DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY OF HORSE TOURISM

2009-2013

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1 The current status of horse tourism in Finland

In order to guarantee coordinated development of Finland's tourism services as defined in Finland's Tourism Strategy 2020 (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2006), themed national product development programmes are being drafted. The key values of the development programmes are profitable, year-round business activities, sustainable tourism, safety, fulfilling of customer value propositions and Finnishness. Horse tourism has been designated as one of the themes to be developed in the national Outdoors Finland activity development programme (for more information about the programme, please visit the website). Small-scale development activities have already taken place, but the need for more extensive national development work is clear. This development strategy has been created together with key partners in the Finnish equestrian sector.

Definitions

In horse tourism, horses are used as a part of the tourism product. They are an essential element of the tourism activity and the creation of an "adventure", a memorable experience. Programme services are produced in natural and/or man-made environments in an environmentally responsible manner. Horse tourism is very extensive. According to the Fédération Internationale de Tourisme Équestre (FITE), horse tourism products can be classified into two categories: 1) horseback holidays and 2) horse-related events and tourism. FITE defines horse tourism as follows: recreational horse-related activity practised away from the customer's usual place of residence. Target groups range from professionals of the equestrian sector to persons with no prior experience of horses or riding. Horse tourism products include horseback hiking, cross-country horseback riding, sleighing, horse sledding, workhorse shows, assisted horseback riding, horse shows and other horse tourism activities (such as moving logs and ground handling). They also include horseback riding training holidays and courses, skijoring and other horse-related events, including trotting and other competitions.

Nature and the countryside are an essential part of the appeal of horse tourism. Horse tourism products include professional instruction, equipment, meals, and potentially also accommodation and other services. The customers need no prior experience of horses, and some products are specifically targeted for beginners. The customers can be professionals, hobbyists or beginners.

The term horseback hiking refers to hiking in nature with a horse. Horseback hiking is guided professional activity where proper equipment is used and safety matters are taken into account. Trips can be organized for riders of different skill levels. Calm and strong breeds such as Icelandic horses and Finnhorses are used for horseback hiking. A cross-country horseback riding excursion is a subcategory of horseback hiking products. Cross-country riding excursions are shorter and do not feature an overnight stay.

According to MoNo (Norms of Tourism Programme Services, report 4:2004), horseback hiking products can be classified as follows:

- Easy – does not require previous experience of the activity
- Normal – requires some experience of the activity
- Demanding – requires special skills related to the activity
- Very demanding – requires special skills and extensive experience of the activity
Current status

Horse-related activities have enjoyed increasing global popularity over the recent years. In the United Kingdom, the number of people engaging in horseback riding has increased from 2 million in 1995/1996 to 4.3 million in 2005/2006, with approximately 50 per cent practising horseback riding regularly and approximately one quarter embarking on at least one horse tourism trip abroad every year.

In Europe, there are approximately 20 million registered individuals engaging in horse-related activities and approximately 2 million horseback hikers. The international horse tourists coming to Finland are usually independent travellers, although there are groups as well, especially during the Christmas season. A typical horse tourist is a woman of 35 to 45 years who practises or has previously practised horseback riding. The horse tourists who use Finnish horse tourism services are primarily private customers; corporate customers comprise only 10 per cent and international customers only 5 per cent of the total volume.

Finland has approximately 200 companies that are active in the horse tourism sector, but for many of them horse tourism is not their primary business.

- The approximate number of riding stables is 15,000.
- The number of stables (riding schools) that belong to the Equestrian Federation of Finland is 250.
- The Trail Riding Union of Finland has 17 member stables.
- The number of horse hobbyists in Finland is almost 200,000. Approximately 50,000 of them take part in trotting competitions.

The number of horse owners is 35,000, and the total number of employees working with horses is 15,000 part-time and full-time employees (Hippolis, Minna Martin-Päivä 2008).

Finland has 43 trotting tracks, and trotting races are arranged throughout the year. In terms of audience numbers of different sports, trotting is the second in popularity after ice hockey. Trotting competitions range from major national competitions such as the internationally known Finlandia Race, Great Finnish Derby, Suur-Holola Race and St. Michel Race, to small local competitions. Major competitions are also arranged for different age groups. The biggest trotting event in Finland is the Kuninkuusravit Race (“The Royal Race”), where Finnhorses compete for the title of racing king and racing queen. In terms of tourism, notable events also include the races that take place near tourist centres as well as the atmospheric summer races and ice races around Finland. The almost 600 annual trotting competitions attract nearly 800,000 spectators every year (www.raviradat.fi, www.kesaravit.fi).

In addition to trotting competitions, Finland has many horse-related events of interest to tourists, ranging from small local competitions and fairs to major international events.

The most important horse-related tourist events are:

- Suomenratsujen Kuninkaalliset (Ypäjä, September)
- Young Horse Festival (Ypäjä, August)
- Kuninkuusravit (July-August, touring event)
- The Finnhorse Work Competition (June, touring)
- Helsinki International Horse Show (summer)
- Bastioni Horse Festival (Hamina, June, biennale)
- SeaHorse Week (Hanko, summer)
- FinnDerby (Ypäjä, summer)
- Steeplechase GP
- Trotting events
• Horse shows

Other important horse tourism destinations

For more destinations and services related to horse tourism, please see www.hippolis.fi/hevosmatkailu.

2 Future challenges and possibilities

As a destination for horse tourists, Finland is safe, exotic and interesting. Nature tourism attracts visitors and horses spark interest. Finland is still, however, a relatively unknown destination for horse tourism. There is plenty of potential, but most of it remains untapped.

The quiet, clean and spacious Finnish nature with its flora, fauna, four seasons and good terrain create a solid foundation for further development of horse tourism. With the current highlighting of environmental values, horse tourism has excellent opportunities for significant growth. Companies offering programme services must, however, be aware of the environmental impacts caused by their activities and understand the principles of sustainable development. All products must be planned and implemented in such a way that their potentially harmful impacts are minimised. Horse tourism is year-round business, and the Finnish winter offers unique opportunities for this activity. Climate change and declining snow levels can also be an opportunity for horse tourism.

The popularity of horseback riding is increasing. European horseback riders and horse clubs and associations are a great potential relatively close to Finland.

The Finnhorse

The Finnhorse is Finland's speciality and an important asset for Finnish horse tourism. The current number of Finnhorses is approximately 19,500, one third of all horses in Finland. The Finnhorse is an original and unique breed that has been developed in Finland. Its versatile uses, suitability for both children and adults, character and superiority in applications such as sledding offer good opportunities for horse tourism. The multilingual material produced to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Finnhorse is a good starting point for developing further material for horse tourism, and the brand work focusing on the Finnhorse will open new opportunities. The characteristics of the Finnhorse that should be emphasised are its uniqueness and sporty character as well as its uniquely Finnish nature, its role in history and its modern applications. Service products focusing on the Finnhorse are an important strength and key asset for the Finnish tourism industry, but these characteristics have so far been underutilised. The number of Finnhorses being used for tourism has increased significantly over the past few years. The challenges that are still unsolved are its availability and its international visibility, which both need to be improved. The uniqueness of the Finnhorse has, however, now been noted, and its market value is being put to use. Horse tourism services produced for international target groups are an important way to make the Finnhorse better known.

The international repute of the Finnhorse must be supported by linking it closely with international horse tourism. Our special national building blocks for horse tourism are the historical anecdotes, the long traditions, the climate, the native horse breeds and their special qualities and purposes, as well as local nature and culture. The Finnhorse provides these building blocks for Finnish horse tourism.

From the perspective of horse tourism, information about the Finnhorse should be made available on the Finnish Tourist Board's Finland portal in the horse tourism section.
The Icelandic horse

Icelandic horses have been bred in Iceland for centuries, and we are enjoying the fruits of this work also in Finland. The special characteristic of the Icelandic horse is the ambling gait known as the tölt. The Icelandic horse’s great ability to cooperate, small size and pack behaviour provide good possibilities for using this breed with customers and as a travel and hiking horse for both beginners and professionals.

Horse tourism entrepreneurship

The number of experienced and skilled entrepreneurs working in the horse tourism sector is increasing steadily, but the need for skills development is clear. Horse tourism is a relatively new and developing field, making counselling and support work a key priority.

The safety instructions issued by the Consumer Agency and entrepreneurs who have been trained accordingly hold a key position in the internationalisation of horse tourism in Finland.

What is also especially important is the skill level and constant skills development of the entrepreneurs in horse tourism. Obtaining and retaining skilled workforce is already clearly a challenge. The training of entrepreneurs must be continuous, systematic and diversified.

When aiming at the international market, collaboration with other entrepreneurs and parties in horse tourism is very important. Knowledge of international customers is still insufficient, and more information is required to support product development and marketing. The products and services targeted at international customers must be defined clearly, and the service providers must commit to international, often fast-paced business. This requires long-term focus and perseverance, high and uniform product quality, and a correct balance between price and quality.

Existing legislation does not recognise horse tourism as such, sometimes leading to marginalisation caused by the strict definitions of tourism and agricultural industries. This is one reason why close attention must be paid to the operating conditions of the horse tourism industry and the representation of its interests.

Hippolis ry collaborates with the FITE and acts as the meeting point between consumers and producers.

The biggest problem faced by horse tourism companies is profitability, which is often affected by the fact that horse tourism is for many a secondary occupation or an additional service. Profitability considerations may be neglected and the pricing may be unrealistic. The amateurish nature of the activities often further distorts the pricing. Business volumes must be relatively high to enable the service producers to focus on their horses and the development of their own and their employees' skills. Tools and methods for sharing knowledge in a networked environment should be developed based on currently available instruments, and the knowledge should be distributed as widely as possible.

Products available

The range of products currently available is relatively diverse, but much more could be done. Improving overall service quality requires effort; the horse tourism sector would benefit from a quality classification scheme that would ensure professional and safe implementation of all products and services. Questions related to quality have been addressed in more detail in Section 7 (Theme-specific product criteria: Quality criteria in FTB campaigns). A horse tourism route network that could serve both international and domestic horse tourism would be essential.
Product development activities have much untapped potential. Products could be made more dynamic and attractive by utilising the existing traditions and stories and by making the experiences more memorable and entertaining. The objective must be to implement functional, tested, high-quality product packages. Examples of new possibilities for using the Finnhorse for horse tourism include the following:

- Memorable and exciting, fact-based Finnhorse activity excursions such as courses, seminars, camps and hiking trips for horse enthusiasts and, in the future, also for professionals.

- Adventure excursions to the roots of the Finnhorse to Finnhorse centres established in Ypäjä, Lapland, Koli and other attractive nature destinations. Each of the centres would focus on its own speciality: Ypäjä, for example, on horse sports (trotting, riding), the centre in Lapland on themed hiking excursions, etc.

- Unique and memorable Finnhorse events.

On the whole, the following factors should be addressed in the range of products currently offered:

- Products targeted at selected customer groups (groups and individual travellers)
- Utilisation of existing product criteria
- Winter, year-round activities
- Utilising the special characteristics of local nature
- Demand
- Paying attention to food and restaurant services
- Different themes, such as local stories and tranquillity
- Emphasis on creating memorable experiences
- The Finnhorse
- Increased use of the horse as a means of transport
- Well-being
- Culture
- History
- Sustainable development
- Utilisation of technology
- Products and services created for special tourist groups
- Products and services as a part of welfare and health tourism
- Products and services as a part of conference services and incentive tourism
- Products and services targeted at professionals

Horse tourism centres and services can be established in connection with existing riding schools, trotting tracks and tourist centres. The popularity of multi-activity packages is increasing, and horse tourism should be made a part of them. Many horse tourists are professionals whose skills should also be employed in product development.

More effective utilisation of the existing route network is in line with the principles of sustainable development.

What the market needs now is functional, tested and high-quality product packages, where close attention is paid to the quality of accommodation and restaurant services. The best way for meeting customer expectations is to carefully select the "spearheads" that the packages rely on and develop them in a logical way.

Challenges
The primary challenges for the development of horse tourism are the lack of sales and marketing infrastructure, problems with profitability, the shortage of skilled workforce, the availability of horses that are suitable for tourist services, the current economic decline, the tightening of various regulations, increasing competition and other changes taking place in the operational environment, including the changing consumers, values and expectations. The economic decline and the associated changes in values can, however, also be turned into positive trends by emphasising the "soft values", the ethical ("occurring in harmony with the horse and nature") and ecological nature of horse tourism and its role as a building block of well-being.

3 Goals for 2009–2013

Horse tourism has a strong foothold among the Finnish tourist services currently offered, and safe and high-quality horse tourism products created by networked partners are readily available via both domestic and foreign tourism distribution channels. Companies that provide services professionally are developing their operations further, simultaneously improving their competitiveness and developing their skills. Finland's image as a horse tourism destination and the home of the Finnhorse is well known (the aim is to make the Finnhorse an internationally known breed whose role is highlighted and utilised in horse tourism). The sales numbers of packages produced jointly by many small entrepreneurs have increased in selected key markets. There is now regular monitoring of tourist volumes and tourism income.

4 Main markets and their key areas

According to the 2004 and 2005 Border Interview Surveys (Puoskari 2008), 2 per cent of activity tourists visiting Finland engaged in horseback riding during their stay in Finland. Weighed estimates would therefore predict approximately 3,500 horse-riding tourists every summer. The gender distribution of these tourists has a slight female bias with 57 per cent of the tourists being female and 43 per cent male. The horse-riding tourists spent an average of 64 euros per day while in Finland (S=91).

Number of tourists taking part in outdoor activities by country of residence (unit: 1,000 tourists)

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<th>FR</th>
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<th>IT</th>
<th>NL</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>8.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<td>4.1</td>
<td>10.7</td>
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<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>11.3</td>
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<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cycling</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
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<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canoeing and rowing</td>
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<td>8.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<tr>
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Border Interview Survey (1 May – 31 Oct 2007)

The main markets consist of the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, France, Russia, and potentially also the USA.

An analysis focusing on competitors will be made later.
5 Key points for development

The most important points for further development of horse tourism are the developing of a brand for Finnish horse tourism, product development, skills development, marketing, networking and strengthening the status of horse tourism.

The measures shall be implemented using means such as improved use of existing fund allocations, more efficient procedures and operations, EU project funding and the contribution of individual entrepreneurs. For more information on activities to be undertaken, please see Horse Tourism Action Plan 2009–2013.