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## CURRENT CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR TOURISM AT LAKE VELENCE

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to summarise and review the historical documents relating to the development and evolution of the Lake Velence area, not only to provide an insight into the history and changing functions of the Lake Velence municipalities, but also to provide a chronological overview of local economic development ideas, their implementation and practical results. A wide range of primary and secondary, quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to investigate the situation and development potential of the seven municipalities with tourist functions under study (Gárdony, Kápolnásnyék, Pákozd, Pázmánd, Sukoró, Nadap, Velence). In addition to identifying the untapped potential, it is also important to find an answer to the question of how to solve the fundamental problem of tourism businesses, namely the seasonal fluctuation of visitor flows.

*Keywords: local economic development, tourism products, destination management, Lake Velence*

### 1. Introduction

What makes tourism on Lake Velence special is the quick and easy accessibility of the destination from Budapest and Székesfehérvár, but it also poses great challenges. In the past, waterfront destinations in Hungary were almost exclusively based on beach tourism, and even today, tourism is still concentrated in the summer. Many organisations, local authorities and businesses are addressing the problems of the Lake Velence region, but the successful local development projects of recent years have still not lived up to expectations and have not brought the expected breakthrough for tourism in the region.

When considering the potential for economic development in the Lake Velence region, it is important to look at tourism and other sectors of the economy, but also the effects of suburbanisation, which make the situation and the problems facing the region unique.

Due to the characteristics of the area under study, the two municipalities with urban status on Lake Velence, Gárdony and Velence, which are not among our historic cities, are given special attention in the study. Given that tourism and its seasonality are assumed to permeate the whole economy of the municipalities, I have devoted a separate chapter to the analysis of the tourism function. The results thus obtained and the analysis of current economic development concepts also provide a very important starting point for future development plans.

The systemic development of Lake Velence's economy is closely linked to the intensification of the involvement of the hinterland in tourism in the region. The development of the hinterland and its involvement in Lake Velence tourism was set as an objective by the Lake Velence Tourism Development Committee in the 1980s, but the transport, commercial and catering infrastructure needed to ensure that tourists can enjoy a carefree stay is not yet in place.

Although the 21st century has seen major developments in tourist attractions and programmes, without adequate provision for visitors to the hinterland, these experiments cannot generate significant numbers of tourist arrivals.

## 2. Methodology

The development of a settlement or a region can only be interpreted from a historical perspective, since the results of any development can only be seen later and its long-term effects can only be interpreted in decades or centuries, so the research started with a historical analysis of the development of the settlements under study. As a result of this analysis, we can also identify current problems that still affect the region today and that have been addressed in the past. The study of the role of tourism in the region's municipalities is also a practical tool for researching the local economy, analysing the spatial concentration of tourism and defining future tourism development strategies. In the course of my research, I analysed the literature, the statistical data available on ksh.hu and igyutazunk.hu, and the development documents of different periods, and during my last field visit I conducted in-depth interviews with Zoltán Alekszi, the owner of Dinnyési Castle Park, and Zoltán Köteles, the mayor of Nadap.

I assess the weight of the tourism function of the Lake Velence municipalities by the tourism function value. Among the municipalities in the area, only those that have commercial and/or private accommodation facilities were considered appropriate for analysis. The municipalities of Gárdony, Kápolnásnyék, Nadap, Pákozd, Pázmánd, Sukoró and Velence are the only ones with a tourism function. The indicators were defined on the basis of data collected in the KSH and TeIR systems, and were selected in accordance with the principles of the acronym 'SMART': I aimed to identify indicators that are appropriate, measurable, accessible, realistic and timely in relation to the research objective. (Tóth - Káposzta 2010) From the indicators thus selected, my aim was to create a relatively objective system of indicators that reliably measures the function under study and is suitable for ranking municipalities, even if the results may only show us reality with some distortion, since, for example, in tourism research, measuring the number of "day-trippers" is still unresolved, so that we can rely mainly on the number of tourists, taking overnight stays as a basis. The tourism functions of the municipalities studied were defined on the basis of the following set of indicators:

- number of overnight stays
- tourists/population ratio
- number of accommodation units: sum of number of commercial and private accommodation places
- number of beds in the accommodation: sum of number of beds in commercial and private accommodation places
- the occupancy rate of accommodation in accommodation facilities in July: number of overnight stays/number of beds available for rent X31
- number of catering facilities
- number of foreign guests: number of foreign guests in commercial accommodation places + number of foreign guests in private accommodation places
- average length of stay: number of overnight stays/number of guests

After collecting the data and carrying out the arithmetic operations necessary for the defined indicators, I developed indicator rankings, which were summed up to give a ranking of the settlements according to their tourism function.

In the present paper, the author draws heavily on the research results published in his doctoral thesis defended in 2017, as well as on his subsequently published studies.

The author has elaborated the transport history of the Lake Velence area in the context of a comprehensive and centuries-long analytical and fact-finding work closely linked to the development and historical evolution of the lake.

### **3. Tourism development at Lake Velence in historical perspective**

The development of transport, from the era of railway construction in the 19th century onwards, significantly transformed the structure, economic fabric and society of the settlements on the shores of Lake Velence. The analysis of these profound historical changes has implications for many other areas of research, including tourism and local economic development.

Despite the fact that the lake had already been a favourite bathing place for many Budapest residents since 1907-1908, until the 1920s the economic exploitation of Lake Velence was centred on fishing and reed cutting. (Polgár 1914) After the First World War, most of the popular tourist destinations were located in the annexed territories, the remaining tourist capacity could not meet the domestic demand, so the Lake Velence accommodation and camping tourism was developed alongside Lake Balaton. (Galambos - Törzsök 2015) The development of the previously neglected lakeside in Gárdony began in the 1920s, when wealthier residents of the capital bought plots of land on the shores of Lake Velence. The locals quickly discovered the potential of tourism, and a beach bath and associated catering facilities were built (Vitek, 2009). The new holiday areas on the southern shore were connected to the road traffic between Budapest and Lake Balaton via a road through Kápolnásnyek, Kis- Velence, Gárdony, Agárd and Dinnyés, while the northern shore could be reached via the old road through Pákozd, Sukoró and Velence (Erdős et al. 2001)

The road network development policy of the Horthy era contributed significantly to the mass development of the Lake Velence visitor traffic. At least 95% of the people who bought a villa on Lake Velence were from the capital, and in 1934, 150,000 visitors came to the lake by train, car, carriage or bicycle. Of the estimated 150,000 passengers, at least 80% were residents of Budapest (Votisky 1934).

As early as 1934, Antal Votisky accurately described the future of the settlements on Lake Velence: 'if MÁV introduces the Árpád-type express motor, the ever-increasing settlement process will make Lake Velence one of the suburbs of Budapest.' (Votisky 1934: 25) Rail transport would thus have a decisive influence on the future of the settlements on the southern shore of Lake Velence, and the settlements would become part of the Budapest agglomeration as a result of the settlements that were partly associated with it.

The development of Lake Velence between 1958 and 1985 was coordinated by the Lake Velence Management Committee: the construction of the Zámoly and Pátka reservoirs ensured the water level of the lake, the dredging of the lake bed prevented siltation (Vitkóczy 2010), and the construction of campsites, accommodation and lakeside infrastructure (Szauer 1964).

The section of the M7 motorway between Budapest and Székesfehérvár was opened to traffic in 1968, which also had a positive impact on tourism on Lake Velence. Road and rail transport has always been a key factor in the development of the region, and there are negative examples of this: the closure of the Bicske-Székesfehérvár railway line, which was of regional importance, made several settlements difficult to reach (Molnár et al. 2002) The tourism development concepts published since the 1980s have invariably taken into account the local energies of Lake Velence: as the area is located in the most important tourist corridor of the country, the connections and links of the region with Székesfehérvár and Budapest have also been analysed. (VÁTI 1986)

In 1986, the VÁTI referred to the settlements of Gárdony, Velence, Kápolnásnyék, Sukoró and Pákozd as “agglomerating areas”, an indication of the growing attraction of Budapest. (VÁTI 1986) The increased traffic on the M7 motorway has also made noise pollution an increasingly serious problem, which has necessitated the construction of noise barriers. (Molnár et al. 2002) The population growth of the settlements on the shores of Lake Velence can be explained by several factors, namely the favourable transport-geographical situation - the M7 motorway, the proximity to Budapest and Székesfehérvár - and the attractive landscape and settlement environment. Settlements are changing their structure, local economy and society.

In the years following the change of regime, tourism on Lake Velence has also been in decline, with a decrease in the number of overnight stays in campsites and other accommodation facilities. The opening of the borders, problems related to the water level and water quality of the lake, ageing infrastructure, the opening of the borders and changes in travel habits have created a difficult situation for tourism in the area.

Up to the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the tourist landscape of Gárdony and Velence was dominated by bathing and beach facilities. Developments over the last 15 years have significantly increased the role of wellness and cycling tourism. The Velence Resort & Spa opened in 2008 and the Hotel Vital Nautis in 2010. The cycle path around the lake still attracts huge crowds, and the development has also contributed to an increase in the number of day visitors. The construction of the Bence Hill Lookout and the reconstruction of the Halász Castle in Kápolnásnyék were the two most highly publicised development projects, following the creation of the Velence Korzó and open-air beach. An analysis of the tourist attractions of Lake Velence shows that both natural and artificial attractions are present. The attractions opened in 2010 include the Bálint-Borárium, the Öko-Beach in Gárdony and the Pákozdi Pagony Wildlife Park and Arboretum.

Among the more recent attractions, we should mention the Gárdonyi Wooden Castle and the Dinnyés Castle Park. The Gárdonyi Rönkvár is modelled on the Egri Castle, offering entertainment and at the same time introducing the youngest generations to the story of the book *The Stars of Egri*. Visitors to the five-time Guinness World Record holder Dinnyés Castle Park can see miniature stone models of medieval Hungarian castles. (Alekszi 2024)

However, the improvements made so far have not solved all the problems: changing the negative elements that make up the tourism milieu of the settlement is the biggest challenge for the coming period. For example, the Ifi hostel and restaurant, built in the socialist era and now closed, is still a dominant feature of the coastline when you get off the train, and its deteriorating condition and appearance give the coastline a ‘retro’ character.

The developments in the 21st century were not part of a strategy of a single lake tourism organisation, but were carried out as independent, point projects.

Despite these developments, a strong and attractive destination brand is still lacking and there is still no organisation to bring together the development of tourism in the area.

A historical overview of the development of Lake Velence has played a major role in the author's research to date, as the review of the processes has made it possible to identify the problems that still need to be solved. From the research carried out so far, it is clear that the problem of seasonality has been a defining feature of tourism on the lake for almost a century, and that the issue of water quality and water levels on the lake has also been the focus of attention on several occasions. In addition to the favourable geographical and transport geography, mainly determined by the proximity of Budapest and Székesfehérvár, the constantly developing transport infrastructure significantly shortens the journey to Lake Velence, with the number of day visitors to the lake shore constantly increasing (Wirth 2019).

On Tripadvisor.com, users of Lake Velence highlighted the cycling opportunities and the proximity to Budapest, while the disadvantages include the crowdedness of the shore in summer, the lack of parking spaces and the quality of the water. Apart from the beaches and the cycle path, only the Velence Resort & Spa and the Bence Hill Lookout are mentioned, reflecting the low visibility of other tourist attractions.

Transport improvements in recent years have led to a revitalisation of the links between the municipalities around the lake (Gárdony, Velence, Sukoró, Pákozd), with bus services around Lake Velence now operating on a new timetable and an extended network of routes. For those living further away from the lake, Budapest and Székesfehérvár will also be more easily accessible, with new bus services connecting to the suburban trains of the 30a (Budapest-Székesfehérvár) railway line, running regularly every 30-60 minutes during the day.

In July 2024, Gárdony and Velence also ranked 4th and 5th in the tourist area, with approximately 45,000 overnight stays between them, while nearby Székesfehérvár is the 3rd most popular settlement in terms of overnight stays. Not surprisingly, Visegrád and Esztergom occupy the top two places. (MTÜ)

Examining the MTÜ data on the number of overnight stays, we can conclude that within the tourism area around Budapest, two areas stand out: the Danube Bend and the Lake Velence area.

On the basis of the regional links and guest numbers, it seems to be a viable idea to create a tourist destination in the seven municipalities of Lake Velence with Székesfehérvár. This idea is also supported by the structure of the settlements, which, unlike Székesfehérvár, do not have a historic city centre and could therefore complement each other in terms of tourism product profile.

To date, Lake Velence has been defined as a tourist destination in various ways. The interpretation of Lake Velence and its surroundings, the Val Venosta Valley and the Vértes as a single tourist area was an important element in the development documents of the socialist system, and today the activities of the Development Council, which bears the name of the area, follow this logic. The designation of this territorial unit is justified by the catchment area and the geographical characteristics.

At the same time, the municipalities of Lake Velence are part of the tourist area around Budapest, which, according to Government Decree 429/2020, includes municipalities with very different characteristics and relatively distant locations. This is somewhat contradicted by the fact that in the image film of the Hungarian Tourism Agency Lake Velence is shown together with Székesfehérvár.

#### 4. The current role of Lake Velence settlements in tourism

The role of the settlements in tourism and the current state of tourism in the region was analysed by the author using the tourism function index (Table 1).

Table 1 Tourist Function Index of Lake Velence settlements

	Settlement						
	Gárdony	Kápolnásnyék	Pákozd	Pázmánd	Sukoró	Nadap	Velence
Indicator:							
number of overnight stays	25036	553	623	525	1304	124	19692
tourists/population ratio	71%	4,49%	5,6%	7,9%	19,7%	3,2%	87,7%
number of accommodation units	117	12	11	12	16	3	95
number of beds in the accommodation	1990	83	99	79	156	16	1977
the occupancy rate of accommodation in accommodation facilities	40,6%	21,5%	20,3%	21,4%	27%	25%	32%
number of catering facilities	140	14	16	7	8	3	98
number of foreign guests	5681	174	14	19	49	3	454
average length of stay	2,4	2,9	2,8	2,8	3,2	4,8	3
Ranking by indicators:							
number of overnight stays	1	5	4	6	3	7	2
tourists/population ratio	2	6	5	4	3	7	1
number of accommodation units	1	4	5	4	3	6	2
number of beds in the accommodation	1	5	4	6	3	7	2
the occupancy rate of accommodation in accommodation facilities	1	5	7	6	3	4	2
number of catering facilities	1	4	3	6	5	7	2
number of foreign guests	1	3	6	5	4	7	2
average length of stay	6	4	5	5	2	1	3
Average of positions by indicator:	1,75	4,5	4,8	5,25	3,25	5,75	2
<b>Ranking by tourism function:</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>

Source: own editing and calculation based on KSH dates, 2024

The study shows that tourism on Lake Velence is concentrated in Gárdony and Velence, so the development of these two municipalities with urban status has a decisive impact on the tourism of the whole region. It is also clear from the data in the table and from the research results so far that water-related leisure activities continue to dominate in the destination. This is also closely linked to the spatial and temporal concentration of tourism: the ratios of tourists to population are very high in Velence and Gárdony (Table 1), but these figures do not include day visitors, so that the ratio of people staying at the beaches and lakeside in the two largest municipalities at the same time in the high season, with the number of tourists staying overnight, to the local population would be much higher. This mass tourism overburdens both the natural environment of the lake and the infrastructure of the municipalities, so this half-century-old problem remains unsolved. Lake-side music festivals such as EFOTT or Campus do, of course, generate relatively high revenues for the municipalities in the short term, but they are not a step in the direction of sustainable tourism. The average length of stay in Sukoró, on the northern shore of Lake Velence, and in Nadap, one of the backwater settlements of the lake, proved to be the longest (Table 1), for several reasons of course.

It should be noted, however, that the northern shore of Lake Velence is not suitable for beach tourism and water-related activities, but for hiking, rural tourism, active tourism and gastronomy. In the Lake Velence part of the Etyek-Buda wine region, there are several traditional and younger-generation wineries, as the villages on the northern shore of the lake offer ideal conditions for the production of quality wines. Like Pázmánd, Nadap sees the future in quality gastronomy and wine tourism. (Köteles 2025) The National Monument in Pázmánd and the Pagony Wildlife Park could become important attractions for rural tourism. The occupancy rate of the accommodation facilities is not very high even in the peak tourist season (Table 1), so there is no justification for large-scale expansion of accommodation capacity. Given the number of foreign visitors, it is not at all surprising that the area is most attractive to domestic tourists. The highest proportion of foreign visitors in July 2024 was found in Gárdony with 22.26% (Table 1), the other municipalities being almost exclusively known to the domestic public.

In third place in the ranking of tourism functions is Sukoró, located on the northern shore of the lake, which is a very popular destination for the capital's residents to buy property and move out of the city, due to its peaceful and attractive natural environment and its quick accessibility via the M7 motorway. The distribution of catering establishments among the municipalities is in line with the visitor figures (Table 1). Based on the field survey, the data from the CSO and the interviews, it can be concluded that the basic problem of hospitality is caused by the seasonality of tourism in most cases.

## Summary and conclusions

In terms of their economic weight, the two settlements with the highest urban status in the region, Gardany and Velence, have the greatest responsibility for the design and implementation of future developments. The biggest question for the coming years will be to what extent the TDM organisations, with their modest resources, and the other development organisations in the region will be able to implement a coherent, well-planned concept.

The wide range of development organisations working in different contexts and with different interfaces has so far not proved capable of developing a coherent, systemic approach to development. The future of Velence and Lake Velence will therefore be determined by the question of how to create a coordinated, viable structure for tourism in the area and whether a destination can be developed that is defined in line with market needs. Villages further away from the shores of Lake Velence, such as Pázmánd, Nadap or Kápolnásnyék, could find their starting point in rural tourism. The expansion of the tourism function is also possible in close connection with local agriculture. In Pázmánd and Nadap, local wine producers have already recognised the potential of wine tourism in the municipality and on Lake Velence, and wine tasting is a major part of the offer, with a focus on local and regional wineries.

The results of the research also show that the advantageous geographic location of the area is a key determinant of local tourism. One-day visitors are expected to continue to dominate the region's visitor flows in the future, and the needs of this segment should therefore be integrated into the region's tourism and transport development strategies. The extension of cycle paths to more settlements and the development of cycling tourism services could also become a useful pillar of tourism on the lake.

Future developments should therefore be implemented in such a way that the hinterland settlements of Lake Velence can become part of the Lake Velence tourism system, while maintaining their rural character and traditions, which is also hampered by the negative effects of the expansion of the Budapest agglomeration. The development of the Lake Velence municipalities as a system, as a common economic unit, is only possible if the basic functions of each municipality and consequently their economic profile are defined. The development of tourism, one of the most dynamic and seasonal sectors of the economy, can only be envisaged in conjunction with the development of other functions. The agricultural sector can be linked to tourism and the hospitality sector by promoting local products.

The historical and cultural assets of the Lake of Velence area are not in themselves an attraction that would lead to a greater number of tourists and visitors, but the rich monuments of the former crown city could be used to create a more attractive and substantial programme of events, which, by combining the water-based and other attractions of Lake Velence and its municipalities, could even be positioned as a strong brand in an already very saturated tourist market.



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