

TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ECO-TOURISM WITH AN EMPHASIS ON RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA

Gajdobranski Aleksandra

Faculty of Management, Sremski Karlovci, SERBIA,
e-mail: aleksandra.gajdobranski@famns.edu.rs

Abstract: *The main purpose of this paper is to review the main trends and opportunities for development of ecotourism in Serbia using the available primary and secondary data. Representing space in which traditions and pride of medieval rural Serbia are woven in, the values of the idyllic landscapes of untouched nature are highlighted.*

Our country is committed to offer innovative programs within rural tourism on the European market. In this regard, we point out that the strategy of tourism development in Serbia established a selective approach, where the rural tourism stands out as a priority in forms of tourism that are tied to special interests. This is particularly emphasized development of ecotourism villages in mountainous areas, the water that offer a healthy environment, organic food, pleasant atmosphere, quiet holiday in the countryside, ethnographic and other cultural and historical values.

It is expected that tourist visits in Serbia will be experiencing a gradual expansion, calculated on the representation of all age groups of tourists, various forms of tourism trends with rich marketing facilities in rural tourism. Serbia is ready to offer a new kind of tourist services - life in the country with the use of existing facilities for independent living of families with two or three members, with activities around the small, rural household.

Keywords: *ecotourism, rural tourism, market trends, opportunities, strategies*

1. INTERESTS AND TRENDS IN THE FIELD OF RURAL TOURISM

Tourism related to the special interests include several aspects of tourism for which there is a corresponding demand showing steady growth, with an expected tendency of even faster growth in the future. This includes interest in the culture, archeology, art, architecture, sport, music, hobbies, hunting and fishing, sojourns in the village and other interests. This group of different interests is especially important in Serbia with those forms of tourism in which to some extent already a tourism product is established. One of these forms is precisely ecotourism, which is closely related to rural tourism. In developing, for the time being, small but high-quality nucleus of rural tourism it is necessary to build up environmental elements (development of eco-villages with different forms of common life, such as healthy food, walking, etc.).

Of the many definitions of the various authors, the most commonly used is the one that defines ecotourism “as a natural based form of tourism which is the main motivation for watching and enjoying tourist in nature, as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas” (International Year of Ecotourism, 2002).

Market trends in the world are moving in favor of rural tourism, which is confirmed by the estimates of the World Tourism Organization (WTO). Demand in the last 15 years shows a clear growth, where the highest rate of annual increase of about 25% have been observed in some of the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe. Based on research within rural tourism within Europe, there are about 200,000 known service providers, 2,000,000 beds and 500,000 directly and indirectly employed in the sector, with an annual consumption of about 65 billion Euros (<http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/tourism>). In our region, according to WTO data, Slovenia has the most developed rural tourism. The World Tourism Organization recommends Serbia to develop rural tourism, since it has many resources for the development of this form of ecotourism. The strategy for development of tourism in Serbia provides significant activity in this type of tourism and gives the priority importance to it. Rural tourism in Serbia contributes to the conservation of the rural environment and cultural heritage, but also economically motivates local people to stay in rural areas. This type of tourism could significantly contribute to the protection of nature, but also provide the means for survival and development of the village. The development of tourism in the villages of Serbia, as an organized activity began over a quarter of a century. The early development of rural tourism is linked to the spontaneous movement of tourists who wanted to briefly escape from the city, environmentally degraded environment and to spend some time in nature. At the beginning, this type of tourism dealt only with individual households. Over time, fueled by tourism companies, tourism in the country received a mass character. In order to develop tourism in the countryside, tourism companies appear, mainly in the mountainous villages (Devići, Brankovina, Studenica), tourism associations of municipalities (Kosjerić, Ivanjica, Knić), and agricultural cooperatives and hospitality and tourism industry joined to this activity.

The economic importance that Serbia may have on the development of rural tourism is huge. For example, if we start from the simple premise that a rural household has only two rooms with two beds and issues them to foreigners only 200 days per year at the price of 20 Euro for full board, we get a figure of 16,000 Euros per year. In Serbia, half the population lives in villages, i.e. so it is the place where it is possible to find millions of households. If only 10% of these households decide to be engaged in rural tourism, it would generate 1.6 billion Euros just from the sojourns and food. If we add the revenue from transportation, tours, hotel spending, duty customs, etc. more than three billion Euros per year is to be expected, initially. Satisfied tourist spends over 100 Euros per day (www.cenort.org.yu). In order to realize this, it is essential that many industries maximize its engagement. Let us mention only the construction industry, building materials, industrial equipment, food industry, transport, etc.

According to information from the archives of the tourist association, in the late eighties of the last century, 50 villages with approximately 3,000 beds in 800 households were engaged in rural tourism. Today, it is estimated that approximately 250 households has approximately 1800 beds. The Table 1 shows the official statistics in relation to the number of tourists in western Serbia, in period 1999 – 2012: According to official statistics, in period 1999 – 2012 about 300,000 tourists visited western Serbia per year. The largest number of tourists was recorded in 2012 (370,924) and the smallest number of tourist was recorded in 1999, (237,419) due to the political situation in the country and the period of NATO bombing of Serbia. Growth of the number of tourists after in 1999 has slow growth rate low because ecotourism as an economic sector is the most sensitive to changes in

the political and economic nature. It is important to point out that, regardless of the state trend, the number of tourist arrivals from year to year rises, i.e. has an upward trend. The rural tourism as a special tourism industry is getting more and more important, (www.dokuments%20and%20settings/korisnik/Desktop/Teksovi%20za%20projekat/Seoski%20turizam.htm).

Table 1: The number of tourists in western Serbia, in period 1999 - 2012

(Source: www.stat.serb.sr.gov.yu)

Year	The number of tourists			Number of spent nights			BDP	
	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign
1999	237.419	226.441	10.978	1.291.621	1.226.012	65.609	5,41	5,98
2000	328.663	310.785	17.878	1.775.092	1.707.702	67.390	5,49	3,77
2001	311.378	294.559	16.819	1.607.553	1.541.281	66.272	5,23	3,94
2002	300.936	284.122	16.814	1.472.350	1.413.215	59.135	4,97	3,52
2003	288.213	270.737	17.476	1.363.773	1.289.809	73.964	4,76	4,23
2004	313.138	292.683	20.455	1.337.820	1.262.565	75.255	4,31	3,68
2005	308.494	285.167	23.327	1.303.884	1.230.995	72.889	4,39	3,12
2006	288.213	270.737	17.476	1.363.773	1.289.809	73.964	4,76	4,23
2007	347.997	313.260	34.737	1.432.774	1.323.578	109.166	4,23	3,24
2008	363.444	324.563	38.881	1.442.961	1.325.429	117.532	4,08	3,02
2009	318.118	279.700	38.418	1.294.672	1.185.114	109.558	4,24	2,85
2010	332.650	287.733	44.917	1.257.546	1.130.834	126.712	3,93	2,82
2011	345.248	300.062	72.262	1.350.141	1.200.459	275.682	12,6	6,2
2012	370.924	316.827	54.097	1.530.211	1.360.218	169.993	12,9	5,4

Based on the data of the Tourist Organization of Serbia, hosts in Kosjeric, Valjevo Ljig, Čačak, Požega Knić, Lučani, Mionica, Uzice, Sokobanja, Čajetina, Prijepolje, Brus, Šabac, Kraljevo, Ivanjica, Rača kragujevačka and Gornji Milanovac deal with organized tourism (SBS, Municipalities in the Republic of Serbia 1999-2012, Belgrade). Based on the survey, it was concluded that the majority of tourists who visit the villages of these municipalities are older age people, belong to the age group of 46 to 60 years (32 %) and the age group over 60 years (46%). A significantly smaller number of tourists belong to the age group of 31 to 45 years (15%), while children under 15 years accounted for only 7% of the total number of tourists. Of all the surveyed tourists, half of them are highly educated, while about 43% of tourists have secondary education. Most of the surveyed tourists are domestic tourists (86%) and comes from Subotica, Kikinda, Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Pancevo. The remaining 14% are foreign tourists, and they come from Skoplje. However, from discussions with the hosts, it can be concluded that visitors of Kosjeric are tourists from many European countries, such as France, UK, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and other European countries. The majority of tourists (90%) were very satisfied with their sojourn in the village and the rooms were rated with 5 on a scale of 1 to 5. The remaining 10% of the tourists stays were rated between 4 and 5. Based on this, it can be concluded that tourists are very happy with everything that villages are offering, and that rural tourism is the future of these municipalities, regardless of minor and major fluctuations.

As for tourist valorization of rural spaces or areas in western Serbia, their condition was assessed with medium grade (2.72 to 3.88), while micro-location status and the availability were poorly rated. These environments, in addition to cultural, historical and artistic value, do not have adequate ecotourism facilities, which reduce the value of tourism and limiting them to regional importance, as can be seen in the following table:

Table 2: Tourist valorization of rural spaces or areas in western Serbia
(Source: Ivanovic, M. (2009))

Entirety	Place	The elements of touristic valorization					Average		General touristic value
		Micro location and the availability	Touristic value of the environment	Cultural and historical value	Artistic value	Touristic equipment	Touristic richness		
Zaseok Bebića	Valjevo	3.66	4.66	3.66	4.66	2.00	4.66	3.88	
Selo Šitkovo	Nova Varoš	3.00	3.33	3.66	3.33	1.33	2.66	2.89	
Tičije Polje	Prijepolje	1.33	3.66	4.66	2.66	3.00	2.66	3.00	
Centar sela	Godovik	2.33	3.00	4.00	3.00	1.66	2.33	2.72	
Stara Čaršija	Bajina Bašta	3.33	3.00	3.33	3.66	1.66	3.00	3.00	
GENERAL TOURISTIC VALUE OF RURAL AMBIENTAL ENTIRETIES								3.10	

2. OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM

An important advantage of the development of rural tourism in Serbia is reflected in the achievement of household income with minimal investment. Households, in addition to agriculture, as the main activity in tourism sell their products at the most competitive retail prices, because the tourists come for the goods themselves. Bearing in mind this fact, the rural tourism should become one of the development generators of Serbia and the growth of overall economic activity. The prospect of Serbia is in agriculture and tourism. These two industries have to be closely related because both rely on each other and their common ground - the village. Prospects for agriculture and rural tourism are great. The world is increasingly demand high quality food, especially those produced in a healthy way. While food can be exported, tired man must come to our villages to be well rested. As estimated by the Observer, this year Serbia was ranked among the 20 of the most attractive destinations in the world (14th place) and that is the best way of talking about our perspective.

The Strategy of Tourism (2005-2015) was adopted in the Republic of Serbia, and points out to the possibility of the development of tourism in Serbia with focus on rural tourism in relation to trends in world tourism, with tourist strategic positioning, selection of priority of Serbian tourism products and the competitiveness plan, investment strategy, necessary investment plans and marketing plan. The expected results of the implementation of the strategy are achieving increasing the competitiveness of Serbian rural tourism, increase foreign exchange earnings, the growth of the domestic tourist traffic, as well as job growth through this type of tourism in order to transform Serbia into a competitive tourist destination. Development strategy of Serbia by 2015 envisages establishing of the

tourism clusters in order to successfully position Serbia as a relevant destination in the international tourism market. This strategy defines the following clusters - Vojvodina, Belgrade, Southwest Serbia and Southeast Serbia. The vision of rural tourism in Western Serbia from this strategy is following, "Western Serbia, the land of an open heart receives tourists from home and abroad, pointing to its rich heritage, nurtured and protected natural resources and modern accommodation facilities. Here are the key natural and historic resources of the country, and a high standard of well-equipped winter and summer recreation and health centers, as well as a dense network of roads heritage, offering a unique insight into a living organism of Serbian spiritual culture of the monasteries". According to this strategy, positioning and brand of the Republic of Serbia as an eco-tourism destination has to offer interest for traveling to Serbia on the basis of a number of products, which are already nearly ready, such as city breaks, touring; MICE (Meetings Incentives Congresses Exhibitions), (meetings, tourism tied to special interests, conferences, exhibitions), cruising, and special interests (Tourism Strategy of Serbia, 2005).

Here are some guidelines for the future development of tourism in the country:

- For the further development of tourism in the country, it is necessary to apply the appropriate standardization and categorization of services, particularly adequate conditions for accommodation. Tourism law specifically regulates the provision of accommodation and food in the household, as a specific form of service delivery. Rooms, houses, and holiday apartments rented to tourists, shall meet the sanitary and technical requirements and are be classified in the appropriate categories by a specific act of the municipal authorities, as required by the Regulations on the classification, minimum requirements, and categorization of tourist facilities in the Republic of Serbia (www.razvojturizma.rs).
- Usage of available houses in the villages may be a part of completely new tourist package and deal for those people who live in major cities to be able to spend four or five months per year in the country side. Users of these arrangements may be, and in practice they are, retired people from the metropolis that rent their apartments to others, and can be retired person from our cities dedicated to themselves and their grandchildren. A survey by the NGO "Agroprofit" from Novi Sad, show there is a willingness of tourism organizations in local government to coordinate the implementation of such programs that bring profit to service providers.
- Today in Serbia, there are necessary conditions and extreme offers in villages remote from city centers, which only two or three households live in, with provided electricity, water, and telephone networks. Offers like these with independent taking care of food, exist in the municipalities of Piroć, Dimitrovgrad, Svrlijig, Bela Palanka, but in slightly different conditions in lowland municipalities such as Bela Crkva, Ćoka, Vrřac and Beoćin.
- Definition of deals with high-quality content and services of the hosts that in addition to a top accommodation have to tennis courts, swimming pools, children's playgrounds, walking guides, and additional facilities for barbecue, wine cellars, etc. is realistic. The bikes are required on farms in the west, if there is an opportunity to use them, and in some regions, there are special sleighs, horseback riding, carriage rides, etc. Facilities for such a rich offer are located in large, remote areas, with no neighbors. The overall price of this service is more expensive than a high-class hotel.

- Of particular importance are investments in infrastructure (roads, telecommunication, etc.), the provision of health care and the preservation and protection of the environment in order to prevent uncontrolled urbanization.
- One of the most important tasks in the development of rural tourism is to educate rural home for engaging in this activity. A great role in this should have the non-governmental organizations, tourism organizations, municipalities and all stakeholders. First, it is necessary to point to the economic feasibility of carrying out this activity through domestic and international positive experiences in countryside tourism.
- The hosts should attend specially organized lectures and read the relevant literature in order to be familiar with the standards related to guest's accommodation, appropriate hygiene requirements, method, quantity and quality of services of nutrition, behavior towards guests and other necessary conditions for comfortable stay of tourists in the countryside.
- On the achieved level of development of rural tourism, the role of animation of the users and organizing field trips, sports and other cultural, entertainment and recreational activities take tourism organizations of municipalities through which booking of the accommodation were made, which are engaged organized in tourism. In the future development, in line with market-based development of all, and this type of tourism, the role of supporting the activities of the organizers and the reservation of accommodation will take over the travel agencies having an interest in engaging in this type of tourism.
- Tourism product of rural tourism must also have adequate sale channels. It is necessary to overcome the lack of organization in filling the capacity of tourist facilities in the villages while travel agencies should perform sale. Organized way of selling will greatly contribute to a better matching of supply and demand for holiday in the country and certainly will help rural householders to fully valorize made investments.
- Promotion of eco-tourism (accommodation in the countryside, authentic food) started without integrated supply - each host was operating in accordance with the budget, and usually, it was expected that the media would react emotionally and promote such programs. That was the case for some time, but it is not possible to rely on that. The fact that conditions the agro-tourism sector have improved is obvious thru the fact that great number of families depend on this, it has become the main occupation of many families, rather than as an additional activity. According to incomplete data, around 120 villages in Serbia have no other income (pensions, children support or part-time work).
- On the demand side, in line with international experience, there are tendencies to the greater sophistication of tourism demand and its fussiness in relation to the quality, content, price and other elements of specific destination. The general position is that in the tourist demand, the individualization of the requirements with the orientation of the special interests is increasingly coming to the fore, and that is the great chance of rural tourism.
- For the approach to planning tourism development in the villages of Serbia, of particular importance is market research, and the use of marketing instruments. Tourist values in Serbia are highly correlated with these growing trends when it comes

to foreign as well as domestic tourism demand. Because of this, it is necessary to determine the target markets i.e. their segments, on which positioning of Serbian villages would be performed. On the domestic market, it is primarily urban population, and a large number of potential tourists from Vojvodina of certain age, educational structure and affordability. As for the international market, selling holiday facilities in rural areas will have to be much more direct and to meet the demands for individualization.

- Positioning of Serbian tourism products will be based on the preservation of the natural environment, the diversity of the tourism product, the richness of the cultural heritage of the village (architecture, tradition, old crafts), as well as the hospitality and warmth of the population.
- The number of registered organic food producers in Serbia is 150, but it is not a measure for the offer because 1000 households in extensive conditions opted for this type of production, and these products can be part of the tourist spending in the rural environments. Often offers include this type of foods are reduced to dairy and meat products, rather than offering healthier fruits and vegetables. This type of food preparation involves thorough education of producers and users, which is often lacking in the field.

Based on the above facts, our potential for ecotourism development, with special emphasis on rural tourism, are listed in the following - a regional approach to tourism development (forming clusters); land usage plan of the district, geographic and strategic position, commercialization and conservation of cultural and historical heritage; building the road network; involvement of local communities, intergovernmental cooperation, stimulating the development of this form of tourism by the state; marketing plan, implementation of the Strategy for the development of tourism, the impact of this form of tourism in the development of other activities (the typical product placement); adapting to educational backgrounds; the ability to access donor programs and funds, strengthening public-private partnership, market-oriented operation of the tourist facilities, local and regional media, improving the image of the destination, etc.

3. CONCLUSION

As already mentioned above, Serbia has a number of resources on which it is possible to develop rural tourism as an important aspect of eco-tourism. Unused potentials indicate an unfair representation of eco-tourism, the need for better management and development of rural tourism in Serbia. It is necessary to develop interest in the culture, archeology, art, architecture, sport, music, hobbies, hunting and fishing, sojourns in the village and other interests.

All of these forms should be adequately involved in the design and development of eco-tourism, and as such become a permanent offer in other forms of tourist movements, and in our case, it is a village. Combined with natural resources as the main motive of tourist movement in Serbia, rural tourism could become a significant factor in improving tourism in general, and setting aside as an independent form of tourist movements.

There are good initiatives, proposals and projects for the development of this type of tourism, but they are still untapped and without continuous marketing. The goal is to get tourists who come for vacation or business commitments to encourage for intensive use

of rural tourism facilities, to enhance the offerings and services. This would increase the competitiveness of the tourism sector, which would still allow for an increase in foreign exchange earnings, growth in domestic tourist traffic as well as job growth.

This goals should answer the basic key questions related to this issue, which is, In which direction development of rural tourism in Serbia will continue; In which way Serbia can identify areas with the greatest potential for the development of rural tourism so Serbia could improve the competitiveness of the tourism offer in the tourism market, How to find resources for funding future development of rural tourism in Serbia, How to ensure the implementation of this objectives to the greatest extent.

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