

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Rural tourism as a factor of integral and sustainable development of rural areas and Villages of Serbia and Voivodina**

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**Rural tourism is an important component of integrated and sustainable development and revitalization of villages, as well as an important factor in encouraging the development of local agricultural and non-farmer activities in rural areas and villages, and also a special incentive to employment. In many countries of the European Union rural tourism is included in the development strategies of regions and rural areas and villages. Rural tourism helps maintaining the population in place, creates new jobs, and contributes to socio-economic progress of outstanding areas. In Serbia, also in Voivodina nearly half of the population lives in villages and the region has numerous resources for rural tourism development. Rural tourism can also play an important role in increasing the diversity of the tourist offer in Voivodina. This work highlights the importance of rural tourism in the function of the revitalization of the village, focusing on the challenges of the environment and the possible directions of development in the context of creating a recognizable tourist product and brand of rural tourism in Voivodina, which could target both domestic and international market.**

**Keywords:** rural tourism, Serbia, Voivodina, revitalization, marketing

## **INTRODUCTION**

Rural tourism is both old and new activity. The interest in recreation in rural areas and villages has grown since the nineteenth century. It was a reaction to pressure created by increasingly urbanized and industrialized society. The term "rural tourism" has been adopted by the European Commission for tourism as the means to describe and explain all the touristic activities in rural areas and villages (European Commission: Towards Quality Rural Tourism).

Republic of Serbia and autonomous province Voivodina both have substantial potential for the rural tourism growth. Natural resources in conjunction with culture, tradition, gastronomy and music, may alter to a recognizable tourism brand. It would improve the export revenue and it would improve the country's image.

Nevertheless, the Serbian tourism's momentarily achieved level of competitiveness in the field of rural

tourism is not particularly good (Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia). It is independent to the fact that in its development all the natural, cultural and social requisites exist (natural realm, substantial agricultural area, substantial number of the agriculturally active population, traditional approach to agriculture, low levels of the ground, air and water contamination, the possibility of growing organic food, high conceivability of complementary activities in tourism as horse riding or preparing the local gastronomic delights etc.).

## **Role of tourism in the revitalisation of villages and rural areas**

The United Nations' World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) concludes, based on detailed analysis, that mass tourism and recreational habits of citizens are less and less orientated on "tourism under sun". Also, the interest towards untouched nature is growing. Natural resources and cultural heritages are preferred more and more in the rural areas, and other environments beside

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urban ones (<http://www.world-tourism.org> - World Tourism Organization).

Although defining rural tourism, as a tourism which is based in rural area looks easy, this definition does not include complexity of activities and different forms and meanings which are developed in various countries. According to wider definition: "Rural tourism includes wide range of activities, services and satisfactions provided from farmers and villagers to attract tourists to their region toward making additional revenue" (Muhi, 2009). Similar definition would be the following: Rural tourism includes wide range of activities, services and additional contents, which are organised by village population on family households and properties toward attracting tourists and making additional revenue, while respecting the principals of sustained development and preservation of natural resources (Štetić, 2007).

Rural tourism looks like an appropriate tool for revitalization of abandoned rural areas and providing their sustainability in future through preservation of work places or making new ones, increases the diversity of professions, preserves landscape and nature or supports preservation of village handicrafts as tourist attraction.

The main objective of rural tourism is that, based on the tourism demand, provide additional income to rural population and thus improve their living standards and reduce emigration. Tourism policies should also be applied to help to raise the standard of living of population in the regions visited and meet their needs. Local people should be linked with tourism activities and participate in an equitable distribution of economic, social and cultural benefits they bring, especially in direct and indirect jobs resulting from them (Muhi, 2009).

Rural tourism is a real asset for revitalization of many small and large rural spatial entities, if not quite abandoned, then very sleepy. The development of tourism in these areas can stop the emigration of young people, because the development of tourism today means creating basic conditions for a general, much higher level of village comfort. In such circumstances, young people can find not only economic but also socio-cultural motivations to continue living in family homes, in an environment where the general quality of life is really approaching a level that is nowadays considered necessary (Vratuša, 2002).

Serbia is a land of rural character and is one of the most agrarian countries in Europe. Rural development, as one of the areas of regional policy, is a key instrument for restructuring the agricultural sector and should be tasked to steer the strategic use of the potential of villages attractive to tourists. Given the important economic and other functions of tourism, as well as various and high-value potentials, the spatial plan of Republic of Serbia and its economic policy gives the possibility and proper importance for development of this activity. In addition, the Tourism Development Strategy in Serbia was established selective approach, where rural

tourism is treated as a priority under those types of tourism related to the special interests.

### **Rural tourism in Europe**

Rural tourism is both old and new phenomena. Interest in recreation in the countryside of Europe began to rise already in the nineteenth century, in response to the growing pressures of urbanization and industrialization. The term "village" or "rural" tourism has been adopted by the European Commission for Tourism in order to describe and explain all activities in village-rural areas (European Commission: Towards Quality Rural Tourism).

For the last 20 years, Europe is the world leader in rural tourism, and it is anticipated that this will remain, largely due to the rapid enlargement of the European Union, as well as due to the existence of well-organized Pan-European Association of Rural Tourism (EUROGITES - <http://www.eurogites.com>). Considerable attention is given to EU support for rural tourism initiatives within the broader context of rural development. Complementary benefit is achieved by creating different opportunities for employment of local people. In the UK, for example, changes in land use have attracted similar ideas regarding tourism in rural areas, including hiking, sports and other active recreation. Additional loans were disbursed to farmers through government loan plan for the diverse activities of the farms, to cover the costs of attempting to use land in non-agricultural purposes, such as creating a new circular walking trails, including the signs, and also the needed publicity (Plavša, 2007).

According to the Pan-European association of rural tourism there is about 200,000 known registered providers in rural tourism in Europe, with more than two million beds (data from year 2010, <http://www.eurogites.com>). It is estimated that accommodation on farms, in private cottages, small inns and family hotels achieves an annual direct tourist spending of around 12 billion euro. Including local added value and multiplier effects this amount reaches 26 billion in favour of European rural economy. If daily visits are added and also the fact that the actual bid is estimated at more than twice the size of the officially registered, the total consumption in the rural tourism in the European regions likely exceeds 65 billion euro. In addition to that about 98% of all registered accommodation facilities for rural tourism are in EU countries (data from year 2010, <http://www.eurogites.com>).

The largest receptive, but also rural tourism source markets in Europe are France, Germany, Austria, Great Britain and Italy, which together make up over 77% of the total market for rural tourism in Europe. Today in Europe, the most famous are rural tourist destinations of France (Gites de France), Austria and Germany (Urlaub am Baurenhof) and Italy (Village Tour).

Modern tourism trends are characterized by increasing

guidance to rural destinations, a more pronounced personalization, increased interest and significant tourist focusing on non-standard tourism products. Therefore, in countries with developed tourism offering an increasing attention is focused to the development of rural tourism, which today is one of the important components of development not only of tourism, but of integrated and sustainable rural development and rural regions as a whole.

Rural areas cover 90% of the European Union and contain 60% of its population. Agriculture and forestry use most of the land and play a key role in managing natural resources in rural areas. Synergy of agriculture and tourism provides socio-economic development of rural areas and serves as the platform of economic diversification in rural communities, and therefore strengthening of rural development has become a top priority for the European Union (European Commission: Towards Quality Rural Tourism).

### **The challenges and possible directions of development of rural tourism in serbia and vojvodina**

With the advent of urbanization and industrialization, and thus exhausting work, noise, various pollutions, more and more tourists yearn for the areas of preserved nature, clean air, healthy food. The ideal refuge for these tourists are precisely the rural, village areas and farms - an oasis of peace, which earlier in Voivodina were symbols of wealth, fertility, and prestige.

Serbia and Voivodina have very favourable conditions for tourism development in the countryside. First of all, there are particularly favourable conditions of preserved nature, with a mild climate, clean air, still unpolluted rivers and lakes, rich flora and fauna. Spending time in nature gives tourists the opportunity for walking, recreation, sport, hunting or fishing, horseback riding, hiking, picking berries and herbs, and other recreational and leisure activities in nature. Those tourists who demonstrate an interest in carrying out agricultural work can also be involved in it.

The development of tourism in rural parts of Serbia, as an organized activity began just over a quarter of a century ago. Early developments of tourism in the country are related to the spontaneous movement of tourists, who wanted to, even briefly, escape from the city's degraded environment, and spend some time in nature. Initially only individual households dealt with this type of tourism. Over time, fuelled by tourism organizations and other state tourism authorities, tourism in the country gained a mass character. In order to develop tourism in the countryside, largely in the mountain villages, tourism companies started to establish themselves (Devići, Brankovina, Studenica), as did the tourist associations of municipalities (Kosjerić, Ivanjica, Knić), and the activity also involved the agricultural cooperatives and hospitality

and tourism industry. According to information from the archives of tourism associations, the late eighties, 50 villages in Serbia engaged in tourism with approximately 3,000 beds in 800 households (according to Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia).

The development of tourism activities in the villages of Voivodina has a long tradition, as organized tourist traffic in this region began to take place from the late 70's of the last century. The recent development of rural tourism in Voivodina is characterized by uncoordinated or unsynchronized development of supply components, without synchronizing with other entities. This development has formed an incomplete and insufficiently differentiated rural tourism in the province (Hrabovski-Tomic 2004).

Voivodina has a good geographical position. Its territory is crossed by Eastern European tourist route, presented by the highway E-75, and there are other busy traffic routes, railways, as well as airline corridors, and at 70 km from Novi Sad is the main airport in Serbia. Great importance in Voivodina have three navigable rivers Danube, Sava and Tisa, a little less important are Tamiš and Begej and numerous waterways in the Danube-Tisa-Danube Canal, which had not been used for tourism purposes, but remain as a significant resource of water transport. Natural and geographical characteristics of Voivodina are diverse and provide opportunities for the use of resources and establishment of tourism services, which are required in the tourism market, such as protected areas, waterways, hunting grounds, and native villages that are remnants of tradition. Significant natural curiosity of Voivodina is the Pannonia plain, from which two mountains rise – Fruška Gora, which was declared a national park and Vršac Mountains. No less interesting is the Deliblato sand, often called the "European Sahara". Her moving sand was consolidated by afforestation and now there are conditions for the formation of recreational area with a pleasant atmosphere for relaxation.

One of the most important tasks in the development of rural tourism is education of the village host for doing this activity. First, it is necessary, through the expert processing of domestic and international best practice in tourism in the countryside, to show to the village hosts the economic feasibility of dealing with this activity. In addition to using aggressive marketing and market performance, propaganda and information, the goal can be set to familiarize public of our country, local and foreign tourists with the beauty and possibilities offered by the rural tourism.

Rural development strategy and its implementation must necessarily be done through cooperation not only at the community level but also through regional cooperation and integration in the wider international programs. Linking with national and international associations, whose activities are related not only to develop rural tourism but also for the integral and sustainable development in general, besides enabling the

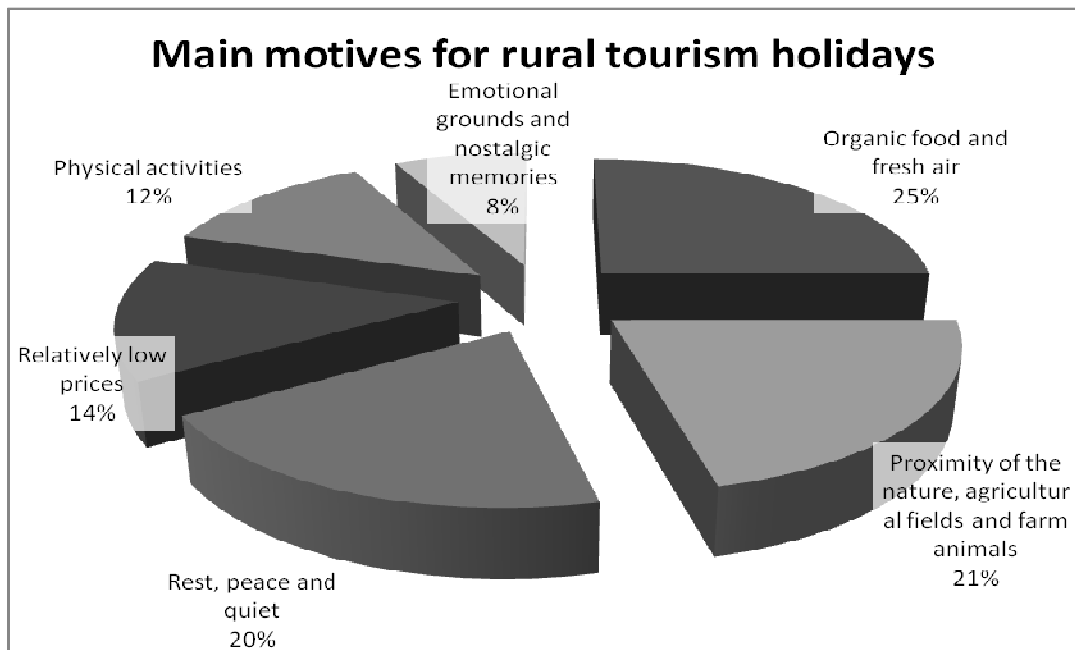


Figure 1. Main motives for rural tourism holidays

exchange of information, experiences and methodologies, contributes to the adoption of effective marketing. In order to obtain a significant promotion in the region, rural tourism needs to implement a professional marketing approach, which would be implemented by local governments, tourism organizations, NGOs, private sector and so on.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The article presents the results of the conducted questionnaire survey. The research used the stratified sample. The sample was stratified with intention of providing answers as sincere as possible. Willingness to answer questions was mandatory. The sample consists of 44 female and 36 male respondents. All the answers were valid. The data was gathered in the City of Novi Sad. The participation in the survey was optional. The article conducts the questionnaire survey in order to adopt wider opinion on the subject. Even though the results may not represent the entirety of the Autonomous Province the survey still provides some qualitative conclusions. In the survey the first direct question which should point out the attitude of the respondents and prospects about their possible holidays in the rural areas was: *“Would you spend your holidays (vacation) in rural environment (a village or bowery)”?* In order to understand their motives, the respondents were asked the following question: *“What is possibly Your main motive to choose the rural tourism (only one)”?* All the answers are narrowed to six categories, where it was possible to choose one of the main motivation groups.

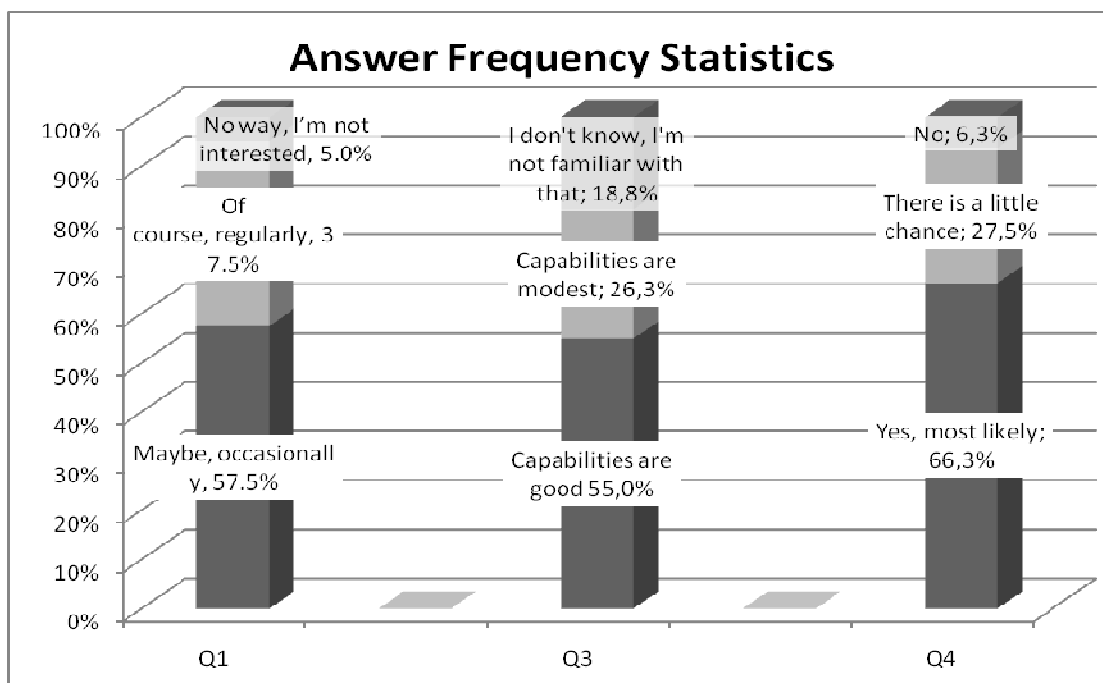
Responders' opinion on the subject of natural, cultural and other growth capabilities for rural tourism development in this region has also been analysed. They were asked to *“Evaluate what natural, cultural and other potentials for rural tourism development, exist in our region”?* At the end of the survey, respondents were asked: *“Do You believe that there is a chance for rural tourism to attract not only domestic, but also the foreign visitors”?*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of the rural tourism is mainly known to a wider population for a long time now. The empirical test of the previously established questionnaire is shown in following parts of the article. The questions of the questionnaire have oriented the results towards the four major categories: rural tourism willingness, main motivation, capabilities opinion and non-professional opinion of international tourism attractiveness. Figure 1

The potential domestic tourist's willingness to visit the rural areas is peaking in the mediocre answer section. The survey shows over a half of the responds potentially give high chance for the development of this type of tourism. It also shows that over one-third more responds more certain than the rest. On the other hand, respondents emphasize as a main motivation factor for the rural holidays the organic food and the fresh air. Both flora & fauna, in combination with restful retreat, give two-thirds of main motives for rural tourism journeys. Figure 2

The capability of rural tourism development (Q3), in the survey, has been given the multiple responds of



**Figure 2.** The Answer Frequency Statistics of the Questionnaire Survey

opinion. The peak value was given within the positive opinion. The opinion is proven to be somewhat positive on behalf of the development issues. The international tourism attractiveness, of the rural tourism, brought to attention the positive opinion of local inhabitants.

Even though some 95% of the first question answers were positive, willingness to become a rural tourist is questionable. It doesn't present the fact if the respondents would give rural tourism advantage over resort, alpine or other popular types of tourism. On the other hand, the first question results provide an insight in further rural tourism development. It gives general public opinion about rural activities and it should motivate the stakeholders to improve rural tourism offer to meet this possible demand.

The main motive question gave some diversifying answer. It classified motives by popularity, and it seems that organic food with fresh air, proximity of the nature, agriculture and farm animals, with restful relaxation possibility, make the two-thirds majority. Therefore, this development direction should be followed to improve rural tourism results overall.

Estimation of development capabilities of rural tourism in Voivodina has shown the majority of positive opinions (55%). This may come from two main reasons. Firstly, the general population is a largely TV audience, and public service is the most common programme which is followed in Serbia. Secondly, the public schools so far don't have an alternative in elementary education. Teachers in Serbia commonly teach the children that the country is very rich with vast development capabilities

generally (practically without limitations). Public service (RTS) is the only TV programme viewable across the entire territory. Its program scheme tries to influence the positive public opinion on development issues, including informative, documentary and entertainment shows. General population's positive opinion is in main attention of all public sector employees who may influence it.

The opinion on the rural tourism's international attractiveness is a bit different from other views. This is for a reason of large number of Serbian emigrants living and working in the developed countries (i.e. Germany, France, USA, UK, etc.). A lot of contacts with the people residing in the developed countries, produce very well backed opinion. Locals are quite familiar with the interests and volitions of the international tourists. Therefore, it may be expected that this is a very valid judgement, even if we take into the consideration the subjective approach to the answering process.

The capabilities are evidently influencing the opinion on the rural tourism subject.

## CONCLUSION

Each person has individual motives, as well as aspirations and demands. In rural tourism it is necessary to frame different offers and services for different market segments. The motivation factors are crucial for the tourist destination selection. Besides the fact that results may not be considered representative, they may give some qualitative conclusions. On the basis of the small

sample it may be concluded that most of the population has chosen the positive response towards the rural tourism and would eagerly spend their holidays in rural areas. The main demand is the adequate housing and catering. Citizens see vast capability of Voivodina in rural type of tourism and are interested in tourist capacities in rural areas. The most respondents have decided on the basis of organic food and fresh air as main motives. That implicates that population of urban settlements are eager to spend a few days in rural environment, on the fresh air and organic food. Acquired data implicate on how are people familiar with this type of tourism at all. Also, it provided the data on their view of development capabilities of the region towards the rural tourism destination. On the basis of obtained answers it may be concluded that respondents mostly believe that Voivodina has good natural, cultural and other resources for rural tourism development. The results show the fact of responders' awareness on the subject of importance of this type of tourism for this region. With some reason they believe that rural tourism in Voivodina has some qualification to attract both domestic and foreign tourists.

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