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## THE FUTURE OF RURAL TOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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### ABSTRACT

The Republic of Serbia has numerous predispositions for the development of rural tourism, considering that it represents a factor in the revitalization of the surrounding rural areas. Development and orientation towards “rural Serbia” could bring numerous advantages that relate to stopping migration flows from rural areas to urban areas and provide revitalizing the agricultural sector and other complementary activities. The aim of paper is to point out the importance of rural tourism, as one of the priority products of the Republic of Serbia, through the analysis of the current level of its development, and predicting future trends that promote the future of rural tourism. The methodology includes an overview of the theoretical framework of rural tourism collection of existing statistical data, obtained on the basis of previous research.

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### Introduction

The unique tourist product is the „aim“ of the expectations of modern tourists, who are increasingly moving from mass and saturated tourist market towards non-standard tourist products, tending to new and unforgettable experiences.

Rural tourism is a topic that has been in the center of interest of numerous authors in recent years. This form of tourism represents an important component of integral sustainable development, both at the local and regional level, and at the level of the entire country, thus acting as an

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important factor in encouraging the development of various activities and strengthening the whole economy of the Republic of Serbia. In general, the exchange of experiences and good practices led to the general conclusion that rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia could play a key role in: increasing tourism activities that will generate more jobs in tourism or related industries and reduce unemployment, diversifying the rural economy; protecting and improving natural and cultural resources and revitalizing the countryside (Lakićević, 2020).

The demand for this form of tourism is constantly increasing, considering that tourists are more and more interested in interacting with nature, getting to know new landscapes, people, other cultures and customs. (Gašić et al., 2015; Pantović & Pantić, 2022). Tourist movements of these forms of tourism, are characterized by a smaller number of visitors, and their movements usually have an individual character; as well as the fact that each tourist represents an individual, who has his own specific needs and the increasing participation of the local population (Todorović, Štetić, 2009). According to the Tourism Organization of Vojvodina (*The handbook for rural tourism*), trends in Europe and the world indicate that rural tourism has been growing rapidly in recent decades and the reason lies in the fact that people decide for shorter vacations and trips, travel more often by car, search for new experiences and return to nature and original values.

“Rural areas that were almost undeveloped and uninteresting for tourism are now in the spotlight. Although there are still no official data, according to some estimates, around 25% of tourists in the world opt for rural tourism each year. This trend will be continued in the future, and research conducted by the World Tourism Organization speaks in support of this.” (Gašić et al., 2014; Ilić et al., 2021; Lakićević et al., 2022). Considering the fact that the Republic of Serbia has significant potential for the development of all forms of rural tourism, tourism as an important tertiary economic activity, the “service industry”, should be one of the “locomotives” of the development of rural areas of the Republic of Serbia, along with agriculture, as a primary economic activity (Cvijanović, Ružić, 2017).

The rural area of Serbia is characterized by a large concentration of natural resources such as agricultural land, forests, water, with preserved ecosystems and biodiversity. Also, the wealth of cultural resources, as well as the preserved traditions of the people who live in this area, is one of the advantages of these areas. Natural and cultural resources, along with human resources, represent the most important elements of the rural base of Serbia (Cvijanović et al., 2016). Rural tourism is listed in the planning documents as one of the priority products of the Republic of Serbia. Nowadays, something “new” can only be offered if the focus is shifted from the traditional way of doing business to modern trends, and those trends that, together with the consequences of globalization, which conditions more and more changes on the market, initiating the permanent development of modern - informative solutions, in order to respond to the specific needs of consumers, at the same time representing the future of tourism.

The aim of paper is to point out the importance of rural tourism, as one of the priority products of the Republic of Serbia, through the analysis of the current level of its development and predicting future trends that promote the future of rural tourism.

## Theoretical framework of rural tourism

Rural tourism is a concept defined in the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025 (“Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia”, no 85/2014) as “a series of activities and services that should be organized population of rural areas”

Rural tourism represents “ecological travel to relatively preserved areas, for fun and enjoyment in nature and is based on the principles of sustainable development and direct contact of tourists with nature and aims to improve living conditions, protect the environment and create conditions for performing other economic activities” (Radović et al., 2018), and is also used for terms related to tourist products and services that are directly related to the agricultural environment, agricultural products and staying in a rural environment (Donaldson, Momsen, 2011). Rural tourism, which has developed on family farms, has the primary aim of attracting a serious number of tourists, and at the same time generating additional income. (Jovanović, 2013), this product offers tourists a stay in a rural environment and nature presents the traditional hospitality of the local population, as well as their lifestyle and cultural values (Manojlović, 2021). The characteristic of rural tourism is that it has economic, social and political importance at the same time (Jing, 2006). The overall vision of the Master Plan for Rural Tourism of Serbia is the development of a master plan for socially, economically and ecologically sustainable rural tourism (The Master plan for sustainable development of rural tourism in Serbia). Rural tourism plays a key role in raising the living standards of rural communities and their economic development. European trends in the last couple of decades show that Europe is the world leader in the offer of rural tourism and will remain so for a long time (Živković, Mihajlović, 2010).

„Determining a rural area or a rural environment is difficult due to the fact that it is defined differently in different countries. The rural area is determined by three main factors: population density, land use, community identity.“ (Ružić, 2009). A rural area could be defined as „an environment with a small population concentration, whose main occupation is agriculture, characterized by a special way of life, work, customs and village identity. According to the traditional approach, rural areas in Serbia include 70% of the total territory with 43% of the total population, and according to the OECD definition, rural areas include 85% of the territory and 55.5% of the population with an average population of 63 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>“ (Cvijanović et al., 2009).

Rural areas with preserved nature and the traditions of different rural areas have always attracted people to stay and rest. In recent times, people’s interest in rural areas has increased, primarily due to environmental pollution, increasing alienation from the natural environment, uniformity and standardization offered by the modern way of life in urban areas. (Đenadić et al., 2016). Within the framework of rural development, tourism has been identified as a key factor that will initiate the diversification of the rural economy (Ploeg, 2000). Rural tourism in Serbia and other European countries is defined as a significant factor of multifunctional rural development. Serbia is a

country of diverse and preserved nature, with many elements of attractiveness and representativeness, with a development priority in the direction of ecological and rural tourism, which has a great chance on the discerning international market (Petrović, 2014). Rural tourism is not a pure form of tourism, but is permeated by different types (eco, ethnic, sustainable, adventure, rural, agrotourism), the potentials for the development of different forms of rural tourism both in Europe and in Serbia have been defined (Janković, 2009). While modern trends in world tourism are looking for an undisturbed or at least minimally preserved natural environment, the chances of Serbia, as a country with diverse and preserved nature, are in the direction of developing ecological and rural tourism. The commitment to these types of tourism and the undoubted quality of the natural environment of the rural areas of all Balkan countries, with the numerous specificities of Serbia, are a good path towards the ultimate formation of a rural tourism development strategy (Milanović, 2008). “The millennium development aims of the Republic of Serbia are focused primarily on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, sustainability, environmental protection and the development of global partnerships for development” (Cvijanović, Ružić, 2017)

### **Materials and Methodology**

In the research process, the methodology used refers to the review of the theoretical framework of rural tourism, and the basic conceptual definitions that characterize it, then data collection at the table in the form of an analysis of existing statistical data, obtained on the basis of previous research.

During the research in order to get the results, secondary sources of data were used (domestic and foreign literature, data specified in planning documents and strategies, which deal with the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia, of which the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025 („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“, no. 85/2014) has a significant importance.

The data obtained for research purposes are relevant for the review of the current state of rural tourism development in the Republic of Serbia. The method of analysis was used to observe the essential characteristics of rural tourism, contemporary trends and an overview of future trends, which could significantly contribute to the development of rural areas of the Republic of Serbia. The method of description was used in the paper with the aim of analyzing the data found and their better interpretation.

The paper is divided into three theoretical backgrounds:

1. Analysis of the current state of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia;
2. Predicting future trends of rural development in the Republic of Serbia;
3. The recommendations for the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia.

## Results and Discussions

Rural areas occupy 85% of the territory of the Republic of Serbia, while the great geographical diversity, wealth of natural and anthropogenic resources, multi-ethnic population, indicate that rural areas and more intensive development of tourism could play a key role in the future economic development of the Republic of Serbia the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025, („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“, no. 85/2014). “The Republic of Serbia (without Kosovo and Metohija) has a total of 631,552 agricultural farms, from which, there are 628,552 family farms, that is, they occupy 99.52% of the total number of all agricultural farms” (Cvijanović et al., 2014). Rural areas are riched by ecosystems and biodiversity, natural rarities, various activities, cultural and historical heritage. (Table 1) shows rural accommodation in the Republic of Serbia.

**Table 1.** Rural accommodation in the Republic of Serbia

Type of accommodation	Number of objects	Percentage (%)
Suites	50	20.57
Log cabins and sculptures	26	10.69
Ethno villages	1	0.42
Guest houses	42	17.28
Hostels	1	0.42
Motels	1	0.42
Boarding houses	5	2.06
Lodgings for the night	5	2.06
Rural households	82	33.74
Rooms	7	2.88
Suites	1	0.42
Tourist complexes	2	0.82
Tourist facilities	2	0.82
Weekend cottages	9	3.7
Villas	9	3.7
Total	243	100.00

Source: Gašić et al., 2015, p. 76.

Based on the data from the table (Table 1), it can be seen that in the observed period (2014), the largest number of accommodation facilities in rural tourism consisted of rural households (82), suites (50) and guest houses (42).

„Data obtained by the Tourist Organization of Serbia show that rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia is developed in the following villages: Seča Reka, Donji Taor, Ramaća, Kamenica, Borač, Žunje, Lisa, Koštunići, Lopatnica, Gostilje, Jošanica, Kalna, Vrtovac and others. , as well as the fact that a large number of master plans were made with a special emphasis on rural tourism.“ (Gašić et al., 2015).

According to *the Program for the Development of Sustainable Rural Tourism in the Republic of Serbia* („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“, no. 85/2011) in the

development of rural tourism, more important results began in the first decade of the 21st century, in the area of Vojvodina, Central and Western Serbia. Also, the data indicate that in the territory of Serbia in 2010, 145,354 overnight stays in rural tourism were registered. "According to data from the Tourist Organization of Serbia, otherwise obtained by local tourist organizations in Serbia, in 2016 there were a total of 207 categorized rural tourist households in 40 municipalities, which have 752 rooms and 1783 beds. The largest number of categorized rural tourist households is registered in the municipality of Gornji Milanovac, with 47 facilities that have 170 rooms and 395 beds." (Cvijanović, Ružić, 2017).

The Republic of Serbia has numerous predispositions for the development of rural tourism, bearing in mind that it represents a factor in the revitalization of the surrounding rural areas. The development of rural tourism can solve numerous problems that arise, which are related to the depopulation of the population, the departure of young people to cities within the national framework, but also outside the borders of their country, giving up farming, etc. In order to make better use of the comparative advantages of rural areas, rural tourism is being "imposed" as an alternative development option. Development and orientation towards "rural Serbia" can bring numerous advantages, related to: stopping migration flows from rural areas to urban areas, reviving the agricultural sector and other complementary activities, as well as "awakening" dormant, neglected and forgotten traditional crafts.

A large number of villages are located near valuable cultural and historical monuments, which tourists can visit in an organized manner. The buildings of traditional architecture, with the characteristics of a certain area, as well as the products of old crafts and handicrafts, through which the rich heritage of our people is known, have exceptional cultural value. It is also possible to visit various exhibitions that are organized in the area, especially naive paintings, as well as tourist manifestations and traditional events through which people can learn about folk customs and characteristics of village life. (Popesku, 2016). The development of tourist activities in the villages of Serbia does not have a long tradition, because more organized traffic of tourists in this area began to take place from the end of the seventies of the last century (Radonjic, 2011).

Rural households in the surroundings of Ivanjica have the possibility to offer full board, including guests in tourism related to special interests, such as agricultural work, which they do (picking raspberries, collecting hay, etc.), then hunting and fishing through the Hunting Association and the Sport Fishing Association of the municipality Ivanjica, hiking, picking forest fruits and medicinal herbs and other recreational and fun activities in nature (ivatourism.org). On (*Figure 1*) is showed „Golijski Konaci“ in the village of Komadine.

**Figure 1.** „Golijski Konaci“, Komadine village

Source: [golijsskikonaci.com](http://golijsskikonaci.com)

“Golijski Konaci” (Figure 1) are lodgings located in the village of Komadine, in the municipality of Ivanjica, at the foot of the Nature Park and Biosphere Reserve - Golija. The guesthouses represent a family rural household owned by the Milosavljević family. The complex represents a good example of practice, bearing in mind that lovers of untouched nature are quadricycles in the summer, and snowmobiles, a children’s amusement park in the winter. The hosts also organize trips up to 1833m above sea level - the highest peak of Golija.

“The diversity of natural resources is just one more reason that the development of rural tourism is considered a very important element of sustainable tourism development.” The basis for its development is protected natural resources. So far, 418 natural assets have been protected - 5 national parks, 19 nature parks; 9 landscapes of exceptional beauty; 71 nature reserves; 322 natural monuments, 45 natural assets with historical and cultural characteristics, 215 plant and 427 animal species.” According to estimates by the World Tourism Organization, the share of rural tourism in total tourist trips is between 2 and 4%. This is a very small percentage for our country, and the reason lies in insufficient motivation and low profitability of intermediaries - travel agencies. In a large part of the country, i.e. in rural areas, the cult of hospitality is still cultivated in households. This is also the case with many villages in the Danube region (“Belo Blato”) - which provide domestic and foreign tourists with comfortable accommodation in ethnic houses, through which they revive rural tourism, architecture, as well as the traditions and folklore of their people.” (Tasić, 2018).

As is known, the existence of natural and anthropogenic resources in the rural areas of the Republic of Serbia is not a sufficient condition for the development of rural tourism. (Škorić, 2013). Comparative advantage - what sets the Republic of Serbia apart from the crowd is actually the abundance of natural and anthropogenic treasures, however, what essentially makes it competitive on the international tourist market is the ability to use the available resources in an efficient way in the long term in the function of

tourism, tourists, on the one hand and the local population, on the other hand. Another comparative advantage and opportunity for the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia is the national cuisine and the production of indigenous products produced by family farms located in the rural areas of the Republic of Serbia.

### **Future trends of rural development in the Republic of Serbia**

The modern tourist market is characterized by globalization, which increasingly conditions changes in the market. The changes refer to the continuous development of modern information technologies in order to respond to the specific needs of consumers in the tourism and hotel industry. One of the limiting factors in the development of rural tourism in Serbia is precisely the lack of application of technological solutions and modern ways of doing business. When creating their offer, service providers and other businessmen in tourism should pay special attention to the heterogeneity in tourism, that is, the diversity of their potential consumers and their specific needs and desires. The creation of an individual offer makes it possible to develop a flexible offer that will respond to the needs of specific market segments. The role of modern technology and its application in rural tourism is increasing, so, its growing large-scale trend, the rural tourism product must follow modern information trends.

In the current time and political environment, the opportunities provided by the indisputable value of tourist resources are insufficiently used. Among the weaknesses, the following stand out: lack of finance, poorly built infrastructure, inadequate age structure of the population, lack of receptive capacities, insufficient design of the content of the stay, lack of marketing, management and information system (Čomić, 2002). Among the key trends that business entities encounter on the Internet is the ever-increasing choice of ways to communicate with potential and actual clients. These are meeting points (Touch Points), which exist within every organization or destination, so they also exist outside the organization - on the Internet (Galičić, Laškarin, 2016).

In rural tourism, the benefits of using the Internet can be seen as: more efficient business operations, a tool for researching tourist markets in order to attract potential visitors to rural destinations, creating a more comprehensive tourist offer, facilitating communication between “hosts” - tourist destinations and guests “visiting” rural areas, integrated marketing and promotion of destinations in rural tourism, where modern technologies represent “strategic weapons” without which it is almost unthinkable for rural destinations to create their offer aimed at selected market segments and satisfy their demands and needs in the best possible way. Choosing a tourist destination to be visited is preceded by a series of activities. First of all, it is necessary to develop the awareness of the resident population of the rural destination about the potential it offers, and their permanent education about the provision of services in rural tourism, as well as the awareness of potential consumers about the potential the destination offers. The Internet provides access to all necessary information, and very often represents the first step in realizing a tourist visit. Therefore, the consumer’s first contact with the destination is electronic, so great attention is paid to the e-experience. From the perspective of tourists,



the three most significant technological advances that enable easier communication are: communication between tourists and the destination, communication between catering establishments and tourists, and communication between tourists. What often happens is inadequate promotion of the tourist offer. Actors in rural tourism, both providers of rural tourism services, all interested parties - stakeholders for the development of this type of tourism, as well as visitors, who do not have a sufficiently developed "perception" of the amenities and offer of the tourist destination, often face this problem. The success of a tourist destination is to respond to changes in the tourist market and adapt its business to them. This first of all came to the fore during the situation in the world caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The tourism industry faced a reduction in funds for work, the impossibility of tourist trips, the cancellation of tourist arrangements, the impossibility of flights, etc. Actors on the tourist market, who adapted their offer to the events, managed to "survive" and maintain at least a minimum level of competitiveness - precisely with the right business tools.

Tourists are becoming more educated, want "value for money", and strive for a high level of information. The future direction of the development of rural tourism, in addition to exploiting the potential of insufficiently established destinations, is certainly the use of modern technology.

Rural tourism is based on the principles of sustainable development and direct contact with nature and aims to improve living conditions, protect the environment as a factor of recreation and rehabilitation, create conditions for performing other economic activities, increase the stability of the working population and enable migration in the opposite direction, from urban to rural areas (Loureiro, 2012). The concept of sustainable development is one of the basic concepts of the economy of natural resources and the environment (Milanović et al., 2008). Tourists in rural areas are looking for high quality and untouched environment, peace, silence, sometimes solitude, as well as special kindness and contact with the host, which can be provided by agrotourism as the core product of rural tourism (Cawley, Desmond, 2007). The program for the development of sustainable rural tourism in Serbia was created on the basis of the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia and the National Master Plan for the Development of Rural Tourism, documents of the United Nations Joint Program "Sustainable Tourism in the Function of Rural Development". The program is fully harmonized with the Law on Tourism of the Republic of Serbia. The goal of the program is the development of rural tourism in Serbia for the purpose of diversifying the rural economy, and for the sake of reducing poverty, improving the quality of life, preserving the cultural wealth of the country, protecting the environment and more balanced regional development. This program also aims to make rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia contribute to the overall development of the country's tourism, in accordance with its great potential. Rural tourism has been identified as a key catalyst that can stimulate the rural economy by launching new business initiatives and developing synergies between existing agricultural production and tourism. (Milošević, Milovanović, 2012). The support is also represented by the local population, which increasingly accepts rural tourism as a development opportunity (Mair et al., 2005).

Rural tourism is highly correlated with other types of tourism in the Republic of Serbia, and one of them is sustainable tourism - nature-based tourism, which has recently gained more and more importance, and it is believed that in the future “it will gain even more momentum” “ and become a trend on a global level. In that domain, in the future, the aspiration of rural development will be to achieve business based on sustainability, and resource management, in accordance with green business, and other principles of ecological sustainability. According to the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025 („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“, no. 85/2014), for the competitive positioning of tourism in the Republic of Serbia, it is necessary to create the product offer in such a way that it is based on modern motives and experiences to tourists who, according to the Matrix for competitive positioning of products by groups and destinations, are listed in the following order: Enjoyment; The nature; Culture, history, customs; Entertainment; Health; Sports, recreation and adventure and business tourism. Cyclotourism (cycling tourism) - this type of tourist offer is divided into several segments: racing bikes, mint bikes, trekking and e-bikes. The oldest is the segment of racing bikes (only 10% of the market, but the share is stable). Around 40% of the market is mountain-bike cyclotourism, where there is a growing trend of interest in fun trails with accompanying content. The largest share of the market belongs to the trekking and e-bike segment, where tourists up to the age of 70 are counted. Cyclotourism does not only mean the existence of bicycle paths, but also very good markings, preferably GPS, then themed paths, bicycle service, accommodation for tourists where they will have a place to store rather expensive bicycles, charging stations for electric bicycles. For the development of this form of offer in the future, the networking of destinations, roads, and accommodation service providers is very important. Bicycle trails are most often categorized according to the difficulty of overcoming individual trails (mountain bike trails, road trails, and paved trails). As a selective form of tourism, bicycle tourism appeared in the second half of the 20th century and will bring people closer to nature. It is based on direct contact with nature, while respecting the principles of sustainability of the natural environment on positive psychophysical influences, and all this with minimal financial investments. Bicycle tourism is a collective name for different ways of using bicycles for tourist purposes, which depends on the adventurous spirit, expectations, lifestyle habits, possibilities and natural environment. Hike & bike geocaching - a combination of a tourist offer, which consists of going on a bicycle trip in “treasure hunting” (geocaching). Also, a fast-growing segment of tourism with potential development in the future (Galičić, Laškarin). Bird watching - The Republic of Serbia has conditions for the development and promotion of bird watching tourism. This type of activity can greatly contribute to the sustainable development of the reserve, to enable a stay in nature, and at the same time make the stay more meaningful for visitors to rural destinations.

### **Conclusions**

Despite the rich resource base, rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia is in the initial stage of development. Fragmented and dispersed peasant holdings, orientation towards other types of tourism and mass tourism, insufficiently developed awareness of the value of the

environment, are just some of the factors that have influenced the weak development of rural tourism. Also, the weak appearance of rural tourism in the tourist offer of the Republic of Serbia has influenced such a situation (Todorović, Bjeljac, 2007; Luković et al, 2022).

The Republic of Serbia, with its numerous predispositions for the development of rural tourism, is a factor in the revitalization of the surrounding rural areas. The success of a tourist destination is to respond to changes in the tourist market and adapt its business to them. This first of all came to the fore during the situation in the world caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The tourism industry faced a reduction in funds for work, the impossibility of tourist trips, the cancellation of tourist arrangements, the impossibility of flights, etc. Actors on the tourist market, who adapted their offer to the events, managed to “survive” and maintain at least a minimum level of competitiveness - precisely with the right business tools.

Serbia has discovered opportunities, on the one hand, and unconfirmed potentials, on the other. It is of crucial importance to develop awareness both among potential visitors and among all parties interested in the development of rural tourism. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to continuously monitor changes in the market, contemporary trends, and those trends that make the future of rural and tourism in general.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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