DIPLOMA THESIS

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SUMMARY

This thesis delves into the intricacies of tourism competitiveness in Iran's touristic cities, focusing on Rasht as a specific case study. The goal of the research is to identify the main influencing factors on the competitiveness of tourism products in Iran's tourist cities, with a specific case study on Rasht, and to give recommendations for further development of the tourism industry in the city.

Rasht, the capital of Gilan Province, is characterized by its lush natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and renowned gastronomy, making it a multifaceted tourism destination. However, the research highlights some critical issues. First, cultural attractions in Rasht are not well-preserved, mainly due to financial constraints and a lack of awareness. Second, marketing efforts for the city are insufficient, leading to challenges in attracting tourists and realizing its full potential.

The study aimed to discern the key factors influencing tourism in Rasht, and through a comprehensive analysis of respondent feedback, four pivotal determinants were identified. The survey results emphasize the pivotal roles of cultural, natural, and culinary attractions in driving tourism, alongside competitive pricing and sustainable tourism practices. Cultural attractions, marked by the city's rich heritage and traditions, play a significant role in Rasht's appeal, providing historical and cultural enrichment to tourists. The allure of natural attractions, exemplified by the lush landscapes and proximity to the Caspian Sea, draws visitors seeking serene, picturesque settings. Additionally, Rasht's renowned gastronomy, boasting an array of unique and savory local dishes, is a compelling magnet for culinary enthusiasts. Finally, as a practical consideration, pricing is integral, with affordability and competitive pricing contributing to the city's appeal. These factors collectively underscore the diverse appeal of Rasht as a tourism destination, shedding light on the interplay of culture, nature, gastronomy, and affordability that underpin its attractiveness to travelers.

On the other hand, cultural attractions, including historical sites and festivals, face preservation challenges due to financial constraints and insufficient funding, highlighting a need for concerted efforts to safeguard these assets. Additionally, the survey indicates ineffective marketing, with most visitors learning about Rasht through personal recommendations rather than formal advertising. The synergy between cultural, natural, and culinary elements is crucial for Rasht's tourism potential, as reflected in competitive pricing.

However, the absence of sustainable practices poses a significant challenge, necessitating urgent initiatives from local authorities to align with eco-conscious traveler expectations.

The thesis employs statistical analyses to test a hypothesis, comparing survey mean scores with the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 (TTCI2019). Using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the analysis reveals a significant discrepancy between Rasht's survey results and the 2019 TTCI scores, leading to the rejection of all the statistical hypotheses. Notably, Rasht consistently exhibits a higher index value in all competitiveness factors compared to the national average reported in the TTCI2019.

This divergence is attributed to factors such as the TTCI2019 report's limited data scope, extending only to 2019 without considering changes in Iran's tourism landscape up to 2023, including the impact of events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the thesis's localized and current perspective focused specifically on Rasht, while the TTCI2019 report covers the entire country, contributing to the observed differences in competitiveness indices.

The recommendations include enhancing cultural preservation, strengthening marketing strategies, promoting culinary tourism, optimizing pricing strategies, engaging the local community in tourism development, and promoting sustainable tourism practices. By addressing these key factors, Rasht can bolster its competitiveness, attract diverse tourists, and achieve sustainable growth.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of localized, up-to-date research for a comprehensive understanding of regional tourism competitiveness. The thesis serves as a call to action, urging efforts to develop Rasht's tourism industry by addressing challenges, enhancing preservation, refining marketing strategies, and embracing sustainability practices.