

ISCTBL

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE ON
TOURISM AND BUSINESS LOGISTICS - GEVGELIA



GOCE DELCEV UNIVERSITY OF STIP
FACULTY OF TOURISM AND BUSINESS LOGISTICS

P R O C E E D I N G S

THE 2ND INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC
**CHALLENGES OF TOURISM
AND BUSINESS LOGISTICS IN
THE 21ST CENTURY**

Stip, September 13th, 2019

North Macedonia

Publisher:

Faculty of Tourism and Business logistics

Goce Delcev University of Stip

“Krstе Misirkov” no.10-A P.O. Box 201 Stip 2000, North Macedonia

Tel: +389 32 550 350

www.ftbl.ugd.edu.mk

www.ugd.edu.mk

For the Publisher:

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CIP - Каталогизација во публикација

Национална и универзитетска библиотека Св. „Климент Охридски“, Скопје

338.48(062)

INTERNATIONAL scientific conference "Challenges of tourism and business logistics in the 21st century, ISCTBL (2 ; 2019 ; Stip)

Proceedings / Second international scientific conference "Challenges of tourism and business logistics in 21st century, ISCTBL, Stip, September 13th, 2019. – Shtip: University "Goce Delcev" - Shtip, Faculty of tourism and business logistics - Gevgelija, 2019. - 358 илустр. ; 25 см

Фусноти кон текстот. - Библиографија кон трудовите

ISBN 978-608-244-693-6

а) Туризам - Собири

COBISS.MK-ID 111863818

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HEALTH TOURISM IN THE FUNCTION OF DEVELOPING RURAL DESTINATIONS OF SERBIA

Drago Cvijanović¹; Snežana Milićević²; Nataša Đorđević³

Abstract

Tourism has been identified as one of the key sectors of importance for rural areas in Serbia which make up a large part of its territory. Different forms of tourism can be developed in rural areas depending on the specific natural and anthropogenic resources. The aim of the paper is to show what are the key resources for the development of health tourism in rural destinations of Serbia. Health tourism is one of the current trends in the tourism market and there is a growing effort of different destinations to create the offer that would refer to healing, rehabilitation, recovery, surgery interventions, prevention. In rural areas of Serbia, the basis for the health tourism development is natural healing factors such as climate, flora and mineral waters. In addition, an important part of the health tourism offer is organic food and a stay in a natural environment.

Key Words: *health tourism, rural tourism, rural destinations, Serbia, development*
JEL classification: *L83, Z32*

Introduction

Health, wellness and medical tourism have grown exponentially in recent years to become increasingly relevant in many destinations. Health tourism is an emerging, global, complex and rapidly changing segment that needs to be better understood by destinations willing to leverage opportunities and better address challenges (UNWTO, 2018). It is the term which has been applied to the industry catering for combined health and tourism motivations (Laws, 2015).

Some studies indicate that there is a belief that life in the countryside is better for health, that there is less crime and it is expected to live longer in such an environment (Đenadić et al., 2016). On the other side, environmental medicine research has highlighted the negative effects of urban pollution on human health (Droli, & Osti, 2013). Both rural and urban attributes can be structured via opposing adjectives linked to them: e.g. clean–polluted, tranquil–turbulent, natural–artificial, authentic–staged, silent–noisy, spacious–crowded, safe–dangerous, etc. (Bell et al., 2009). The Finrelax study analyses Finnish wellbeing tourism in rural areas and identifies the following attributes, most of which are non-compatible with the urban image: lakes, watersheds, coasts, the archipelago, the sea, forests, hills, fields, meadows, tundra, wilderness,

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natural phenomena (northern lights, seasons), landscapes, cleanliness, clean air, water, resources (berries, mushrooms), topography and unbuilt countryside. These give the most “authentic” nature, food (game, wild food, countryside food, traditional food), peace and quiet, safety, freedom, uncrowdedness, non-violence, the diversity of activities (ice swimming, rowing, cruises, courses, familiarization with forms of agriculture), traditions and cultural experiences (Pesonen, Tuohino, 2016). Therefore, rural areas are perceived as healthier, offering fresher air, cleaner water and the opportunity for outdoor recreation (Podovac, et al., 2019).

The aim of the paper is to show what are the key resources for the development of health tourism in rural destinations of Serbia. Serbia has great potential for development of wide range of non-agricultural activities in the countryside, considering its richness of diversity in rural areas, significant natural resources, preserved natural environment of rural areas (Mihailović et al., 2012).

Health tourism concept

The positive impact of the very temporary change of life and work environment to the psycho-physical state of a man is well-known, especially the positive effect of staying in a climate-comfortable and primarily healing natural environment which is more and more intensely used by tourism, through a unique composition of elements and factors such as climate, flora, fauna, which are due to their attractiveness and healing effect the strongest reason for tourist journeys. Precisely for the purpose of optimal usage of the healing effect of the natural environment in tourism, there is a need to form a selective form of tourist offer which would maximally use the advantages of the combination of the natural environment and medical procedures and content, which is today listed under the term health tourism (Đorđević et al., 2018). Climatic, balneological, thermal and mineral water or other natural healing factors, along with other tangible and intangible products, make the health tourism destination (Milićević & Jovanović, 2015).

There are three forms of health tourism (Milićević, 2013):

- Traditional healing, i.e. spa tourism;
- Wellness tourism;
- Medical tourism.

Traditional healing, i.e. spa tourism in thermal facilities of Europe, includes preventive, curative or rehabilitation by the application of natural healing resources (thermo-mineral springs, salty lakes, mud and radioactive sand, climate, etc.).

Wellness tourism implies the acquiring of physical and mental welfare with the usage of natural healing factors and other types of activities. Medical tourism can move from operational procedures in Thailand through dental tourism in Hungary to aesthetic surgery in Switzerland.

On the supply side, Central and Eastern Europe has a strong focus on medical waters and natural assets (Smith & Puczkó, 2013), treatments based on the benefits of healing water does have a curative effect. However, in other cultures, balneotherapy is not known or understood that – because of the lack in perception – can influence the success of such developments. In order to benefit the most of the available resources, many of the Central and Eastern European governments (e.g. Hungary) invest a lot in developing the ‘medical’ pillar of health tourism,

and so developing a medical health tourism including high quality services, providing modern, innovative and attractive experience to the participants (Papp & Lőrincz, 2016).

Characteristics of Serbian rural areas

Serbia has no official definition of rural areas. Criteria used by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia do not include standard rural indicators that meet international practice (population density, population, the participation of the agricultural population, etc.), but rural areas are considered as parts of the country that do not belong to urban (Cvijanović, et al., 2016b).

Rural Serbia represents a key part of the Serbian population and resources. Currently around 78% of Serbia's territory is rural. Although lower than urban, the unemployment rate in rural areas is still high. The rural economy in Serbia is highly dependent on agriculture, food industry, mining, and energy industry, and rural infrastructure is underdeveloped (National Programme for Rural Development (NPRD) from 2018 to 2020). Some unfavourable demographic trends (population decrease, youth migrations) are caused by numerous factors, such as limited access to quality services and public goods like infrastructure, access to quality education, health services, lack of social life in the rural community, as well as the dominance of primary agriculture and poor diversification of production and non-production activities, etc. (Republic of Serbia IPARD Programme for 2014-2020).

Using cluster analysis to more than forty indicators are defined homogeneous rural regions in which a reasonable extent reflect the specificities of rural areas in Serbia (Cvijanović, et al. 2014):

- **Region of highly intensive agricultural production and integrated economy** is located in the northern part of Serbia that covers the territory of AP Vojvodina and territory of north-western part of Serbia (Mačva). This region is characterized by a plain high quality land and significant water resources: large rivers that flow through this region (Danube, Sava, and Tisa). Specific lowland landscapes, rivers, lakes, national park Fruška Gora and Deliblatska sandstone is an essential part of the tourist offer of the region, but under special protection is more than 200 natural resources.
- **Region of small urban economy with intensive agriculture** is located in the northern parts of Central Serbia, Šumadija, and parts of Mačve and Stig. The hilly landscape is dominated by the mountains of the western and the eastern edge of the region. Region of small urban economy with intensive agriculture is more developed with infrastructure compared with other rural regions of Central Serbia. Being located near large urban centres has better infrastructure, as well as easier access to public utility services.
- **Mountain region, with an economy based on natural resources**, is the most rural region in Serbia and it covers 29% of the territory. A significant part of this area includes parts of Serbia with an altitude of over 500 m, and can be divided into the hilly and mountainous area. In the valley of the Danube, Morava and South Timoka are present lowland areas, where diversity of landscapes and heterogeneous nature of the resources contributed to an extremely diversified economy and agricultural structure. The main limiting factors for the development of agriculture in this region are under-used land potential shortage of labour, unorganized market and the lack of adequate rural infrastructure.
- **Region of high tourism potential with poor agricultural structure** is the smallest rural region in Serbia. It covered 14% of the territory and considering the natural and geographical conditions of the region is relatively homogeneous. This region is one of the most powerful assets for successful positioning of Serbian tourism product, with an

extraordinary combination of tradition, history and natural beauty. Development priority in the region is building the Ibar highway, but with the simultaneous protection and rational use of natural attractions and areas.

Tourism development potentials in Serbian rural areas

Diverse resources and attraction structure of the Republic of Serbia represent a basis for the development of a diversified tourism product portfolio (thermal springs, untouched nature, cultural heritage, internationally recognized protected natural areas and monuments, gastronomy) (The Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2016 to 2025).

Climate of Serbia varies between continental climates in the north, to more Adriatic climate in the south. South and South-west Serbia is subjected to Mediterranean influences (Armenski et al., 2011). There are numerous mountains, gorges, caves and other forms of relief. The most interesting are speleological objects, first of all caves. There are nearly 500 in Serbia. The canyons are a special attraction in the tourist offer of our country. The Tara has carved the greatest canyon valley in Europe 78 km long and 1,300 m deep. Đerdap is the biggest penetration in Europe and the longest gorge here (100 km). It is made of several gorges. Hydrologic tourist motifs of Serbia reflect in myriad rivers (the Danube, the Sava, the Velika Morava, the Kolubara, the Ibar...), lakes and thermo-mineral springs. (Štetić & Šimčević, 2008).

Serbia has over 1,000 cold and warm mineral water springs, and a great wealth of natural mineral gases and medicinal mud. Serbian spas have: natural curative factor, medical indications, skilled medical personnel, equipped special hospitals, different types of accommodation, affordable prices, spa&wellness supply, sport and recreation, culture and entertainment. Besides the rich medicinal water spas, Serbia has "climatic spas", which have been designated health resorts thanks to their favourable climate and geographical location (Milićević, 2015).

Rural areas of Serbia are rich in forest, medical plants and herbs (Tara, Rtanj mountain, Stara planina, Goč, etc.) and there are places where organic agriculture is present.

Analysis of rural tourism in Serbia shows that it already contributes to the rural economy and has great potential for further development. Vojvodina, Western Serbia and Central Serbia have good examples and significant experience in rural tourism. It is estimated that there are more than 32,000 beds (registered and not registered) available for touristic use on rural holdings (Republic of Serbia IPARD Programme for 2014-2020). The main characteristics on which the promotion of rural tourism in Serbia is based are: home atmosphere, traditional cuisine (homemade brandy, cheese, cream, sour cabbage or beans in earthen pots, pies, cabbage, cornbread, home gibanica etc.), festivals, additional activities, such as rafting, mountain climbing, hiking, fishing, etc., a healthy natural environment, away from the noise, crowds and pollution (Rural Tourism in Serbia, 2019).

Tourists traffic of the Republic of Serbia

Analyzing the tourist traffic of the Republic of Serbia for 2018 (Table 1), it can be noticed that the most visited region is Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia (1,184,051 tourist arrivals), while on the second place is the Belgrade region (1,160,582 tourist arrivals), which is more urban and of all other regions of Serbia it is the most visited by foreign tourists (971,942 foreign

tourists in 2018). Significantly smaller tourist traffic is recorded in Vojvodina (538,472 tourist arrivals) and in the Region of South and East Serbia (547,417 tourist arrivals), which are largely comprised of rural areas (The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018).

Table 1: *Tourists arrivals and nights spent by tourists by region, 2018*

Region	Arrivals			Nights		
	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign
Republic of Serbia	3,430,522	1,720,008	1,710,514	9,336,103	5,678,235	3,657,868
Belgrade region	1,160,582	188,640	971,942	2,480,516	469,767	2,010,749
Vojvodina region	538,472	278,516	259,956	1,314,968	756,832	558,136
Šumadija region and Western Serbia	1,184,051	890,187	293,864	3,926,783	3,183,718	743,065
Region of South and East Serbia	547,417	362,665	184,752	1,613,836	1,267,918	345,918
Kosovo and Metohia

Source: *The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018*

Since there is no precise statistic for the tourist traffic of rural areas of Serbia, in Table 2 there is tourist traffic for places that are not defined as cities. In this regard, tourist traffic is presented for tourist places such as spas, mountains and other places that are more rural, and according to this table, the tourist traffic of rural areas of Serbia can be closely considered. Very attractive tourist destinations of Serbia, spas (596,884 tourists arrivals) and mountains (596,313 tourist arrivals) had approximately the same number of tourists in 2018. The total number of tourists who visited these tourist sites (spas, mountains and other places) for the observed year was 1,352,683, which makes 39.4% of the total tourist arrivals of the Republic of Serbia, while the total number of nights spent by tourists is 5,088,849, which makes 54.5% of the total number of nights spent by tourists in Serbia.

Table 2: *Tourists arrivals and nights spent by tourists in tourist places, 2018*

Tourist places	Arrivals			Nights		
	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign
Spas	596,884	487,302	109,582	2,542,391	2,226,627	315,764
Mountains	596,313	474,464	121,849	2,172,906	1,827,830	345,076
Other places	159,486	80,516	78,970	373,552	220,106	153,446

Source: *The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018*.

In spite of the natural and cultural attractiveness of rural area, rural tourism, especially in agricultural holdings, develops slowly in relation to demand and supply in the surrounding countries. Some reasons for the slow development of rural tourism are underdeveloped infrastructure and unfavorable age structure of the population

Conclusion

Rural areas of Serbia have significant natural and cultural resources that can be used for the development of different forms of tourism. The primary form of tourism in these areas is rural tourism, but natural resources allow the development of a traditional form of health tourism, which involves the use of natural healing factors. Key resources, ie natural healing factors for the development of this form of tourism in the rural areas of Serbia are: thermo-mineral waters, medicinal mud, medicinal plants and herbs, clean air, pleasant climate, organic food, stay in natural surroundings, activities that can improve human health (walks, climbing, fishing etc.) and other.

For the development of medical and wellness tourism in rural areas of Serbia, significant investments are needed in the transport infrastructure, hospitals, individual medical offices, wellness centres that will improve the offer and complete the health tourism product of the rural areas of Serbia.

The entire offer of health tourism in Serbia should connect natural resources, agricultural production, crafts, domestic crafts, etc. Experiences of developed countries transferred to the territory of Serbia and the Balkans would imply the cultivation of original and ethno style. The connection with spirituality and the promotion of cultural and historical monuments would complement the offer of health tourism (Cvijanović, et al., 2016a).

A stay in rural areas has a beneficial effect on human health, which is why health tourism should be promoted in the context of rural tourism. As Rodrigues et al., (2010) suggested that "health and wellness tourism should be integrated into rural tourism destination marketing".

Acknowledgements

The paper is a part of research within the project no. III 46006 - *Sustainable agriculture and rural development in the function of accomplishing strategic objectives of the Republic of Serbia in the Danube region*, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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