostar are following:

- managing the City of Mostar brand as a unique tourist destination, i.e. defining a common goal which will form a basis for building partnership among the sector stakeholders
- integrating the existing and developing new and innovative tourist products, which will send a unique message and which will create a sense of uniqueness and differentiation
- developing capacities and knowledge of tourism players, particularly mechanisms for collecting information about customer experience and customer satisfaction, and the information obtained must be used as a basis for appropriate quality improvements
- increasing sales and average tourist stay in Mostar,
- integrating the offer with other destinations (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Monenegro), and
- monitoring trends and application of information and communication technologies.

Thus, having in mind the described challenges and the existing natural, historical and spatial assumptions for tourism development, it is necessary to work on the development and holistic management of tourism and tourist destination of the City of Mostar, that is:

**Figure 3.** Strategic shift in the development of tourism in City of Mostar



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