

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT FOR VLADIMIR AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES

Year Two Report: 2005

2 August

Bruce E. Wicks, PhD

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA

Summary Comments

Important progress has been made in Vladimir in 2004/2005 that will help promote a viable tourism industry for the city. For example the attractiveness of the city center continues to improve as buildings are renovated, old macadam sidewalks are replaced with concrete paving stones and bricks, flowers are planted and litter is promptly removed. Such activities should be commended and certainly continued. More important, however, is the recognition that tourism needs to be managed at both the city and Oblast levels, and that now is the time for the authorities to act. The emergence of interest in creating a new Tourism Development Center (TDC) and a concurrent proposal to construct and staff a Tourism Information Center (TIC) is evidence of such a desire. These actions clearly demonstrate that city officials and leaders are more widely recognizing the benefits of tourism development and that they are beginning to respond affirmatively by building positive momentum toward constructive projects. The Oblast administration has also shown an increased recognition of the economic and social value of the tourism industry, and they are making a commitment of support. In addition, a growing awareness of tourism's benefits in cities like Morum and other communities in the Golden Ring area can only serve to improve the region's overall attractiveness as a tourism destination.

The increased awareness of tourism's potential for the city and region is a required first step toward successful and sustainable tourism development. However, the development prospects for the city and region are now at a critical juncture. Major players or stakeholders such as the city and Oblast administrations must begin a dialogue to discuss the assumption of responsibility for tourism development activities particularly as it pertains to a TIC and TDC and the many smaller supporting projects that have been suggested. Simply stated: Who is going to do what? It should be noted that the report produced last year recommended that a TDC be created that was independent of any specific administration or business. Such reasoning centers on the concept that for a TDC to reach its potential it will need to earn the respect and trust of many different individuals and organizations. This advice was not taken and the comments and recommendations presented in this report will accept that reality, although our earlier recommendation still stands.

Based upon personal interviews we conducted it appears that at this time the combined city-sponsored TDC and TIC will have considerable difficulty achieving its goals as currently envisioned. The charter for this new entity suggests that it aims to be a regional tourism support organization as well as serving city interests. To do this will require significant voluntary contributions of time, information and resources by other administrations and organizations at the same time as the Oblast, with more wide-reaching authority, seeks to provide a similar service. With the many projects and programs that could be developed in and for Vladimir, it's apparent the city's TDC should adopt a more local focus and provide support for regional and national tourism efforts that will also benefit the city—rather than trying to duplicate the Oblast's efforts..

The TIC concept for the city stands on even less stable ground as it will require considerable financing for construction/renovation, staffing and operation. Of even greater concern is the Oblast's plans to seek Federal funding for a series of Golden Ring information centers. Not only have they already selected an ideal location

for one in Vladimir next to the Golden Gates, but they are the logical level of government to support tourism information and development at the regional level. Like the city leaders, the Oblast is proposing an expanded commitment to tourism at this time and it has an important regional niche to fill. It would truly be a shame if the city and Oblast's new-found energy in support of tourism was squandered through a duplication of effort or wasteful in-fighting. An additional serious problem with the city TIC will be the proposal to include a new travel agency and retail store to help support it. Not only should government avoid competing with the private sector, but in this instance such a business is very likely to engender resentment within the tourism sector exactly when trust and collaboration are most needed. Although we are well aware of the financial constraints facing the city administration, we have serious concerns that this endeavor is unlikely to be successful either in the short or long term.

The Golden Ring region has great brand recognition or identity but is undervalued by visitors because its attractions have not been thoroughly developed or properly promoted. For Vladimir the overarching immediate concern for all tourism development stakeholders and activities should be to focus on how to keep tourists in the city longer. More lengthily visits (greater than 3 or 4 hours) will translate into increased overnight stays, additional meals purchased, added admission fees and more shopping expenditures. If scarce resources are going to be committed to tourism development there should be a demonstrable return on that investment.

The following report is divided into three sections. The first is labeled Process Tasks for the city and Oblast. The second section includes specific recommendations for both administrations and the third section outlines what the American Home tourism project team is prepared, in principal and assuming adequate funding, to assist with during the following year.

Process Tasks: Vladimir Tourism Development Center: City and Oblast Administrations

Much needs to be done to coordinate tourism development interests in Vladimir and other Golden Ring cities. Particularly at the beginning of a new tourism development initiative, many activities must be undertaken to build trust and consensus among tourism stakeholders in order to facilitate working together toward a common goal. These activities are best described as "process tasks" as they help build capacity for tourism development by employing the collective strengths in the community (synergy). Either in parallel or following these actions more specific or tangible products need to be developed.

Please note: The items in the following bulleted lists are NOT in priority order.

In order to promote mutually beneficial cooperative efforts, the following need to be done:

- Regularly hold meetings of tourism leaders and other interested individuals and organization representatives. Because of the diversity within the tourism industry, and the need for cooperation between the sectors or spheres, research has demonstrated the overwhelming importance of shared communication to promote tourism success. Our observations indicate that this is not now occurring—even though this critically important step will not require any out-of-pocket expenses.
- Develop tourism networks regionally and nationally. The Federal government has expressly identified increased travel and tourism as an economic development goal for the country and specifically the Golden Ring region. Without an active and visible presence where and when tourism related resource allocation decisions are made at the Federal level, Vladimir and the other Golden Ring cities will miss valuable opportunities. In addition, regional leaders will need to lobby for changes in existing laws and regulations that will facilitate tourism development. For example, in addition to lobbying for a simplified international visa application process it

would greatly help if local cities could receive tax revenues from businesses operating on their territory but with their legal headquarters in another city, usually Moscow. The current tax law that has a hotel located in Suzdal that is owned by a firm in Moscow pay taxes in Moscow clearly needs to be changed. A bloc of tourism destinations, businesses and governments can have more of an impact when speaking with one focused and collective voice. This effort should generate additional results if it is vigorously coordinated by the Oblast administration for the entire region. Finally, the travel market from Moscow is so large that Vladimir needs to develop close relations with tour operators there.

- Begin a bottom-up tourism development process in Vladimir. This includes actively bringing community leaders from all sectors together to collectively prioritize tourism development goals. Now that the TDC concept has been formally recognized this task should be a high level first priority. Consensus building activities should be employed to help promote better understanding of divergent views, minimize possible conflicts and prioritize tourism development goals.
- Identify training needs for tourism leaders and the hospitality sector. This should be followed by the development of curriculum objectives and a search for appropriate instructors. Where funds are available, new tourism development staff should join professional associations and attend conferences. For example, the carnival committee director might benefit greatly from joining the International Festivals and Events Association: Europe (www.ifea.com) and learning from European event professionals.
- With regard to developing the Golden Ring brand, it will be very important to create and produce additional educational material about the historical and cultural attractions in Vladimir and the other Oblast tourist destinations. In this connection, the Museum Reserve appears to do a very good job of providing visitors with Russian-language interpretation of their displays, but for international visitors not knowing Russian, educational materials are sorely lacking. It must be kept in mind that tourists at historical and cultural attractions are there primarily to learn. Obviously, an accurate and informative message translated into popular languages will be very helpful.
- The city and Oblast need to designate staff to work in support of the TIC and other promotional or developmental efforts. To the extent feasible, these staff and community leaders should visit other cities (domestic and foreign) to learn how they are developing their travel industries and then share that knowledge locally.
- Cultural events such as art exhibits and various performances are natural and complimentary additions to the historic architectural and religious attractions. Where appropriate the Oblast and city should actively make these local resources available to tourists. Among other things, this will require preparing and keeping up-to-date a calendar of events—and making sure it is made available to tour operators and individual visitors.

Acton Steps: City. To promote the City of Vladimir and encourage longer stays by visitors, the following recommendations should be considered:

- It is very important for Vladimir to develop and encourage new activities like special events that communicate a coherent theme or brand message to visitors. Obviously this should revolve around the abundant historical and cultural assets the city and region are now known for. To that end, the city should make a concerted effort to develop and implement special events that follow the historical theme and compliment existing attractions and tourist expectations. This may mean devising new partnerships with other organizations and allocating resources for these activities. New events that are unrelated to a theme may be nice to have but do not contribute to enlarging the destination's attractiveness to traditional tourists and tour operators. This is particularly important when trying to attract visitors during the shoulder and off seasons. For example, festivals and celebrations during the Christmas season could be a large tourist draw as might large secular performances of

church music. It may also be helpful to interpret the history of the city in fun and exciting ways such as presenting fun facts or personalities that engage locals and tourists alike.

- Define the City administration's role in tourism development. City leaders should examine closely the mission of the International Relations and Tourism Department with the goal of maximizing economic return to the city. It appears likely that greater emphasis should be placed on supporting efforts of the new Tourism Development Center (TDC) concept with dedicated Department support staff. This should include revised job descriptions and a review of compensation and training needs. The TDC should remain as autonomous as possible and city staff should contribute to projects that support the larger effort. As noted above, the Oblast, city and other parties need to prioritize tasks and decide who will commit to performing those tasks. This might include assigning someone specific responsibility for keeping track of all city-related special events, and then making sure that these events are adequately advertised locally and beyond. When no one has clear responsibility for specific tasks, nothing tends to get done.

- The Vladimir administration should include a line item in its budget for tourism promotion that will be used to produce materials for travelers. Even if very small to start, such an action confirms a commitment and underlines the continued need for such expenditures.

- To the extent feasible, facilitate the construction of new "European quality" lodging facilities that are in close proximity to the city's historic attractions.

- Provide—or arrange for the provision by one or more private firms—clean public restrooms. Morum has just completed such a project and it might be used as a model for Vladimir.

- The Golden Ring communities need to take maximum advantage of the World Heritage status that has been awarded by the UN to a number of architectural monuments in the region. Currently that valuable recognition is rarely noted. They should start by mentioning this important designation frequently on all promotional materials and by using whatever logo or trade mark that comes with it. Some World Heritage sites even fly the UN flag. It may also be helpful for the city and Oblast to lobby to get the official name changed. It is currently "White Stone Monuments of Vladimir and Suzdal." The term "monuments" is very confusing both in English and in Russian. A far better term might be "architecture" or even "churches." This provides a more accurate description. (In English the phrase "Stone Monuments" might mean "tombstones" to some—which is hardly a positive invitation to tourists!) An additional reason for changing the name is that the term "Stone Monuments" may relate to the architectural significance of the sites, but it does nothing to suggest or support their cultural importance that many travelers and pilgrims are seeking.

- A draft tourism site plan for "Old Vladimir" should be produced as a working document. The physical location of proposed developments needs to be constantly reviewed and shared with all concerned. Many notable suggestions have been made with regard to such developments and each will have an impact on the others. Examples include, but are not limited to: a new shopping mall, tour bus parking, a pedestrian street, visitor centers, craft/souvenir display area, public lavatories and auto parking lots. Where are the optimum places for such facilities and how will they interact with each other? Has there been planning for future growth? If planning is not done now, there is a very high probability that major mistakes will be made. Different departments in the city administration (for example: Tourism, Facilities and Construction, History and Roads) must work together on this. For example, in the near future a growing number of independent travelers, both domestic and international, are likely to arrive by personal auto and will not stay or have a positive experience if they are unable to park their vehicle with reasonable convenience.

- The city has been successful in creating new and distinct organizations in the past that have brought like-minded people together. They should do so again by helping to organize: 1) a Cultural Arts Council to help

provide authentic cultural experiences for tourists and 2) an Arts and Crafts Guild to promote the local production and sale of gifts/souvenirs that are uniquely Russian and ideally clearly tied to Vladimir and the Golden Ring.

- The Vladimir-Russia.net English-language tourism web site should receive additional and continued attention as it is of excellent quality and the city should not duplicate efforts in creating another layer of tourism sites on the Internet. This valuable tourism information asset should be translated into other languages, including Russian, to serve the rapidly growing use of the Internet as a travel planning tool. Cooperation between the American Home and local administrations concerning the collection and maintenance of traveler information will be needed to keep this resource current and helpful for potential visitors. The city's webpage should provide a general welcome and information but more specifically it should target the traditional economic development (business investment) audience. One webpage can't adequately communicate to all audiences.
- Develop accountability measures and collect data that will demonstrate the success of initiatives undertaken. Such measures might include but not be limited to: economic impact (i.e., the approximate amount of money tourism brings to the community), hotel occupancy rates, number of international visitors, website "hits," and Tourism Information Center visits. Clearly the Tourism Academy and/or the State University should be well positioned to assist with these activities as student projects and, if possible, externally funded research.

Action Steps: Oblast

- To facilitate collaboration and communication among Golden Ring tourism stakeholders an ideal project for the Oblast would be to periodically produce and distribute a free industry newsletter about tourism developments. A newsletter is desirable as many stakeholders may not be able or willing to attend meetings yet have a serious need to keep informed. Widely distributed, such communications serve to inform and generate support for tourism among the larger community and its leaders.
- Maintain Oblast-wide databases of lodging facilities, restaurants, destinations and other points of interest, shopping establishments and special events. Such data will be needed to help provide prospective and on-site tourists with current, accurate and inclusive travel information (maps, brochures, web sites, etc.).
- At the highest level possible, the Oblast leadership should meet with their counterpart in the city administration and come to a consensus on how to move tourism development forward in an effective and efficient way. Such decisions can then be communicated through the respective support staff of each administration and meaningful actions taken.

Ultimately the goal is to get leaders thinking like tourism development specialists. This means understanding the need to collaborate and viewing the travel experience through the tourists' eyes. Although great strides are being made, much needs to be done to close the gap between old Soviet era tourism services and the needs of modern sophisticated domestic and international travelers.

Proposed Demonstration Tasks (Products) by The American Home and the Tourism Development Team

- Assist in the development and testing of an English language tourist map that includes an array of relevant information for visitors.
- Translate the new English language web site into Russian and possibly Mandarin Chinese and German

for the growing international markets.

- Encourage and facilitate the preparation of English language interpretative material for museums, in addition to producing English language promotional materials and translations of restaurant menus. In the 21st Century English is the language of tourism, and most Europeans (and many others) with available resources and an interest in traveling to the Golden Ring are fluent in English.
- Develop and design a standard system of signage that will direct travelers, particularly international visitors, to key attractions, the proposed information center, souvenir shops, restaurants, parking and public lavatories. To the extent feasible, recognized international signage should be used.
- Create data collection templates for: restaurants, destinations (museums, etc.), shops, clubs and cafes, cultural performances, outdoor recreation, lodging, special events, and crafts/souvenirs. Such templates will serve as the structure of an extensive database for tourism assets in Vladimir Oblast and possibly beyond.
- Help organize and provide a part of the funding for a trip to the Polish cities of Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot for local tourism supporters. Such an educational tour will provide an opportunity to learn how this region has managed to organize a successful tourism development effort while transitioning to a free market economy.
- Conduct research and produce a report summarizing the employment of archeological sites as tourist destinations—to help with the development of the Sungir site.
- Prepare a Business Plan for an Oblast souvenir shop.
- Continue to explore sources of funds to support this valuable tourism development initiative.

Concluding Personal Admonition—Bruce Wicks

Tourism for the Golden Ring and Vladimir can develop rapidly with great local cooperation and considerable new revenues or it can move ahead slowly, one step at a time. Either approach is acceptable if trust and collaboration exist among the members of the diverse tourism community, and if there is an unwavering shared commitment to developing QUALITY experiences for tourists.

Please remember, what is good for Vladimir is good for Suzdal and the Oblast and all the Golden Ring. Conversely, the same is true with respect to what is good for Suzdal and the other communities. I know you understand this, so now make it happen, and remember the most important thing, working together and sharing, costs next to nothing. We are here to help facilitate that process as much as possible, so please don't hesitate to ask (bew@uiuc.edu). I look forward to visiting Vladimir and the region again in 2006 to see what great progress has been made and to produce report number 3!

Lastly, let me share a few personal experiences. Many of my colleagues at the university, as well as acquaintances and friends, have asked me many questions about my trips to Russia – they are really interested. I honestly believe they are especially curious in part because they know so little about your large, rich and diverse nation. Hopefully they also realize that the impressions they may have are based on limited, outdated or false information. Regrettably most Americans know only what the media provides, as I expect is the case in Russia too, but the really important issues are not Putin/Bush, Iraq/Chechnya, etc. but the personal connections made between “real people” through travel and tourism. Without exception, my response to such questions has been very positive and particularly complimentary of the friendly people and the beauty of your country. My reaction to these exchanges is that Americans appear greatly relieved that Russians are really not much different

from us with regard to concerns about their families, their jobs, the environment, etc. Which brings me to a final point about tourism, the importance of citizen diplomacy, or the genuine interactions between persons of different nations and cultures that promote better understanding and better political relations. These exchanges have immense value and the potential the Golden Ring provides for a positive welcome to the rest of the world is significant—and very important to the global image of Russia. For Vladimir and the Oblast that is an awesome responsibility to try to fulfill.