

## **IDENTIFYING A REPRESENTATIVE SOUVENIR FOR A ROMANIAN TOURIST DESTINATION. THE CASE OF RUPEA**

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*ABSTRACT: Creating a souvenir is a large and complex process that relies on the identification of a representative, unique and authentic element for the promoted tourist destination. A souvenir is a tangible product - a symbol of the visited area, the experience at the destination and the memory kept on returning from holiday. This paper aims to investigate the views of representatives of the City Hall of Rupea and of the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Brașov (APDT) on the opportunity of conceiving of a representative souvenir for the tourist destination of Rupea, using the focus group as a qualitative research. The research results showed that the souvenir that would best represent the tourist destination Rupea is Rupea Fortress, this being the most important monument in the city.*

*Key words: souvenir, tourist destination, promotion, focus group*

*JEL codes: L83, M1, M31*

### **Introduction**

Souvenirs are a tangible part of the tourism experience. Souvenirs provide an excellent opportunity to potential worldwide advertising with a potentially lucrative economic activity (Holder, 1989). A souvenir in its most general sense is frequently defined in dictionaries as a small and relatively inexpensive article given, kept or purchased as a reminder of a place visited, an occasion. The nature of humans is to return from travelling with a souvenir of the experience. Souvenirs are universal reminders of special moments or events (Swanson, 2004). The souvenir describes a unique range of objects and artefacts designed for the purpose of satisfying an equally unique way of seeing (Hume, 2009). The identity and image of a culture are often represented by souvenirs as evidence of history, heritage or geography.

Souvenir development plays an important role in destination management, because it is both psychologically and economically related to tourism (Wicks, 2004). Countries of notable tourism potential pay attention to the offer of products that promote their national culture. Souvenirs, and the memories associated with them, help the consumers participate in non-ordinary experiences, expand their worldview, differentiate or integrate themselves with others, and much more.

Researches on the Romanian souvenir market from various Romanian tourist destinations revealed a lack of concern for identifying those lions that best define the specific of an area, the elements of uniqueness or differentiation, and the involvement of local people in producing them.

Based on these considerations, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of research on the identification of the most appropriate souvenir to promote tourist destinations. The research was conducted among the actors directly involved in the management and promotion of the tourist destination of Rupea (Brașov County).

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Rupea city is located on the E60 European highway, approximately at midway between the cities of Braşov and Sighişoara, in the north of the county. The name of the city derives from the Latin word "Rupes" which means rock cliff cone and assigns to quaternary rock cliff towered fortress. The town had a derived name – Cohalm – until 1929, when it changed its name to Rupea. During its existence, the city emerged as an important craft (with 12 guilds) as well as a shopping center, here being held four annual fairs, which are famous in the area.

Rupea city is a major tourist center in Transylvania, which preserves the history, culture and traditions of this region of the country. Rupea Fortress is located in the west, on a steep cliff of basalt rock. It is one of the oldest and most powerful cities in Transylvania, and was first documented in 1324. Dacian fortress at origin – back then it was called "Ramidava" –, Rupea Fortress was built near the road connecting Transylvania to Moldova and the Romanian Country – the southeastern passes. When the Romans conquered Dacia, they sat here a Roman camp, named "Rupes" (meaning "rock" or "stone" in Latin). It connected with other Roman camps in the surroundings, namely those of Hoghiz, Târnavelor Valley, Olt Valley and Râşnov Fortress, and had the aim to control trade in the area. In the fourteenth century, the Saxons found the city in ruins (after migratory invasions) and built on its ruins, in stages, a peasant fortress with the same name that locals used: "Rupes" (much later, Hungarians called it "Cohalom", meaning "stone heap").

The city has a spiral upward and acts as a fortress and refuge for the people in the area. The city has been abandoned since 1643, when a devastating fire turned it into ruins. In 1790, a storm destroyed the roof of the city and, from then, the city was left in desolation. Today the city is renovated and was introduced in the tourist circuit in 2013. Although it can be visited by tourists – lovers of culture and history, the city and its surroundings need a sustained promotion, accomplished in a professional way, consistent with current trends in tourism demand and consumption.

### **Literature review**

The importance of souvenirs to economies, cultures, and visitors is reflected in different researches. Souvenirs are integral to the economic structure of many destinations (Love and Sheldon, 1998). Souvenirs are economically important for many retail businesses located near or at tourist destinations (Swanson, 2004). However, a souvenir must be "typical" of the visited site (Black, 1964, as cited in Hume, 2009). Souvenirs can also serve as tangible symbols to signify or commemorate travel experiences (Love and Sheldon, 1998).

Souvenirs are important as a cultural artifact, as well as an analytic tool for understanding complex social processes. Souvenirs have the connotation of "memory" or "reminiscence." The acquisition of souvenirs is not just the collection of objects, but of memories and, by extension, the experiences that provide those memories. Collecting local crafts, photographic images, t-shirts, jewelry, seashells, and the myriad other treasures that symbolize a destination helps the traveler recall specific travel experiences (Smith and Reid, 1994). The main products purchased by tourists are local handicrafts, clothing, and books (Traveler's Notes, 1995, as cited in Kim and Littrell, 1999). The possession of travel souvenirs is very important to tourists as "tangible evidence of the travel experience" (Littrell et al. 1994, p. 3).

Tourist shoppers look for unique products that are not available in their hometown or are unique to a destination (Reisinger and Turner, 2002). Tourists are often motivated to shop by a number of tangible, intangible, and impulsive factors such as the salespeople whom they interact with, the uniqueness of products, and the sites they visit in a travel destination (Wong and Wan, 2013). The shopping element has recently become a very important instrument in promotion of tourists' places. Shopping has even become a solution for marketing tourism in places with a weak tourism profile (Jansen-Verbeke, 1991).

Due to tourist demand and the economic impact on destination development, souvenirs have gained much attention from researchers. Previous research has tended to focus on the types, uses,

and functions of souvenirs (Love and Sheldon, 1998). Despite the significance of the souvenir in the tourism experience (Shenhav-Keller, 1993; Lehto et al., 2004), little research has been found that investigates the usage and motivations for souvenir purchase. The research has mainly polarized between that on artisan producers and tourist consumers (Kim and Littrell, 2001), and has identified a range of souvenir products from mass-produced products to specialty items and antiques (Swanson and Horridge, 2004).

Gordon (1986) proposed that souvenirs could be put into five categories. The first category consists in pictorial images, such as postcards, photographs, and illustrated books about particular regions. "Piece-of-the-rock" souvenirs represent the second category. These are usually natural materials or objects, such as rocks, shells, or pinecones, taken from the natural environment. The third category of souvenirs is represented by symbolic shorthand – usually manufactured products that evoke a message about the place from which they came. Examples include a miniature Eiffel Tower from Paris, France, or a lobster pot from Maine in the United States. The fourth category may offer no reference to a particular place. These types of souvenirs are inscribed with words, which identify them in place and time. For example, a T-shirt, which has little meaning by itself but is marked "Great Wall" becomes a reminder of the place. The final category consists in local products, including a variety of objects such as ethnic foods and crafts.

Gordon's typology of souvenir was reduced to two types in Shen's study (2011): cultural and commercial souvenirs. Pictorial image, piece-of-the-rock, and local products all share the attribute of local ways of living, including food, drinking, architecture, planting, handcrafted products, entertainment. Thus, Shen reclassifies them as cultural souvenir. Likewise, both symbolic shorthand and markers lose their primitive uniqueness by mass manufacturing and miss their original style by catering to tourists. They are termed "commercial souvenirs".

In relation to the souvenirs purchased, there is evidence of the importance of authenticity for souvenir purchases (Wilkins, 2011). Tourists prefer symbolic and manufactured products that are made by local people. They want handcrafts to have traditional and cultural meaning. Littrell et al. (1993) found that the criteria used to define authentic crafts included several major themes. One of the most important criteria is a craft's uniqueness and originality. Tourists' description of souvenir buying while traveling and while they search for authentic souvenirs shows that their consumption may be different from their everyday spending behavior (Littrell et al., 1993).

Souvenirs can fall into several authenticity categories. These categories include the craft being different from those the tourists already own, the crafts being made in a new or different way, and the crafts being unique to the region or country where they are produced. There are many challenges associated with the development of handicraft industry. When constraints are overcome, production becomes very economically, culturally, and socially beneficial. The social and cultural benefits are mainly associated with heritage, which is the memory of old traditions and finding social and cultural identity in this age of globalization (Wicks, 2004). Souvenirs are objects of repetitive production made when poverty, the profit motive and the satisfaction of the consumer are given priority over and above the artist's aesthetic standards (Hume, 2009).

If tourist souvenirs want to fully attract consumers, no doubt, it is very important to highlight the unique culture of region-specific content in the design. In countries attracting large numbers of international visitors, the tourism sector offers many opportunities for the poor to sell handicrafts, as tourists spend substantial amounts of money on products such as souvenirs. Strengthening the handicraft sector will ensure that tourists have the option to buy locally made handicrafts instead of imported or factory-made products. Handicraft production can also help diversify the tourism product of a region to include home-stays, cultural experiences and facilitate the promotion of responsible tourism principles. In addition to this, the service providers can be involved. They can provide information about the cultural heritage to visitors by offering brochures, books and souvenirs related to the local history.

Once the souvenir product has been selected, the tourist must consider the relative attributes of the product (Anderson and Littrell, 1996). Goeldner et al. (2000) suggested a product's relationship to the local area and authenticity were the most important product attributes. International travelers want souvenirs that are easily portable, relatively inexpensive, understandable, cleanable and usable upon returning home (Pysarchik, 1989). In addition, air travelers consider size restrictions, fragility and manageability as important product attributes. Littrell et al. (1994) reported that product attribute criteria of tourists included design, superior quality workmanship and attractive colors. Some tourists were likely to be attracted to souvenirs based on nature, country and traditional themes. Other tourists selected purchases according to cleaning and care requirements, symbolism of the place visited, vacation site, aesthetic and functional qualities of item and recognized area artisans who signed their works and/or artisans who had been observed creating their works. Turner and Reisinger (2001) found that three product attributes were important to tourists: value (range, quality), product display characteristics (colour, display, packaging, size) and uniqueness (memory of the trip). They concluded that overall product choice determines the importance of product attributes. For tourists, shopping satisfaction will be a direct result of obtaining product attributes that they consider important.

### **Research methodology**

The purpose of this research is to create a representative souvenir in order to promote the Rupea destination. In this respect, we intended to conduct a qualitative research among representatives of the City Hall of Rupea and of the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Braşov (APDT). Thus, the following people were invited to participate in the focus group: Rupea's Mayor, Rupea's Deputy Mayor, the responsible for tourism within the City Hall of Rupea, APDT's President, the manager of APDT and the advisor of Rupea's Mayor for integration and public goods acquisitions.

In our research, we considered as appropriate the use of the focus group method. According to the definitions derived from the marketing literature, the focus group is an "interview taken to a small group of people in a relaxed and informal environment" (Malhotra, 2004, p.139). This method is very flexible and efficient, because the interviewees can express their real feelings, their frustrations and satisfactions regarding the topic (Lefter, 2004). Although this method stimulates people to give information about the products that is filtered through their consciousness (Cătoiu et al., 2009), focus groups also have some disadvantages, such as: the exploratory character of the research, making it virtually impossible to extend upon all men; the difficulty to lead focus groups, the quality of the results depending, to a great extent, on the moderator's abilities; the heterogeneous information, determined by the unstructured nature of responses, which makes the coding, analyzing and interpretation process very difficult (Malhotra, 2004).

The fieldwork was conducted in September 2012, when organizing the Festival of Rupea's Fortress. In conducting the interview guide, and also in order to meet the research purpose, we considered four objectives, namely:

- Objective 1. Identify the views of local government representatives from Rupea and from the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Braşov on the importance of promoting Rupea city through a souvenir;
- Objective 2. Assessment of current situation of souvenirs sold in the area;
- Objective 3. Identification of suitable souvenir and its features for the tourist destination of Rupea;
- Objective 4: Establish a strategy of launching an authentic souvenir for the tourist destination of Rupea on the market.

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, we conceived three themes of the interview, each of which being subdivided into three sub-themes. Hence, the first topic of the

interview, on the importance of promoting Rupea city through the souvenir, considered the three sub-themes related to:

1. Usefulness of promoting destinations through a souvenir;
2. Description of the promotion activities included within Rupea city's economic development strategy for the years 2010-2014;
3. Description of the importance of renovating and including the Rupea Fortress in the tourist circuit.

The second theme, concerning the assessment of the current situation of souvenirs sold in the area, was detailed in three sub-themes, namely:

4. Types of souvenirs that tourists visiting the Rupea destination purchased before the closing of Rupea Fortress for rehabilitation;
5. Locations within Rupea destination where these souvenirs are currently marketed;
6. Identify the most important steps that the local government can take to stimulate the producing and merchandising of souvenirs;

The third theme considered the possibilities of creating and merchandising a representative souvenir for the Rupea destination, using three sub-themes referring to:

7. Identify local resources that could be exploited as raw material for designing a souvenir;
8. Design a story that will accompany the souvenir and identify the tourist attraction from Rupea that will be considered benchmark for its execution;
9. Description of the type and characteristics of a souvenir to represent the Rupea destination.

The discussions that took place in the focus group with the six representatives of the City Hall of Rupea and of the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Braşov (APDT) were transcribed and analyzed. The results' analysis and interpretations were obtained by using the NVivo 7 software package for qualitative research. Interpretation of the results was done according to the original objectives.

## **Results**

To achieve the first objective, concerning the identification of the respondents' opinions on the importance of promoting Rupea city through a souvenir, we examined the extent to which they would appreciate as positive such an initiative, by turning an important tourist attraction existing in the city into a souvenir, and to develop and promote tourism in the area. To address the second objective of the research, on the evaluation of the current situation of souvenirs sold in the area, we intended to bring into question the economic and administrative problems faced today in Rupea, and measures that can be taken by authorized persons from the City Hall to support the creation of authentic souvenirs, with local and representative resources to promote Rupea city. The third objective of the research, on the identification of a suitable souvenir and its features for the tourist destination of Rupea, took into account identifying by respondents of a representative and unique object / tourist attraction / person etc. from Rupea to be reproduced on a small scale, as a souvenir, which will be offered to tourists visiting the area. Finally, the fourth objective, on the establishment of a strategy of launching on the market of an authentic souvenir for the tourist destination of Rupea, considered the identification of local resources necessary for producing the souvenir, and establishing the organizational and personnel frame which will be involved in this activity.

### ***Objective 1. Identification of the views of respondents on the importance of promoting Rupea city through a souvenir***

Rupea city represents, according to the respondents, an area with great tourism potential through its cultural and historical heritage that has materialized in assemblies of fortified evangelical churches, the churches confirming the religious diversity of the area, the memorial houses, archaeological sites, and fragments of fortified walls. The Evangelical Church, one of the oldest classical organs in function, the two Orthodox churches, a number of historic buildings, plus

local customs and traditions – known both home and abroad, especially due to folk costumes – were the basis for the inclusion of Rupea city in the national and international tourist circuit, along with other major tourist attractions, such as the Bran Castle, the Black Church, the old center of Braşov and Viscri village (included in the UNESCO patrimony). Given the significant tourism potential of the area and the specific events that take place in this destination at different times of the year (such as "Fortresses Festival", "Ball of Folk Costumes", "Ball of Married Men in Rupea" etc.), tourism is rightly a branch that can contribute substantially to the economic development of the area. According to the responsible for local tourist activities within the City Hall, Rupea city could annually attract 20,000 to 30,000 visitors a year, both from our country and abroad, due to special cultural and historical potential existing in the area. Creation of a souvenir for tourist destination of Rupea is therefore a unique, attractive and effective way of presentation and promotion of the most representative tourist attractions found in this area. According to some respondents, the souvenir should refer to an important tourist attraction in the area, which will be visited by a large number of tourists, while, according to other subjects, the souvenir "should carry with it the history of Rupea Fortress" or have a fortress-like design.

***Objective 2. Assessment of current situation of souvenirs sold in the area***

Requested to express their opinions regarding the appropriateness and implications of the creation of a representative souvenir for the tourist destination of Rupea, the respondents were first interviewed to discuss issues related to the sale of souvenirs to represent, through their symbols, Rupea city. In this respect, the respondents consider that:

- *The offer of authentic local and representative souvenirs of Rupea city are very poor, almost non-existent.* Currently, the city is being promoted through some souvenirs/products that do not represent the specific of the area (such as plush toys, casual clothing, personalized number plates, diplomas for the best father, mother, boss, etc.). According to the respondents' opinions, "in most souvenir shops in Romania you don't find anything except country towns or Dracula magnets, mugs with the inscription "Romania" or the name of the tourist destination, key chains, dolls and plates made in Horezu, most tourists, especially foreign ones, returning home with an object which doesn't express the visited tourist destination."
- *There is no collaboration between local authorities and local producers of artisanal products (pottery) that could contribute to the creation of authentic local souvenirs that are representative for the promotion of Rupea among tourists.*
- *Within the city, there is no store specialized in selling souvenirs, but only small traders offering for sale various products that are not representative for locality.*

In this context, representatives of local authorities deem it necessary to educate tourists and traders about the importance of authenticity, originality of souvenir-type products that promote the traditional values of the area. To prevent "leakage" of money spent by tourists for the purchase of souvenirs to the import of the areas where they are produced, the participants in the discussion have suggested that these souvenirs be designed by local people, with local raw materials. Thus, building partnerships with handicraft (pottery) in the region could be a great way to offer authentic products valuable to tourists who visit the area. Furthermore, most respondents believed that a souvenir shop in the city of Rupea might represent an opportunity to promote local culture and values.

***Objective 3. Identification of a suitable souvenir and its features for the tourist destination of Rupea***

According to participants in the interview, a gift that can contribute in a significant proportion to tourist promotion of the city of Rupea is the "Rupea Fortress" souvenir, as it is the most important historical monument of the city. It may be a non-composite product made from clay, for example, a candle that imitates the spiral shape of the fortress (fig. 1). Its design must be attractive, to capture the interest of tourists, but also symbolic for the tourist destination of Rupea. Also, the product could be represented by writing hand-written letters, the name "Ramidava" or "Rumidava" (the Dacian name of the city) on the candle. Respondents have also stated that in order to arouse the

interest of tourists and to capture their attention, a presentation, a story related to the Fortress Rupea should be contrived.



*Figure 1. The prototype of the “Rupea Fortress” souvenir, conceived by Ieșanu Steluța*

In the same context, the respondents suggested that other souvenirs could be mini-maps that contain the main tourist attractions in the city, with small stories or descriptions in Romanian, English and German; also, they proposed some traditional folk costumes, hand-made, specific of this area.

***Objective 4. Establish a strategy of launching on the market of an authentic souvenir for the tourist destination of Rupea***

Creation and marketing of a representative souvenir for the tourist destination of Rupea involves several stages, each of them having an important role in the success of the tourist destination's promotion through it. The six major steps of the creation and merchandising of a souvenir, resulting from the discussion with the members of the focus group, were:

- I. The choice of a theme that would constitute the leitmotif of the souvenir;
- II. Identification of the sources of origin of the raw underlying of the conception of the souvenir;
- III. Collecting materials and ancillary products necessary for the conception of the souvenir;
- IV. Creating the story behind the souvenir;
- V. Presentation of this story to tourists;
- VI. Interaction with the tourists.

As regards the choice of the theme, most subjects interviewed claimed that the topic that can be the basis for the creation of the souvenir should be taken from the history of the Rupea community. In this respect, it is considered that the city of Rupea (with its old name – Rumidava or Ramidava), would best promote the locality, local authorities considering that this tourist attraction should be an identification component of Rupea, representative, spectacular, artistic and unique in the national and international tourist offer.

To harness local resources, respondents suggest using clay or argil in creating the souvenir. As regards materials and auxiliary products to complement the value of the souvenir and, implicitly, the image of the city of Rupea, they should include old photos, paintings, ancient coins, pins, costumes and vintage equipment. These materials should be added to informational materials to promote the city of Rupea, such as:

- A tourist guide of the city of Rupea – 54 pages – 3,000 copies;
- A history and tourism magazine quarterly – 1.000 copies;
- An album, "Rupea Chair", which will contain 92 pages with "live" texts and images about Rupea-Cohalm region;
- The portal dedicated to local tourism, [www.rupeaturistica.ro](http://www.rupeaturistica.ro);
- Leaflets, maps of the city;
- Multimedia materials: CDs, DVDs and videos.

Starting from the idea that "creativity is the key to successful marketing", representative APDT respondents argued that the manner in which souvenirs are presented to guests can determine the success of the products marketing on the local market. In addition, to be able to be readily found by tourists, these souvenirs should be placed near the Rupea Fortress, but also within the tourist accommodation units. In the same context, a Cultural Agenda of Rupea city could be created, with a view to promoting the specifics of the region, but also to stimulate the interest of visitors in the discovery of historical, cultural and natural values in the area. Cultural Agenda will bring forward, on the one hand, the most important festivals, fairs and cultural events, and other important sightseeing history in the area. According to the respondents, Cultural Agenda of the city of Rupea should be structured taking into account:

- To set up a cultural-artistic program by: dances, traditional songs, and the stage presentation of local legends and popular ports, but also the specific tradition of the city of Rupea;
- To invite to events related to the production of hand-crafted objects of local folk artists and craftsmen;
- Preparation of and display of specific traditional cuisine of the city (cumin soup, Saxon steak sauce with apples and sour cherries, stew, etc.);
- Presentation of traditional or medieval costumes (Folk Costumes Ball, Fortresses Festival, Traditional Wedding Festival from Rupea, etc.).

Other ways of presenting local souvenirs suggested by respondents were related to: decorating rooms with traditional local objects, notes through which tourists can obtain further information about similar objects they can find and possibly purchase from the store in the vicinity of the accommodation unit, exposing objects in public spaces (dining room), guided tours offered to tourists with the aim of presenting the various handicraft made by folk artists.

Simple presentation of souvenirs and traditional local objects is not sufficient to ensure the satisfaction of tourists. Interest in them, knowing and understanding of their needs and preferences are details that complement the offer of tourist services in the tourist destination of Rupea. Effective interaction between tourists visiting the city of Rupea and tourist service providers is determined by the level of training of the latter, resulted in the existence of effective communication skills, empathy, their knowledge about the services offered to tourists etc.

### **Conclusions**

Creating a representative and authentic souvenir for the promotion of a tourist destination is undoubtedly a difficult, complex task, striving to increase the visibility of a tourist destination, by highlighting aspects that confer authenticity and uniqueness on the national and international tourist market. To identify issues, opportunities and resources that must be taken into account in the process of creating a souvenir that will promote the city of Rupea among Romanian and foreign tourists, it was considered appropriate to conduct a qualitative marketing research, such as a focus group, with representatives of the City Hall of Rupea and of the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Braşov (APDT). The results have highlighted the need for the creation of a representative souvenir for the city of Rupea. Thereby, the respondents considered that the Rupea Fortress is the best-known tourist attraction in the locality, justifying its choice in the design of an authentic and representative souvenir for the city of Rupea. Although the respondents have stated that there are currently some issues of economic and administrative order that could impede

the process of identifying and creating a souvenir for that area, they also offered a number of solutions to create support for it. Among the solutions identified by the respondents for conceiving the souvenir are: using local raw materials, involvement of folk craftsmen in producing them, and the opening of stores specialized in selling local souvenirs.

As a result of this research, it was found that the success of promoting the city of Rupea through a souvenir depends on several factors, the most important of which, from the point of view of the respondents, is this authenticity, thanks to interdependence that must exist between the souvenir and the image of the city.

With regard to the involvement of local governments in stimulating the production of such authentic souvenirs, measures that may be adopted are reduced, because, at national level, it is necessary for the implementation of government policies and strategies of interest to define clearly the role of handicraft and souvenir products in promotion of tourist destinations or regions. However, the City Hall of Rupea will be able to approve the marketing of the “Rupea Fortress” souvenir in the vicinity of the Rupea Fortress.

Although the results we have obtained in this research are valuable, they cannot be extrapolated to the population we did this research on, for two reasons: on one hand, because this kind of research has an exploratory character, and, on the other hand, because we limited our investigations to representatives of the City Hall of Rupea and of the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Braşov (APDT). Future research studies can focus on investigating the tourists’ opinions about the local souvenirs or creating more focus groups in order to complete the results. Nevertheless, these results can be used as hypotheses for future quantitative researches, to verify if the assumptions we have started are in accordance with the tourists’ preferences for souvenirs.

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