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Examination of the position of cruise shipping in the post-season period at Lake Balaton

Ivett Vargáné Gálicz¹, Zoltán Bujdosó², Lajos Szabó², Lóránt Dénes Dávid^{3,4,5,*}¹ Central Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency, 8000 Székesfehérvár, Hungary² Doctoral School of Economic and Regional Sciences, Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 2100 Gödöllő, Hungary³ Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Economics and Business, John von Neumann University, 6000 Kecskemét, Hungary⁴ Department of Sustainable Tourism, Institute of Rural Development and Sustainable Economy, Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 2100 Gödöllő, Hungary⁵ Savaria Department of Business Economics, Faculty of Social Sciences, Savaria University Centre, Eötvös Loránd University, 9700 Szombathely, Hungary* **Corresponding author:** Lóránt Dénes Dávid, david.lorant.denes@uni-mate.hu

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Abstract: Water-based, waterfront tourism has always played an important role in the development of the tourism sector, water has been and still is an important attraction and contributes to regional development. In Hungary, Lake Balaton is the primary destination for waterfront tourism, offering a wide range of opportunities in this sector. Water-based, waterfront tourism is mainly concentrated in the high summer season, but there is an increasing range of opportunities in both the low and high season. In our research, we investigated the development of cruise tourism in Lake Balaton in the off-season, in the months of September-October 2023, by conducting in-depth interviews and questionnaire research. Our research has confirmed that this service is also in demand outside the high season. In the autumn, cruises add a special value to the experience, they can help to reduce seasonal fluctuations in tourism by offering attractive activities and also increase income for local businesses during the off-season.

Keywords: water tourism; cruising; Lake Balaton; off-season

1. Introduction

The importance of water-based, waterfront tourism has always been considerable. Despite the limited availability of water resources, water is an attraction that offers the potential for a wide range of tourism product development and experiences (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019). Water-based tourism has developed in parallel with the development of transport, and related tourism attractions can be a driver of regional development (Győri et al., 2022). However, it is also important to develop an appropriate strategy to ensure that visitors choose the attraction as the place of their visit (Priatmoko et al., 2021).

The concept of water tourism was defined by Ujvári (2009), according to which a traveller uses at least one water tourism, water traffic related service during his/her trip. Water tourism is basically important in the summer, but some services are available in spring and autumn. From a different perspective, water tourism can be defined as a type of local tourism, because it could be a meaning of diversifying tourism supply (Gonda et al., 2021).

In our research, we wanted to know what visitors do outside the high season and what options are available to them for cruise services. We chose to look at a company

that offers a complex package of services to its guests during the autumn and, unlike its competitors, does not focus on just one programme or one autumn event, but offers a programme of activities for visitors as long as the weather permits. Our research was conducted in September and October 2023, through multiple interviews on the boats of one of the largest cruise and tour companies, and an in-depth interview with one of the owners, including the difficulties of cruise tourism in Lake Balaton. We have chosen this company because they have the most complex cruise services at Lake Balaton, other companies either stop at the end of the season or their services are only available for 1-1 day so it is not possible to make a comparative analysis of the post-season between the different companies. Our study aims to demonstrate through this company that it is possible to offer a quality cruise service on Lake Balaton also in the off-season, providing a great experience for guests beyond the summer season.

Lake Balaton is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Hungary, thanks to its cultural and natural characteristics. Tourism plays a key role in the economy and social life of the region (Dani and Gellénné, 2010), many studies have focused on the characteristics and challenges of tourism in Lake Balaton.

The natural beauty of Lake Balaton, the surrounding hilly landscape and the temperate climate all contribute to the region's attractiveness for tourism. In the summer months, pleasant weather and lake temperatures are ideal for swimming and water sports. Tourism seasons are dynamic around Lake Balaton. In the summer, beach and water sports dominate, while in the autumn months, wineries and cultural events attract visitors (Dani and Gellénné, 2010). A wide variety of hotels, guesthouses and apartments add to the tourist offer. Changes in the hospitality industry, innovations and guest experience focused services are all important elements in the development of the tourism sector. The role of technology in tourism is growing. Online booking systems, smartphone apps and digital marketing all play a key role in informing visitors and improving their experience.

Infrastructure developments, new attractions and tourism events can increase the attractiveness of the region (Horváth, 2020), but excessive tourism pressures and infrastructure constraints also pose challenges.

The principles of sustainable tourism are increasingly coming to the fore (Lengyel et.al, 2019). Some researchers are looking at how tourism can be reconciled with environmental protection, for example by reducing the ecological footprint and preserving natural areas (Ogutu et.al., 2023).

Literature research on the dimensions of tourism in Lake Balaton will help to understand the development of tourism in the region and the opportunities and challenges it presents. Ongoing research and sustainable development can enable the long-term success of tourism in Lake Balaton and its positive impact on the local economy and communities.

The development of spa tourism in Lake Balaton dates back to the dualism era, when major infrastructure developments took place, followed by the development of its characteristics. After World War II, corporate holidays came to the fore (Horváth, 2020). Purposeful tourism exploitation began in the 1960s, as international demand also increased sharply (Rátz, 1999). After the change of regime, its popularity declined and the domestic visitor base began to expand in the mid-2000s, as a wide range of resources were available to develop quality tourism and active marketing

communications were undertaken to promote the lake (Dani and Gellénné, 2010). New centres have emerged in the region as a result of these developments (Horváth et al., 2018), and in addition to passive waterfront tourism, cycling, cultural, wine and gastronomic, health and festival tourism have also increased significantly (Pálfi et al., 2015). Accessibility has improved thanks to the M7 motorway, the development of the No 8 main road and the Sármellék airport. In addition to the development of attractions, a number of accommodation developments have also taken place, leading to an increase in demand. With the adoption of the National Tourism Development Strategy 2030—Tourism 2.0., new municipalities have joined the priority area, thus increasing the range of active, cultural and eco-tourism products, which should lead to an increase in the average length of stay and a reduction in seasonality. Continuous changes are necessary to the increase the popularity of tourism and for further developments (Gonda and Rátz, 2023). The waterfront operators have also taken a number of measures to eliminate seasonality and the destination is now open all year round.

Balaton cruise tourism has developed considerably in recent years and has become an unmissable experience on the lake. Cruises are of great importance in the tourism offer, as they present the beautiful landscapes of Lake Balaton from a unique perspective. The slow cruise allows visitors to enjoy the varied panorama of the lake's shores in comfort and the cruises are ideal choices for families, couples and groups of friends as it creates a relaxed environment for spending time together.

Cruises also highlight the cultural and historical interest of the lake and local shipping operators and ports are becoming increasingly attractive to visitors. They play a major role in the economic benefits, attracting millions of tourists to the lake every year so cruising increases tourism spending, as visitors often take advantage of local restaurants and shops while cruising. Therefore, for operators, boat rentals and tours they are a significant source of revenue. The demand for cruises is growing, supported by various cruise events and festivals.

Outside the season cruising can face a number of bottlenecks related to reduced visitor interest, business challenges and other factors. Some examples:

- Weather: Weather conditions can change during the off-season, and cold, rainy, or stormy weather can reduce visitors' willingness to cruise.
- Lower visitor traffic: Significant reductions in tourist numbers are possible during the off-season, particularly due to cooler weather and the absence of school holidays.
- Restriction of tourist services: Some tourism service providers may limit services or close operations during the off-season due to reduced seasonal demand.
- Marketing challenges: Off-season cruising may have marketing difficulties, as campaigns traditionally focused heavily on seasonal tourism may need to be year-round.
- Navigation safety: Cooler weather and off-season water conditions can increase boating safety risks, which can affect the attractiveness of cruising.
- Staffing and operating costs: During the off-season, crew maintenance and payroll costs will remain, but will place a heavy burden on businesses due to the reduction in revenue.

- Disruption costs: During off-season periods, vessel maintenance and storage and operating costs may be higher when less revenue is available.
- Availability and service periods: Off-season cruising requires operators to be more flexible in terms of availability and service periods, which can sometimes lead to logistical difficulties.
- Lack of events: There are fewer cultural and tourist events during the off-season, which can make cruise tourism more attractive and thus reduce visitor interest.

Despite these bottlenecks, it is possible to develop off-season cruising, for example by exploiting the seasonal tourist attractions, special offers, creative marketing strategies and other innovative approaches (Horváth et al., 2018).

In the autumn, cruises offer a special value when the shores of the lake are bathed in picturesque colours so they are also a great way to see the natural beauty of the lake. Autumn cruises have an economic advantage, as fewer tourists appreciate the quiet and romantic surroundings even more, so cruising in the autumn months can help reduce the seasonal fluctuations of the tourist season.

Thanks to the lower seasonal supply, autumn cruises provide local businesses with an opportunity for a return on investment. Autumn cruise visitors can enjoy the tranquility of the lake while having a pleasant time despite the cool weather. For tourists, autumn cruises offer the opportunity to learn more about local culture and traditions. The cruise also stimulates demand for local handicrafts and gastronomic products.

2. Materials and methods

During the research there was utilized a combination of primary and secondary research methods to achieve the research's objectives.

2.1. Literature review

The basis of the secondary sources was the analysis of the existing literature throughout the preparation of the research. This involved defining basic concepts, defining the characteristics of Lake Balaton, and studying international and domestic literature according to the cruise ships.

2.2. Primary research

During the preparation of the research, various methods were used.

In our research, we conducted a structured interview with the owner-manager of the company under study as part of primary research, and we also carried out a questionnaire survey on the spot, in the framework of field visits on several occasions.

The questionnaire was designed in a standardised way to ensure that the data obtained could be compared. The questionnaire consists mainly of closed questions, with several possible answers, but also the possibility to express opinions and make suggestions for improvement. We have analysed the results using Excel and SPSS.

3. Research results

3.1. Interview

In our research we conducted in-depth interview with with Ákos Szemlédy-Regős, owner and managing director of T-Flotta Ltd., who spoke about his experiences in the post-season.

The business has three main areas, which are described in detail:

Charter boating: Boats are rented out to licensed boat drivers for different durations according to the needs of the guest - this has been extended in recent years to include the possibility of hiring a boat driver, but with a shorter duration. This activity can be classified under the heading of sailing tourism, where sailing is the main purpose of holidays and leisure activities (Götz von Rohr et al., 2008). In the implementation of this tourism sector, the journey itself is part of the experience, which is being enhanced by the development of ever higher quality and more comfortable boats (EBA, 2013).

The event management branch of the business: Partly related to small boats and motorboats, but with an important role for large vessels. There are two main types of events: private events, which are practically from wise man to grave, as they have organised christenings, funerals, stag and hen parties, weddings and other family events. Catering services can be provided, and other services can also be provided on request. Among these services, the bachelor party is very popular. The other type of event management is corporate events, of which team building events are of particular importance, and can accommodate up to 200 people. In such cases, several large boats are used, as well as motorboats, but extra boats, barges and other floating platforms are also hired if necessary.

There are two categories of team-building events: The captain's package is made up of services that are more easily available on board, such as mast climbing, where participants pull each other up a 16-metre masthead. The admiral package includes other equipment such as a killer whale, which participants have to drop with harpoons.

According to the National Tourism Development Strategy 2030—Tourism 2.0, cruise tourism belongs to the category of nature tourism, where the aim is to get to know nature, but the tourist is a passive observer (Jászberényi, 2019). In the case of the enterprise under study, classic cruise tourism has already been transformed into programme cruising, as every tour offers some kind of programme. Most of these are the pirate programme, where animators work and entertain the public throughout the day. Every $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour, 1-1 boat sets off to compete against each other and the animators instruct the audience. Each year the programme gets more colourful, sometimes with up to two animators working at the same time with life-like cannons. Their trademark has become the pirate programme, which reaches tens of thousands of people each summer. Its twin programme is the mermaid programme, which is aimed at girls and ladies, as the pirate programme is essentially a more boyish programme.

Also popular is the sunset tour. A new addition to the tours is stand-up comedy, which was launched in 2023. This was introduced to reach new target groups, so that those who are not looking for a children's programme can also find something to do. Pirate disco and retro disco are also available in the evenings, and a new feature is the ghost cruise, where elements are added to the night cruise.

Their programme was not less successful, but the conga show did not move enough people. The reason for this was that they launched the retro disco at the same time, which attracted a lot of interest, so it sucked people away and became a competing programme.

Their main clientele is made up of families who take part in the various cruise programmes with their children during the spring-summer period. The other large group of guests are the guests of team-building events.

In terms of tourist offer, there are several cruise services available in the larger Balaton settlements, and BAHART (Balaton Navigation Ltd.) offers its services in several settlements across Lake Balaton, too. However, some of these service providers suspend their services at the end of the season, as it is not economically viable to maintain programmes in the autumn. This is when the boats are winterised and seasonal repairs and maintenance also take place. Some larger operators still organise cruise programmes in the autumn, but these are more weekend programmes, focusing on the autumn holidays or on specific themes such as Halloween.

In terms of competitors, many try to adopt their ideas, but often only at the level of slogans. No one on Lake Balaton offers a complex service like the company.

A competitive advantage is in the business the personal presence, ambition and ideas of the owners, but the company also has the human and financial background to make ideas happen.

In the pre- and post-season, the event management sector is strong and is the focus. The high season starts in early to mid-July and lasts until the end of August, when programme cruising dominates, reaching a wide range of people. Outside the high season, a limited number of cruise programmes are available. Their credo is that the season should not end when summer ends. In recent years, they have run until at least 23 October, but in good weather they even run cruises in early November. This is a message to guests about stability of their services in all conditions.

In bad weather, as long as the weather permits, they take the boats out. Events are also held in the rain, with raincoats distributed. On rare occasions, extreme weather conditions may prevent the boats from going out, in which case the event is held in the harbour. The programmes and catering are the same, but the boat does not leave the harbour.

Several of the marketing solutions are used together, with no single element being the most successful, but rather a combination of different marketing elements produces the successful marketing strategy. For example, 42 billboards are displayed in the town of Siofok, but their effectiveness is difficult to measure, but they contribute to the marketing activity. A unified look and personal presence in the town squares is very important, with mobile sales promoters promoting the cruises. They have a uniform look and feel, with 8-10 stands in public spaces in Siofok, an important online presence, targeted social media advertising, consciously building social media platforms with different branding: they appear as Talisman pirate boat, as an event management company and as a charter boat company.

In the field of event management, they mainly use Google Ads campaigns. The consistency of the websites is also important, where the services are described in detail, which is very important. A significant proportion of events come through them, and an interesting lesson is that the office and customer service presence is less strong in

terms of sales and is not decisive. Marketing activity is definitely important, but marketing tools must be used consciously.

The coronavirus epidemic hit the business very badly, arriving at the end of the winter when they were already preparing for the next season, causing serious economic damage. During the summer period, charter activities were the first to start, followed by cruises. Interestingly, the cruise sector was stronger then than in the previous record tourist season in 2019. They rewrote their timetable, introduced new ticket prices and expanded their operations. Since 2019, the cruise industry has always been more successful than the year before. Following the Covid outbreak, they have strengthened and diversified their programmes, resulting in higher quality services.

The company is also making progress in the field of digitalisation: They use a cloud-based business management system to coordinate the company's finances and general operations. An innovative and new element on board is the possibility to book and buy tickets online. The system is already working very well for small boats and is fully automated, and started working for cruises this year. For example, the system makes it easy to keep track of when a guest arrives on board and exactly how many guests are on board.

The interview was conducted with a questionnaire in order to confirm what was said in the interview from the owner's side, and to examine the attitudes and motivations of the visitors during the autumn period.

This is important for the study because it gives us a comprehensive picture of cruising on Lake Balaton in the autumn, both from the service provider's and visitor's side. The other service providers were not included in the research due to the limited availability of their services in the autumn period, so a transparent comparison is not possible within the scope of this research.

3.2. Questionnaire survey

The questionnaire survey was carried out in September and October 2023, on several occasions during the cruises, by personal presence. A total of 99 questionnaires were completed by passengers. The questionnaires were completed in roughly equal proportions during the team building and individual cruise programmes. In the first part of the questionnaire, we asked for general demographic data: Gender, age, where you are from.

A significant proportion of service users came from Budapest and the surrounding area, as shown in **Figure 1**. This is likely to be due to the fact that one of the groups that came for team building was from a company in Budapest, but the majority of visitors also came from the capital or its agglomeration during the period under study. Interestingly, there was also a significant proportion of local visitors from Siófok.

After this, we asked the visitors that who they arrived with and which service did they use, because the company has more services: Pirate ship/children's programme, Cruise, without children's programme, Sunset tour, Disco boat, Adrenalin tour, Sailing boat rental for under 12 people, Boat hire for over 12 people (team building, family event, wedding, stag/hen party, etc.), electric boat hire, water taxi, small train.

In **Table 1**, we have chosen the most popular pirate boat programme. We examined, whom the passengers arrived with to this programme. The total number

shows the number of people who uses the cruise shipping service, not the team building service. As we assumed, the highest proportion of people who came with their families attended these programmes, but there was also a high number of people who came with a group.

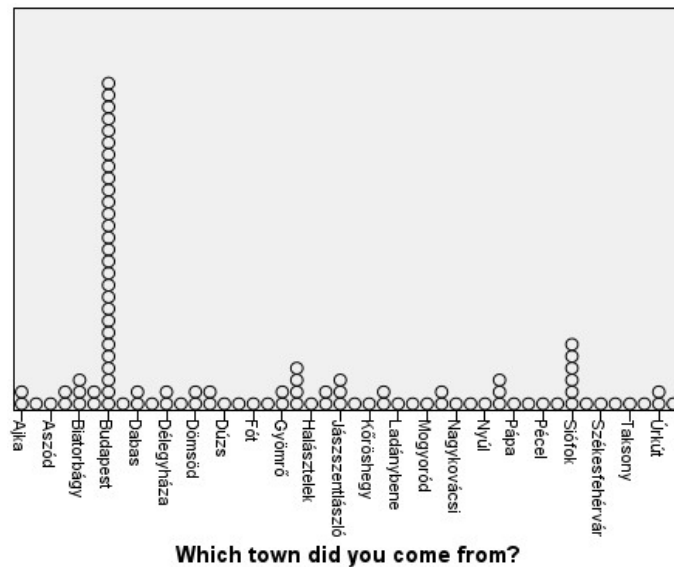


Figure 1. Which municipality did you come from? (Source: Own editing).

Table 1. Who did you arrive with? Service pirate ship crosstabulation (Source: Own editing).

	Number of passengers on the Pirate ship programme (n)	Total number of passengers of cruise ships (n)
Who did you arrive with?		
Family members	39	39
Alone	1	1
Friends	4	4
Group visit	5	5
Total	49	49

We asked how visitors learnt about the programme. **Figure 2** shows that the vast majority of people found out about the programme through recommendations from family and friends, but that the internet also plays a significant role as a source of information. It is clear that word of mouth, personal recommendation, is of particular importance, but the majority of visitors use the internet as their main source of information. Another important marketing tool in this case is the relatively high importance of leaflets and posters, while the importance of tourist information offices and hotel recommendations is negligible.

For those who have chosen to charter a boat for more than 12 people, we looked at the purpose why they arrived with this larger team, **Table 2** shows that a significant proportion of these were for team building purposes during the period under review, with a negligible number of guests arriving for family events or stag/hen parties. This clearly shows that team-building events play a prominent role in the autumn period, as the questionnaires we received showed that these events accounted for half of the total number of visitors.

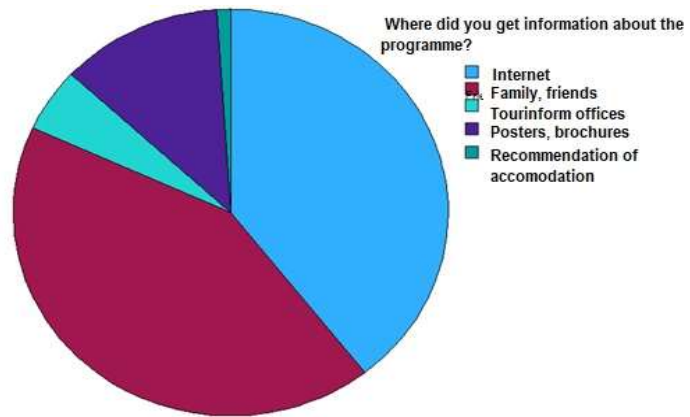


Figure 2. Where did you get your information about the programme? (Source: Own editing).

Table 2. Type of service for boat charter of more than 12 persons (Source: Own editing).

		Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Valid	Team building	50	50.5	96.2	96.2
	Bachelor/bachelorette party	1	1	1.9	98.1
	Family event	1	1	1.9	100
	Total	52	52.5	100	-
Missing	System	47	47.5	-	-
Total		99	100	-	-

We also looked at guest satisfaction. Respondents were asked to rate the services they received from one to five based on the following factors:

- Satisfaction with services;
- Satisfaction with prices;
- Cleanliness, tidiness of boats;
- Staff kindness, preparedness;
- Quality of programmes;
- Selection of programmes.

Meaning of points are the following:

- very bad;
- bad;
- acceptable;
- good;
- very good.

Figure 3 clearly shows that five-point scores were typically obtained, with the most prominent being staff preparedness and programme choice. However, a fifth of respondents were less satisfied with prices, which they considered high.

Respondents were asked to write down which element of the programme they liked best. The overwhelming majority mentioned Captain Gluttonous Badger, who plays a leading role in running each programme. They also highlighted the overall quality of the programmes, and the popularity of cannon shooting and mast climbing were equally popular. Respondents also mentioned the hospitality, the opportunity to

swordfight with pirates, the high quality of service and the quality of the team games, as shown in the word cloud in **Figure 4**.



Figure 3. Guest satisfaction.



Figure 4. Word cloud of the most popular programme elements.

Those who completed the questionnaire were also able to make suggestions for further improvements. Those who responded overwhelmingly used various phrases such as “it was perfect”, but many missed the buffet, especially the coffee facilities, which should be changed in the future.

4. Conclusion

Thanks to the developments on Lake Balaton, tourist services are available all year round and there are many opportunities for visitors to enjoy a holiday outside the classic waterfront holiday. Cruises have always been an important part of tourism in Lake Balaton, and this segment is growing dynamically year by year. Thanks to the development of boats, this service is also available for a significant part of the year. Our research has confirmed that this service is also in demand outside the high season, and that Lake Balaton offers a special experience in autumn, as evidenced by the feedback from many visitors, and that team-building events are also a prominent feature.

As mentioned in the interview, autumn cruising is in high demand, but it is not the strongest time economically. The importance of the autumn cruise lies in the message it sends to guests that the company's services are available almost all year round, except in winter, and to team-building programme organisers it also means reliability and consistency.

The economic benefits include team-building programmes, which account for a significant part of autumn revenues, while in the summer, cruises and children's programmes are more prominent on the economic side. The two types of service complement each other well, ensuring that the boats are used for most of the year. It is important to note, however, that other cruise lines either suspend their services during the off-season or have limited availability, for example during the autumn holidays or Halloween, and therefore it is not possible to make a comprehensive comparison of the companies' off-season services, as this does not allow a transparent comparison of the data. Based on the business model of the company under investigation, economic sustainability can be ensured through stability and a stable presence so the data's show that it could be implemented by other lines too.

Cruises are of great importance for visitors to the lake, as they offer a unique perspective on the environmental charms of Lake Balaton. The cruises create a special environment for shared experiences and showcase not only the natural beauty but also the cultural and historical aspects of the lake. Cruises have also opened up tourism opportunities for local shipping operators and ports so they are of major economic importance, as millions of visitors come to the lake every year, and cruises also increase tourist spending, as visitors often take advantage of local restaurants and shops.

In the autumn, cruises add a special value to the experience, as the lake shores are bathed in dazzling autumn colours. The economic benefit of autumn cruises is that they can help to reduce seasonal fluctuations in tourism by offering attractive activities in the autumn months and also increase income for local businesses during the off-season. Autumn cruises offer tourists the opportunity to learn more about local culture and traditions, as visitors spend more leisure time on the waterfront in the summer, while in autumn they can enjoy cultural attractions or wine tastings, which can be enjoyed on board the boats.

Off-season cruising has a number of direct economic impacts that contribute to the economic revitalisation of the region and the development of the tourism industry:

- Increase in tourism revenue: Autumn cruises offer an attractive programme for tourists, thus increasing the number of visitors to the region. Ticket prices paid for new and exciting experiences and cruise-related services (e.g. meals on board) increase tourism revenue.
- Occupancy: Autumn cruises can contribute to an increase in the occupancy rate of local accommodation as tourists stay longer in the area for cruises.
- Hospitality and trade: Cruise tourists visit restaurants, cafes and shops, contributing to a boost in local hospitality and commerce.
- Income of shipping service providers: Cruise service providers, including cruise ship rental companies and tour operators, increase their revenues through autumn cruises.

- Small business development: Autumn cruises stimulate local small businesses such as craft shops and gift shops, as tourists often purchase local products.
- Job creation: With more accessible tourism options, local businesses can create additional jobs, such as expanding cruise service providers or in the hospitality industry.
- Marketing and promotion: Autumn cruises offer a unique experience that can improve the tourism image and attractiveness of the area, thereby increasing tourist numbers in the long term.
- Other services: Tourists are likely to use other local services such as bicycle rentals or museum visits.

These economic impacts depend in part on the popularity of the autumn cruise and higher spending by tourists, and contribute to the economic diversification and sustainable development of the local community.

We have made some suggestions to development the cruising in Lake Balaton which can cover a number of areas, including the experience, sustainability, quality of services and tourist attractiveness:

- Digital experiences: Developing smartphone apps or digital guiding systems that offer visitors interactive information and stories about environmental and historical attractions.
- Regional collaboration: Cooperations between local businesses to develop tourism services in the Balaton region.
- Thematic ships and programmes: Offering themed boat trips and programmes, such as gastronomic tours or theme boats, that offer unique experiences.
- Diversification of tours according to the seasons: Creating special cruise programmes at different times of the year, such as spring birdwatching tours or autumn wine tastings.
- Innovative marketing: Using creative and innovative marketing strategies to promote fall cruising, including social media, video sharing platforms or influencer collaborations.
- Combined programmes: Offering discounted packages that combine cruises with other tourist activities such as museum visits or bike tours.

A combination of such measures can help to develop the services of the Balaton cruise, increasing the tourist attractiveness and economic development of the area. It would be useful for other cruise lines too so they could work in the off-season too which would increase competition.

All in all, the successful development of cruise tourism in Balaton and the benefits of autumn cruises contribute to the tourism wealth and sustainable development of the region.

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