

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN SLOVENIA

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### Abstract

*The aim of our study was to present and analyze the development of rural tourism in Slovenia. Slovenia can be considered a small green oasis positioned in the sunny foothills of the Alps, which gives it an important competitive advantage in modern times when environmental quality is rapidly becoming an integral part of the perceived quality of life. Obtaining independence from Yugoslavia during 1990, the transition to a market economy, integration process into the European Union, introduction to private property and awareness of the need to preserve and nurture rural areas represent the factors that are combined to enable the start implementation of the strategy for the development of rural tourism. Slovenia has shown a high level of success in the development of rural tourism, which is also significant in terms of its impact on European rural tourism and being a model for the development of rural tourism in the neighboring countries.*

*Key Words: Slovenia, development of rural tourism, socio-economic system, rural accommodation*

*JEL classification: R11, Z32*

### Introduction

Today, tourism has grown from one small activity to an activity that is crucial for the economic growth and development of a country (Lakićević & Durkalić, 2018). Rural tourism is well-defined as the tourism which produces a "rural environment" for the visitor, by proposing a mixture of natural, cultural and human experiences which have a typically rural attractiveness. It is the immersion of the visitor in realistic, unique and

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grassroots experiences which are the essence of rural life. In this case, visitors turn back to nature, to the roots, to basics, and embrace the return to the origins and originality (Armenski et al., 2012).

Rural tourism includes a spectrum of activities (Campbell, 1999). It is based on values of sustainability and offers elements of the country's environment, as well as presenting traditional hospitality and the values of life of the local residents. Through this type of vacation people contact with this nature and the personal human contact with the local people which makes rural tourism so distinctive (Pantić, 2017). Accommodation in rural regions is a combination of different forms of tourism that showcase rural life, art, culture and heritage in rural localities (Chin et al., 2014).

Rural tourism is one of the leading tourism products in the global tourism market (Sagić et al., 2019). Also, rural tourism has become one of the most significant factors of multifunctional and sustainable rural development, which has been confirmed by numerous theoretical and empirical studies (Campbell, 1999). The reduce of traditional subventions for agriculture makes rural tourism more important as a key form of diversification, which supports an economically sustainable rural group.

There are two approaches to rural tourist activities. The traditional way which comprises of passive visitors' stay in accommodation in a rural environment, with passive watching hosts' activities without any significant involvement. This approach is defined as Life-seeing and it is less present in the international tourist courses. The contemporary concept, known as Life-participating, represents a modern way of visitors' spending time on the farms, with active involvement in most of the agricultural and other available work at the farms (Petrović et al., 2015; Petrović et al., 2016).

Worldwide trends suggest that rural tourism is becoming an increasingly broader concept. Needs and expectations of domestic and international demand are becoming ever more stylish in this type of tourism. Rural tourism pools many different aspects of experiencing and sharing rural life. During a visit to a rural destination, tourists have the opportunity to experience the amenities and attractions of the rural area and it is likely that a positive experience will influence a return visit (Koščak, 1998). The first organised rural tourism in Slovenia started at the beginning of the 1970s (Koščak, 1998; Assaf & Knežević Cvelbar, 2011). Slovenia has experienced a long process from the foundation of advisory services, training of the rural population, co-financing a model creation, to

establishing associations, creating rural tourism product, catalogue and similar marketing promotional activities (Dwyer et al., 2012). According to a statistical analysis, the number of households that offer services in rural tourism in Slovenia is 600 out of which 38 are specialised accommodation facilities households. The total capacity is 2,000 beds and annual occupancy rate is 70 % (Armenski et al., 2012). Also, the effects of the great global economic crisis, whose consequences are still felt in all areas of the tourism economy, should be kept in mind (Obradović et al., 2013).

### **Rural tourism**

Experiences related to the development of rural tourism in Slovenia strongly indicate that this type of tourism has influenced the development of the countryside, raising people life standards and improving the culture of housing (Dwyer et al., 2004). According to the type and content of tourist services in Slovenia, three types of tourist farms are defined by law:

- excursion farms,
- tourist farms,
- wineries.

Excursion farms offer food, drinks but and lodging. Tourist farms are registered to offer rooms and apartments as well as for renting camping space. Accommodations on this type of farms can be offered with breakfast, half board or full board. Wineries are a type of tourist rural offering serving wines produced on these farms (Getz & Carlsen, 2000).

Rural tourism in Slovenia is organized in the same way as rural tourism in Austria. Tourist farms offer close contact with nature, locals, their culture and traditions. On the farms, tourist have opportunities to taste domestic food, local wine and brandy. Tourists can learn some of the old crafts or take part in certain activities and farming (Erjavec et al., 1998). The natural environment in which the farm is located provides ideal conditions for performing various type of sport and recreational activities. The most common activities on a farm during a rural vacation are horseback riding, kayaking, golf, hiking, skiing, paragliding, swimming, etc. Farms are often the starting point of excursions to the remote cultural and tourist attractions of a given place (Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008). The potential for the development of rural tourism in Slovenia is enormous, so it is necessary to investigate all the factors that influence this development in order to maximize incomes from this branch of tourism.

### **Tourism potential of Slovenia**

Slovenia is a country located in the northern part of the former Yugoslavia. Today, about two million people live there with a relatively high standard of living. The territory of Slovenia is located at the crossroads of four European regional units: the Alps; Pannonian lowlands; the Dinaric mountains and the Adriatic coast. This geographical position gives this small country an important role because of the importance of its geographical position since it represents a transition zone between East and West Europe. It covers an area of 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The population is about 2 million people with an average density of about 100 people per km<sup>2</sup>. The country is located in the heart of central Europe, more precisely, between Venice (130 km from the Slovenian border), Salzburg (200 km), Vienna (250 km from the border) and the Hungarian capital Budapest (280 km) (Šprah et al., 2014).

Slovenia can be considered a small green oasis positioned in the sunny foothills of the Alps, which gives it an important competitive advantage in modern times when environmental quality is rapidly becoming an integral part of the perception of the quality of life of modern people. During 2015, about 1.6 million tourists visited this country and made six million overnight stays, staying in about 180 hotels, private accommodation or camps. About 75,000 tourist beds are available in this country (Vujko & Gajić, 2014). The Slovenian tourism product and offer are divided into five categories or groups of attractions:

- lakes and mountains,
- coast,
- cities with artistic attractions,
- rural tourism, and
- spa tourism.

### **Rural tourism in Slovenia and its development prospects**

The rural parts of Slovenia offer diverse, almost forgotten traces of the past, handicrafts and a source of ancient centuries-old customs. They are also home to three wine regions that produce not so much wine (one million liters a year) as the exceptional top quality of renowned European and indigenous wine varieties (Vujko et al., 2016).

Obtaining independence, the transition to a market economy, integration process into the European Union, introduction to private property and,

above all, awareness of the need to preserve and nurture rural areas and villages; together, they represent the factors that are combined to enable the start of work on the Integrated Rural Development and Rural Revitalization (CRPOV) project within the Slovenian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food (Ministry of Agriculture, 1991).

The principles for CRPOV are set out in a document known as the National Strategy for the Development of Agriculture, adopted by the Slovenian National Assembly. The strategy set the following objectives for rural tourism development: rural development policy must be multidisciplinary in concept and multisector. It must be based on an integrated multidisciplinary approach that embraces the same legal and policy framework: adaptation of agriculture and its further development, economic diversification, especially of SMEs, rural tourism services, natural resource management, and enhancement of environmental functions and promotion of cultural tourism and tourism recreation (European Council for the Village and Small Town – ECOVAST, 1991).

The strategy equally emphasizes the importance of agricultural product development and the protection of rural areas and villages, their further harmonious development, the preservation of cultural significance, the protection of arable land and the retention of the population in rural areas (ETB/RDC, 1993). It is also important to monitor the dependence of property income and social expenditures as important factors for agricultural development (Pantić et al., 2019)

### **Integrated rural development and rural reconstruction (IDRARV = CRPOV) in Slovenia**

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the entire territory of the Republic of Slovenia is a rural area. According to previous research in tourism, rural tourism in this country is an important component of economic and political strategy as well as national image (Hall, 1998).

Initial forms of rural tourism were present on the territory of the Republic of Slovenia before the Second World War, but its development has been organized and systematically encouraged since the 1970s. The development of rural tourism was initiated by the need of farms to generate additional incomes, given that they were insufficient in agriculture. The development of rural tourism had a significant economic role in the

development of rural areas during the period of transition, as well as during the period after this country become a member of the European Union. Slovenia has implemented the fastest and, in the opinion of experts, the most successful transition. Its characteristic is that it has been carried out its own forces, with full respect for the achievements of developed countries, but in addition to relying on their own needs, existing experiences and possibilities of local agriculture (Šmid-Hribar & Ledinek-Lozej, 2013). Non-agricultural activities, especially rural tourism, had numerous economic and noneconomic effects during the transition period, but also in modern period, the most significant being is the reduction of depopulation in rural regions.

According to some authors, the development of rural tourism indirectly protects and preserves the identity of the Slovenian rural area (Lane, 1994). In the Republic of Slovenia, on average, agricultural holdings have only 6.5 hectares of arable agricultural land, which indicated the need to develop non-agricultural activities, especially rural tourism, in order to be profitable. Semi-sustainable farms prevail in the structure, as 47 % of farms use up to two hectares of agricultural land. Considering the nature of the territory of Slovenia itself, as well as the potential of rural tourism, the aim of this paper was to examine precisely the potentials offered by this destination in the rural context of tourism (Grum & Kobal Grum, 2014). In the paper, we are going to use the methods of analysis and synthesis, historical and comparative method.

### **The modern development of rural tourism in Slovenia**

The development of rural tourism in the Republic of Slovenia was realized with the active professional support of the Agricultural Chamber and advisory services.

The result of the successful activities of the Chamber of Agriculture and Advisory expert services in terms of rural tourism development, is the fact that this became an additional activity, at the beginning of the 21st century, where only a quarter of them were engaged in agriculture farms in the Republic of Slovenia (Table 1). According to the results of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Slovenia, shown in Table 1, 26.7% farms were engaged in rural tourism during 2003, and in 2005, 21.3% of the total number of agricultural holdings. The analysis of the presented data shows that rural tourism is the most represented non-agricultural activity on family farms in Slovenia. According to individual authors, "Rural tourism

is an additional, occasional and very significant productive orientation of peasant economies" (Koščak, 1995, p. 136).

Table 1: *Additional activities on family farms in the Republic of Slovenia in 2003 and 2005.*

Type of activity	No of farms 2003	No of farms 2005	Index 2003/2005	Structure (%)	
				2003	2005
Different services	261	1015	388.8	20.7	47.3
Tourism	337	458	135.9	26.7	21.3
Processing of agriculture product	26	336	163.1	16.3	15.6
Crafts	36	143	397.2	2.8	6.7
Flower design	57	96	168.4	4.5	4.5
Energy production from renewables	23	43	186.9	1,8	2
Education	20	34	170	1.6	1.6
Sale	7	19	271.4	0.5	0.9
Collection and composting organic materials	6	11	183.3	0.5	0.5
Agriculture	8	11	137.5	0.5	0.5
E	1262	2148	170.2	100	100

Source: *Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food. (2007). Rural Development Programme of the Republic of Slovenia 2007-2013, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, Ljubljana, p. 49.*

Advisory services in the Republic of Slovenia still play a significant role in the development of rural tourism. They are organized in eight institutes for agriculture and forestry, and more than 15 % of the total number of employees are in charge of the development of additional activities on agricultural holdings. The Chamber for agriculture and forestry employs 300 experts, mostly agricultural and economic professions, and 50 of them are in charge of additional activities on agricultural holdings. Current role of the Chamber of Agriculture and advisory services entails numerous evaluations of the quality of services in tourist households, as well as an assessment of the quality of tourist manifestations (Bole et al., 2013).

The above mentioned is very important in order to raise the quality of services and development of tourist facilities, as a significant segment of the modern rural tourist offer.

## **Tourism as a great opportunity for the development of Slovenian villages**

While tourism all over the world has been characterized by high growth rates in Slovenia, tourism declined since 1990 due to the political situation and splitting from Yugoslavia. The trend of change in the number of tourists in Slovenia during the period from 1985 to 1994 is presented in Table 2. According to those results, it is obvious that people from Italy have more visitors in Slovenia during 1994 than in 1985, while in all other cases that was not the situation (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Generally, in modern world people give increasing priority to ecological and environmental quality when deciding where to spend their holidays or choosing a travel destination; looking for a clean and healthy environment, fresh air, green forests, clean rivers and lakes. They usually want to explore a natural way of life. People today live in modern cities and in urban environment and because of that they want to explore nature in the real sense of the meaning of choosing a destination like rural region and village in Slovenia. Bearing this in mind, people more often look for village fresh air, peace and quiet, domestic tasty food with traditional way of producing and because of that rural tourism are becoming a compensation for and a contrast to the life in large urban centres (Estol & Font, 2016).

Table 2: *Visitors to Slovenia*

<b>Country-total</b>	<b>Visitor numbers</b>	<b>Market share (%)</b>
<b>1985</b>		
Croatia	320,000	16
Germany	291,000	15
Italy	166,000	8
Austria	97,000	5
UK	87,000	4
The Netherlands	81,000	4
USA	38,000	2
<b>1994</b>		
Croatia	177,000	24
Germany	132,000	18
Italy	131,000	17
Austria	77,000	11
UK	19,000	3
The Netherlands	14,000	2
USA	14,000	2

Sources: Čuček, V. (2013). *Turizam na poljoprivrednim imanjima u Sloveniji, očekivanja potrošača, Presentation, Celje.*



Existing trend in tourism questionably specifies that mass tourism is decreasing, while individual experiences are becoming more popular, and therefore this division of the tourist market is on the escalation. For the future tourism strategy of Slovenian tourism, it is without a glitch clear that the introduction of the cultural landscape of this country and its heritage are of primary importance. Generally, these factors are in fact the basic premises for an elevation rural tourist services in Slovenia (Nastran, 2015).

Slovenian cultural landscape is very explicit but broad in variety. In order to gain a comparative advantage, it is a resource that should be exploited. If we look at the geographic location and its features, we can conclude that only few countries in the world have as broad cultural diversity as Slovenia.

The organized cultural countryside, for a long time now, has not been simply something nice for tourists, but, together with the population and the other typical elements of the specific region, it represents an identity, which in itself is a tourist attraction. Today, most people from different world cities want to spend their vacation with the indigenous people of a region that has its own personality. Exactly this is the topic where agriculture and tourism unify and activate in tandem. Also, the collaboration between agriculture and tourism is proposed on a long-term basis only if both segments are in a balanced association. Both sectors should be perfectly conscious of this (Gosar, 1990).

Consequently, the agrarian occupation will have to realize this relation and act in such a way as to become conscious that the future of Slovenian agriculture is not always measured in increased production, but also increasing numbers of visitors to rural regions. Tourism and the tourist economy should be ecologically positioned, this being a requirement of rural tourism.

### **The basic key principles of rural tourism development**

According to previous results, for the successful development of rural tourism the most important three things are: the balance between people and environment, synchronized operation of different factors and active contribution of the local population (Hall, 1998).

This principle is related to the need for establishing harmony between the people who always or momentarily reside in a definite area with natural, cultural and historic landscape. Challenges are being made to reach this by

providing mutual support between people and living place, as well as by improving the quality of life people in villages (Hall, 1998). Namely, those people want to enjoy almost everything that the population in urban regions has available. Because of this situation, it is necessary, through various forms of grant and similar forms of help, to provide a long-term support to those concepts which in turn support the existing resources, either natural or produced through human effort.

During the past, much damage was caused due to the excessively narrow, sectoral approach and the rigid top down approach. This type of concept was not observed in every aspect of development in a specific area. Today, all plans and ideas, regardless of the size of separate regions, must operate in line with a coordinated action on a national level, starting from the active participation of the government on a state and local level, and they must also be coordinated with the local population's demands (Hall, 1998).

It is commonly known that the domestic population, being linked to a specific area as its own environment, has a much better feeling about what are the real needs of that area, and a clearer vision of future development than the central administration. Bearing this in mind, it will be necessary to include the ideas, requirements, needs, capacities and enthusiasm of the local population in plans for future development of rural tourism (Nastran, 2015).

In order to achieve these principles, the Trebnje Municipality joined the Heritage Trail Association, which is the regional Association for Marketing and Promotion of the rural area in the Dolenjska region. The responsibilities of the association are training people for tourism, produce brochures and other publicity material, create niche partnerships, and attend events (Koščak et al., 1993).

In November 1996, the region was effectively promoted at the World Travel Market in London and later the ITB in Berlin in March 1997 (Koščak et al., 1998). In the framework of the implementation of these and many other actions which are currently in progress as part of the integral rural development in the Trebnje municipality and across the whole of Slovenia, one of the main ambitions for strategies of rural tourism development is to provide the local population with education, so that they could gradually generate new ideas for development and more actively participate in the implementation of these concepts. The previous study showed that the key to success lies in the people who live, work and have

rural roots, and whose offspring will remain in these areas (Koščak et al., 1993).

### **Essentials for rural tourism development in Slovenia**

Rural Slovenia represents a strategic part of the Slovenian population and resources. Presently 85 % of Slovenia's territory is rural, while almost 55 % of the population lives in rural areas and an estimated 41 % of GDP comes from rural areas (Hall, 1998). The rural economy in Slovenia is very much dependent on agriculture. Approximately 75 % of the rural population engaged in subsistence farming (Koščak, et.al., 1993). Regardless of the prosperity of natural and cultural resources, rural areas and villages continue suffering from high rates of unemployment, depopulation, a low economic activity and declining natural incomes.

The support and funding of rural development in Slovenia over the past few years focused on improving agricultural competitiveness, consolidating land, improving market orientation, and developing rural infrastructure. Rural tourism has been recognized as the strategic reagent which can drive the differentiation of the rural economy through initiation new business initiatives and through finding synergies between current agricultural production and tourism (Koščak et al., 1998).

### **Rural tourism - overnights in Slovenia**

International tourists' overnights have increased at an average annual of 13.2 %. Domestic overnights represent the majority of overnights, accounting for 81 % of the total overnights (Lock et al., 2004). The average length of stay varies from 3 to 5 days. Domestic tourists on average have longer trips (about 5 days) while the average for a foreign visitor is approximately 2 days. Key inspiration for domestic tourists is vacation, 80 % of the registered domestic arrivals were for vacation purposes. On the other hand, only 15 % of the foreign visitors come to Slovenia for vacations, the majority comes for business.

Rural tourism represents approximately 2.7 million overnights in Slovenia. This number is the result of adding proper rural tourism overnights 145,354. Therefore, it is estimated that rural tourism overnights represent 27 % of total tourism overnights in Slovenia (Nastran, 2015). According to this, rural tourism already plays an important role in tourism in Slovenia.

## **Differences and similarities among rural tourism in Slovenia and Serbia**

The participants in rural tourism in different state sectors of Slovenian and Serbian rural tourism assessed how important these actions were for the future development of the industry and their impact in relation to these actions (Štetić & Šimičević, 2008). In recent years, tourism development in Serbia has not been given much importance, which has resulted in low competitiveness on the international market (Petrović-Randelović & Miletić, 2012). During the past few years, rural development in Serbia has been defined as economic, social and ecological priority by the Government of the Republic of Serbia (Todorović & Bjeljajac, 2009). Diversification of the rural economy into a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable form aims at improving the quality of life, reducing poverty, as well as in contradiction of social and environmental degradation (Vujko & Gajić, 2014).

It can be said that the shy facts and lack of additional skills of the rural population is confirmed by the data according to which 97% of the rural population in Serbia did not attend skills training programs, and 54% of the rural population lacks special knowledge and skills (Petrović et al., 2015). Rural tourism statistics are based on estimates of both capacity and turnover. As rural areas in Serbia make up 85% of the territory, a significant number of nights spent in mountain and spa areas (Vujko & Gajić, 2014), as well as in other tourist or non-tourist places, can be recorded as overnights stays in this tourist segment.

A previous study showed that the most competitive indicator is hospitality. Today, in rural tourism region of Serbia it is estimated that about 300 rural households with 8,000 beds offer services and realize over 150,000 overnights annually (Petrović et al., 2016). All of this lead us to the conclusion that tourism is a service oriented activity dependent upon interaction, contact and communication with tourist visitors. In accordance with the current regulations, a tourist farm in Slovenia can have a maximum of 10 rooms, or 30 beds for tourist accommodation, as well as a maximum of 60 seats in the hospitality industry. The obligation of tourists is also normatively defined farms to have at least 30 % of the agricultural supply in the catering - of food products from their own production, 30 % can buy in trade, and the rest are obliged to obtain from other agricultural from other regions.

In contrast to Serbia, Slovenia raised rural tourism services to a higher level. As we already mentioned, Slovenia legally defined three types of tourism farms (rural households): open door farms, tourist farms and wineries. System for quality classification is determined by one, two, three and four apples. The categorisation is performed when all the conditions for the start of a tourism farm are met. During all periods of a year, weekends are booked which indicates that there is no high and low periods of the season. Since the 1970s (Koščak, 1998), Slovenian government and rural household owners have been doing a great job to achieve a high level in rural tourism and become compared with France and Italy which are the leaders in the rural tourism industry.

### **Conclusion**

The development of rural tourism in Slovenia has been started since the 1970s. The beginnings of the development of this type of tourism were very difficult, especially due to the political situation and events during the 1990s when the former Yugoslavia collapsed and Slovenia gained independence. During the 1990s, Slovenia recorded a significant decline in contributions from tourism, however, during the later years, the formation of adequate strategies led to a return to the competitive tourism market in the world. The strategy established by the Ministry of Agriculture was very effective in developing rural tourism and its supply in Slovenia. This country made use of all the EU accession funds during the integration process, with the greatest investments being made in educating the local population and raising awareness of the importance and economic benefits of rural tourism. Today, this small country with only 2 million inhabitants has developed very high-level rural tourism, which is competitive even with the leaders in this field such as Italy and France. Rural tourism stakeholders across the various state sectors of Slovenia have evaluated how important state actions are to the industry's future development and their performance in respect to these actions. The diversification of rural economy towards socially, economically and ecologically sustainable form aims at improving the quality of living and lowering poverty, as well as standing against social and ecological degradation. These aims are directed primarily towards the elimination of poverty, sustainable environment protection and the global partnership development. Given that Serbia and Slovenia have similar economic opportunities, social and agrarian policy, Serbia could use the Slovenia model for its rural tourism development.

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