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Contents

INTEGRATION OF SPA AND RURAL TOURISM – AFFIRMATION OF LEMEŠKA SPA IN A RURAL TOURIST ATTRACTION	7
Drago Cvijanović.....	7
Tamara Gajić	7
Miljan Leković	7
THE RISKS OF THE 2020s – THEIR IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT	16
Vladimir Njegomir	16
THE IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATIONS FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM	23
Vladislav Marjanović, Dejan Đorđević, Igor Mladenović	23
POSSIBILITIES FOR IMPROVING THE TOURISM OFFER OF VRNJAČKA BANJA, SERBIA	31
Snežana Milićević.....	31
Nataša Đorđević.....	31
ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL IMPACTS OF TOURISM	37
Nebojša Pavlović, PhD.....	37
Vladan Petrović, PhD candidate.....	37
TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN THE DEPOPULATED RURAL AREAS: ASSESSMENT OF SELECTED VILLAGES IN NORTH MACEDONIA	44
Nikola V. Dimitrov	44
Biljana Petrevska	44
NATURAL RESOURCES AND RURAL TOURISM: EVALUATION OF SELECTED AREAS FROM NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA	51
Nikola V. Dimitrov	51
Aleksandra Terzić	51
COVID-19 IMPACT ON CAPITAL MARKETS IN EUROPEAN UNION AND CHINA.....	58
Matej Smalik	58
Matúš Medvec	58
LINKING BANKS AND INSURANCE COMPANIES – A NEW TREND IN THE MACEDONIAN BANKING SECTOR.....	63
Gligor Bishev	63
Marina Blazhekovikj Toshevski	63
Dragica Odzaklieska	63
PRACTICE AND PROSPECTS OF LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	70
Nataliia Gavkalova	70
Alina Zilinska	70

POSSIBILITIES FOR IMPROVING THE TOURISM OFFER OF VRNJAČKA BANJA, SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

Vrnjačka Banja is the most visited spa destination in Serbia, which has been developing tourism for over 150 years. Traditionally, this destination offers health tourism, sports, and recreational tourism, as well as event tourism. In accordance with the requirements of the tourism market, it is necessary to constantly improve the tourism offer in order to create a destination's competitive advantage. The aim of this paper is to analyze the tourism offer of Vrnjačka Banja and the possibilities for its improvement. A survey method was used to investigate tourists' views on the quality of Vrnjačka Banja's tourism offer. The study shows that the respondents are generally satisfied with the quality of the tourism offer, but that there are possibilities for its improvement in the form of innovative tourism products.

KEY WORDS: tourism offer, innovations, improvements, Vrnjačka Banja.

INTRODUCTION

The progressive development of tourism has contributed to the importance of the role of this economic activity in the world economy[2], and it became of the main sources of foreign income and employment generator for many countries [8]. Despite the world economic and financial crises, the future of tourism is determined to be successful with more travelers, hotel development, emerging destinations, leisure, and recreation centers[16]. Tourism is characterized by constant market changes, especially changes in the tourists' preferences and needs. In order to reach a tourism destination's competitiveness, it is necessary to monitor these changes and adapt the offer to market needs. Tourists' are becoming more demanding and it is no longer sufficient for them to have a clean room and food and beverage service in the destination, but rather a full range of diverse services, such as wellness and spa, recreational activities, etc. The changes in tourist behavior emphasize the importance of innovative services and products, according to specific tourist profiles and the actual motives[5].

Considering the fact that a competitive tourism destination needs constant improvements according to tourism trends, the aim of the paper is to analyze the tourism offer of Vrnjačka Banja and the possibilities for its improvement. The first question that arises is would the development of innovative tourism products contribute to the increase in the number of tourists, i.e. improve the competitiveness of Vrnjačka Banja, and the second - what kind of tourism products that would be. According to this, two hypotheses are set:

- H1: Innovative tourism products would increase the competitiveness of Vrnjačka Banja.
- H2: More outdoor and indoor swimming pools with thermal mineral water and attractive water facilities would particularly affect the competitiveness of Vrnjačka Banja.

Innovation and new service development are important strategic features to assure growth and sustainable wealth for every industry, but in particular for those industries where markets are saturated and clients choose products and services from all over the world, such as is the case in tourism[7]. Like

other service sectors, the tourism industry is often viewed as less innovative than more manufacturing-oriented and technology-oriented industries[4]. To change this and to improve tourism offer of destinations there are certain steps that need to be taken[17]:

- Improve the internal dynamics of innovation: pushing firms to adopt a proactive attitude towards innovation;
- Improve the efficiency of the national system of innovation (improve the training of operators, staff, develop the role of public and private agents, stimulate research);
- Improve incentive systems for operators and employees;
- Maintain the coherence of the tourism industry and its linkage with society as a whole.

TOURIST OFFER OF VRNJAČKA BANJA

Vrnjačka Banja extends through the valley of the river West Morava, the northern slopes of mountain Goč, and it is nearby the southern slopes of the Gledić mountain, Kopaonik, Željina, and Stolovi. According to the Census 2011, there were 27.527 inhabitants [9]. It is located on the road between Kraljevo and Kruševac, but also close to Kragujevac and Čačak, and 200km south from Belgrade. It has been known for its healing resources since ancient times. There are seven mineral water springs in Vrnjačka Banja: Topla Voda, (36.5°C), Snežnik (17°C), Slatina (14°C), Jezero (27°C), Borjak, Vrnjačko Vrelo, and Beli Izvor. Besides this, Vrnjačka Banja is characterized by great natural resources, like climate, flora, fauna, which is the basis for tourism development. In the central part of Vrnjačka Banja, there is a park which represents a significant example of garden art in Serbia. This park has a significant role in the tourism development of Vrnjačka Banja because, it is an ideal place for relaxation in an environment that is peaceful, surrounded by natural values and favorable climatic conditions [1]. Around 300 meters away from this park is the Japanese Garden, which covers an area of about 3,000 m². It was opened in 2011 with the aim of representing the culture of Japan, traditional culture, and horticulture [15].

On the territory of Vrnjačka Banja municipality, there are protected cultural and historical objects, entities, and localities, such as [6]:

- Belimarković castle, the cultural value of great significance for the Republic of Serbia;
- spatial cultural-historical unit of great importance hill Čajka with 49 objects;
- 100 of individually protected facilities;
- archeological sites from the prehistoric period, Roman period, Middle Ages to Ottomans dominions (about 30 sites).

Table 1: *Tourists arrivals and overnights stays in Vrnjačka Banja, for the period from 2015 to 2019*

Year	Tourists arrivals			Overnights stays		
	Total	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists	Total	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists
2015	175,153	146,208	28,945	562,862	481,150	81,712
2016	202,820	163,997	38,823	677,690	573,394	104,296
2017	213,194	176,202	36,992	701,622	603,279	98,343
2018	247,709	200,343	47,366	818,045	695,171	122,874
2019	283,491	230,887	52,604	907,892	774,206	133,686

Source: [10, 11, 12, 13, 14].

Besides this, there are several manifestations from which the most visited ones are *Carnival of Vrnjci* and *LoveFest*, which are organized during summer. It offers a variety of accommodation options, such as hotels, resorts, apartments, villas, as well as private accommodation. Vrnjačka Banja has a variety of sports-recreational, culture and entertainment, wellness and spa offers. In that sense, tourists may take activities such as: walking in the parks, cycling, wellness relaxation, swimming in the pools, etc.

However, although diverse, the offer of Vrnjačka Banja is modest compared to the tourism offer of well-known international spas [3].

Vrnjačka Banja is one of the most visited tourism destination and the most visited spa destination in Serbia [14]. In the last five years, there was a noticeable increase in the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays (Table 1).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research is to collect data about attitudes of tourists who have visited Vrnjačka Banja, towards the quality of the tourist offer, as well as to determine which innovative tourism products would especially contribute to the greater competitiveness of this spa in the tourist market, i.e. to attract more tourists.

For data collection, a survey method was used. Questionnaires were distributed in the form of a Google questionnaire in August 2019. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part consists of the questions related to the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. The second part consists of 4 closed-ended questions related to the tourism offer of Vrnjačka Banja and the possibility for its improvement. Respondents could answer the questions by choosing one answer or by the rating given options on 5 point Likert scale.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of 100 respondents who participated in the survey, 52% are female and 48% are male. Regarding the age structure of the respondents, the largest number of respondents belongs to the age group of 20 to 30 years, 56% of the total number of respondents, and to the age group 31 to 40 years, 37% of the total number of respondents. According to the level of education, the majority of respondents high school graduates 50% (Table 2).

Table 2: *Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents*

		Percent
Gender	Male	48%
	Female	52%
Age	20-30	56%
	31-40	37%
	51-60	5%
	60+	2%
Level of education	High school graduate	50%
	Bachelor's degree	39%
	Master degree	8%
	Doctoral degree	3%

Source: *Authors, based on research*

As a reason for visiting Vrnjačka Banja largest number of respondents (38%) chose the *escape/relaxation* and the *fun and entertainment* option (20%). For *wellness and spa* 18% of the respondents visited Vrnjačka Banja, while only 6% for *treatment and rehabilitation*, 4% for *business* reasons, and even 14% for some *other reason* (Table 3).

By using the Likert scale respondents rated overall tourism offer and individual tourism products of Vrnjačka Banja on a scale of 1 to 5, (1=very poor quality, 5=excellent quality). The respondents were asked to rate the quality of the overall tourism offer of Vrnjačka Banja and the following elements of it: *accommodation, natural beauty and natural resources, culture and entertainment, traditional treatment with natural healing factors, wellness and spa, sports and recreation, and business tourism*.

Table 3: Reason for visiting Vrnjačka Banja

	Percent	
What was the reason for your visit to Vrnjačka Banja?	Treatment and rehabilitation	6%
	Escape/relaxation	38%
	Fun and entertainment	20%
	Wellness and spa	18%
	Business	4%
	Other reason	14%

Source: Authors, based on research

The average rating of the overall quality tourism offer of Vrnjačka Banja is 3.78. When it comes to elements of tourism offer, the *natural beauty*, and *natural resources* received the highest average rating (4.55). In second place with an average rating of 4.42 is *accommodation*, as an important element of the tourism offer. The lowest average rating received *business tourism* (3.43) (Table 4).

Table 4: Quality of tourism offer of Vrnjačka Banja

	Mean
Overall quality of tourism offer	3.78
Accommodation	4.42
Natural beauty and natural resources	4.55
Culture and entertainment	4.12
Traditional treatment with natural healing factors	3.80
Wellness and spa	3.75
Sports and recreation	4.25
Business tourism	3.43

Source: Authors, based on research

Even 95% of the respondents agree that innovative tourism products would contribute to the increase in the number of tourists in Vrnjačka Banja, which confirms the H1 - *Innovative tourism products would increase the competitiveness of Vrnjačka Banja*. On the question *Which innovative tourism products would be particularly interesting for increasing the competitiveness of Vrnjačka Banja* the majority of respondents (41%) opted for *more outdoor and indoor swimming pools with thermal mineral water and attractive water facilities*, while 21% of respondents opted for *richer wellness and spa tourism offer* (Table 5). Considering these answers, H2 - *More outdoor and indoor swimming pools with thermal mineral water and attractive water facilities would particularly affect the competitiveness of Vrnjačka Banja* is confirmed.

Table 5: Possible innovation of tourism offer

	Percent
Richer wellness and spa offer	21%
Richer cultural offer	10%
Richer offer of sports and recreation	16%
More outdoor and indoor swimming pools with thermal mineral water and attractive water facilities	41%
Nature activities	12%

Source: Authors, based on research

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that, although it is the leading spa tourism destination in Serbia, there are possibilities for improving the tourism offer of Vrnjačka Banja and increasing its competitiveness. The natural resources of this spa are the key resources for its leading position in the tourist market of Serbia and represent great potential for improving its competitiveness on the international market.

For the successful future tourism development of Vrnjačka Banja, innovative tourism products may be developed. Innovations should be focused on building more outdoor and indoor swimming pools with thermal mineral water and attractive water facilities, improving wellness and spa offer, sports and recreational offer, organizing various activities in nature (such as horse riding, adventure park, walking tours, mushroom picking accompanied by local guides, etc.), as well as enhancing cultural offer.

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