

BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE TOURIST PRODUCT IN RURAL TOURISM IN THE AREA OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF TOPOLE

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ABSTRACT

Tourism as an economic sector has the capacity to meet the diverse needs of different groups of tourists. Accordingly, tourism is an important factor in the development of areas where it exists and evolves. Holidays in rural areas, in the era of "fast life," are increasingly becoming an accepted form of tourism. The development of rural tourism is seen as a significant factor for the development of rural areas, the improvement of agriculture, crafts, and the preservation of the traditions and cultural customs of the region. This form of tourism also contributes to the development of sustainable development. Rural areas in Serbia vary in economic, social, and demographic terms. The differences are conditioned by their geomorphological characteristics (mountainous, hilly, and flat areas), changes in population numbers, economic structure, infrastructure, environmental conditions, transportation accessibility, etc. The aim of this study is to determine the level of quality of the tourist product offer in rural tourism in the municipality of Topola. The research methods used include the method of quantitative public opinion polling in the form of a questionnaire to assess the quality of the tourist product in rural tourism in the municipality of Topola. The obtained results show that the quality of the tourist product in rural tourism in the municipality of Topola is considered satisfactory, with the conclusion that there is potential for further development and improvement of the rural tourism offer in this area.

Keywords: *Rural areas, rural tourism, municipality of Topola.*

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INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is a current topic and subject of interest in modern society. Many authors, scientists, and experts in the field of tourism have written and discussed rural tourism. When studying it, one often encounters conflicting opinions regarding the definition of rural tourism, its main characteristics, and so on. Rural tourism is a common term for various activities and forms of tourism that take place outside of cities or urban areas and areas where mass tourism has developed (Cvijanović and Ružić, 2017).

The reason for this is the various needs of society for a peaceful environment, clean air, safe food, healthy social relationships, a return to nature, tradition, and cultural values. The more intensive development of rural tourism began in the 1970s. Today, due to the fast pace of life and work and the greater need for shorter vacations in peaceful environments throughout the year, rural tourism is considered the fastest-growing form of tourism. By definition, rural tourism is associated with areas that have low population density, clean and healthy nature, water, and air, and with rural households whose primary activity is agriculture (Veljković and Bročić, 2017). Agriculture is one of the promising and fundamentally important economic sectors for Serbia. The agricultural and food sector and rural areas of Serbia face many challenges and problems (Stojanović et al., 2018). The strongest connection between agriculture and tourism is visible in rural areas because agricultural production takes place there, and various forms of tourism are developing in these rural environments (Dimitrijević and Ristić, 2020). The Serbian government has defined rural development as an economic, social, and ecological priority. Gašić et al. (2015) state that rural tourism will help Serbia achieve its long-term goal – joining the EU. The importance of rural development policy is reflected in the fact that three-quarters of Serbia's territory consists of rural areas where nearly half of the population lives (Gašić et al., 2020). Čomoć (2002) states that the basic characteristics of rural tourism development in Serbia classify the country as an area with significant resources but lacking sufficient tradition in tourism development.

Interest in engaging in rural tourism is constantly increasing due to the existence of still attractive and "untouched" rural areas with a clearly defined way of life, culture, and customs, a great need to preserve such areas, and providing the population with opportunities for income through tourism products that create an offer for a different kind of vacation (Baćac, 2011). Rural development involves creating new products and services while following the development of new markets (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). In the field of rural tourism, the state has a significant influence because, in conditions of relatively low economic development, such as in rural communities, it must take a leading role in improving the business environment, facilitating investment, and developing infrastructure and human capital (Milićević et al., 2015).

The municipality of Topola is considered an area in the heart of Šumadija, located no more than 80 km from Belgrade, Aranđelovac, Mladenovac, and Gornji Milanovac (Figure 1). Regarding its tourist-geographical position, the municipality of Topola covers 356 km² and consists of 31 settlements. The town of Topola is situated between the rivers Kamenca and Jasenica, near Mount Rudnik.

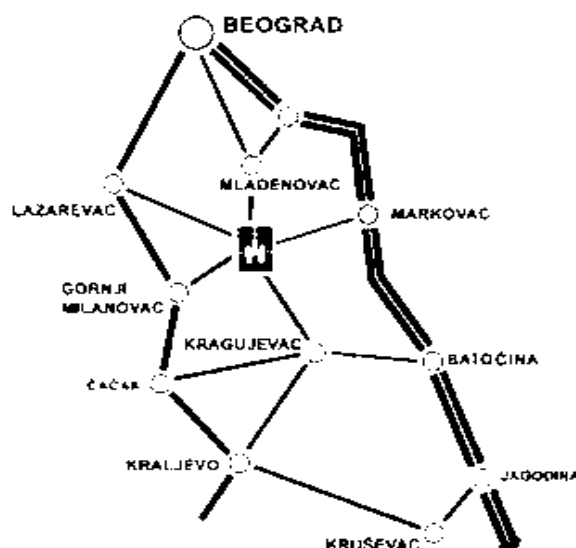


Figure 1. Location of the town of Topola (Source: https://www.topola.com/o_topoli.htm)

The area of the municipality of Topola is rich in historical events and abundant in numerous social values. King Petar I Karađorđević built the Karađorđe Foundation in Oplenac, the Church of St. George, which houses the graves of deceased members of the Karađorđević dynasty (Figure 2 and 2a). Construction lasted from 1910 to 1930, and around it were built the Peter's House, as an apartment for the priest, the king's and queen's villa, and the Foundation House, now a hotel, in the park area. This foundation is a place that must be promoted as a tourist attraction, because the crypt of the Church of St. George in Oplenac contains the most members of the ruling Serbian dynasty and the most rulers in one place. Of the 28 tombs of the Karađorđević dynasty, five belong to rulers, namely the tombs of Leader Karađorđe and King Peter I in sarcophagi in the church and King Alexander II, Prince Alexander, King Peter II and Regent Prince Pavle in the Crypt.

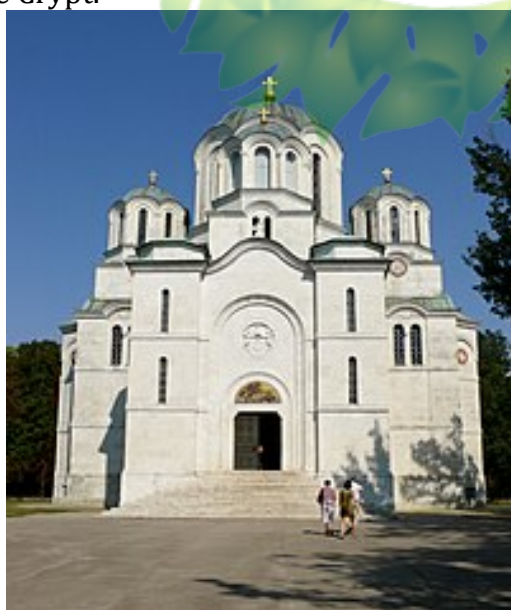


Figure 2. Church of St. George in Oplenac



Figure 2a. Sarcophagi in the church, in the foreground is the sarcophagus with the body of the church's founder, King Peter I (1844–1921), and the other containing the family's founder, leader Karađorđe (1762–1817)

What can be included for tourists to visit is:

- Karađorđev konak in Topola, built in 1811
- Orašac village, from where the liberation of Serbia from the Turks began
- Viševac village, which is the birthplace of Leader Karađorđe.
- Markovačko Lake with a well-maintained beach
- Nikolje Monastery, built in 1425
- Oplenac grape harvest, held in October
- The Assembly of Original Folk Art
- Petrovski fair in July and the fair in September
- "Šumadija Plum Days" in August

The largest part of the area is used for agricultural production (27,835 ha) and forests (over 5,000 ha). The Topole region is known for its grapevine cultivation, with a very high-quality assortment of table and wine grapes. Today, the vineyards cover an area of about 400 hectares. The first vineyards were planted by Aleksandar Karađorđević on an area of over 50 hectares. There are a large number of wineries in this area, which have a positive impact on the expansion of the tourist offer of wine and grapes. The most important winery is the Royal Winery, which is located two floors below ground. It was founded during the reign of King Peter I and in which a barrel with a capacity of 4,000 liters has been preserved (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Royal winery in Oplenac (Source: <https://oplenac.rs/bs/kraljeva-vinarija/>)

These are all good prerequisites for the development of some form of rural tourism. According to the data from the Tourist Organization of Oplenac from Topola, 12 rural tourism households have been registered where tourists stay. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the quality of the tourist product offer in rural tourism in the municipality of Topola.

MATERIAL AND METHODS OF WORK

For the theoretical part of the paper and the research section, scientific methods that align with the topic of the paper and the defined research goal were used. In the process of collecting primary data, a quantitative approach to public opinion surveying was employed.

The research instrument used in the study was a questionnaire, with the condition for participation being that the respondent had visited and/or stayed in a rural area of the municipality of Topola or was familiar with its offerings (a resident of the area), and that the respondent was either the owner, a family member of the owner, or an employee in an establishment providing services in rural tourism. The type of questions used in the questionnaire were multiple-choice questions, where the respondent needed to choose one of the offered alternatives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agricultural production, the preservation of agricultural resources, and the development of rural tourism as a supplementary activity for people living in rural areas should be one of the main goals of rural development (Petrović and Grujić, 2015).

Based on the analysis of the results obtained from the questionnaire regarding the demographic characteristics of the respondents, it was determined that 35 individuals participated in the survey. Of the total number of respondents, a higher proportion were women (62.9%), while male respondents accounted for 37.1%. In terms of age, 54.3% of the respondents were between 21 and 30 years old. The educational structure was analyzed in three categories: primary, secondary, and higher education. Considering the respondents' education levels, the majority had a university education – bachelor's, master's, or doctoral studies (60.0%), while a significant portion had completed secondary school (34.3%). Regarding employment status, 71.4% were employed, 2 respondents (5.7%) were unemployed, and there were no pensioners. The majority of respondents indicated that they visit the countryside (94.3%) for various reasons. The most common motivation for visiting the countryside was staying in nature at a rural household, seeking traditional food.

Further research focused on whether the respondents were influenced by knowledge of natural and social resources.

In terms of social values, it is important to highlight that the municipality of Topola is the home of the ancestors of the Karađorđević royal family (Đorđe Petrović Karađorđe 1768-1817), who began building a church with the intention of having all the members of the Karađorđević lineage buried there, which was later set on fire by the Turks. What promotes tourism in Topola is the Oplenac Hill, where King Peter I Karađorđević built a church that houses 28 graves of members of the Karađorđević dynasty. In the town of Topola, there is also the Karađorđe residence, where personal items of Karađorđe are displayed. Various cultural heritage events have emerged in this part of Šumadija, which are long-lasting (<https://topolaoplenac.org.rs/>, accessed: July 10, 2024).

The most significant event established by King Aleksandar Karađorđević (1806-1885) in the 19th century is the Oplenac Grape Harvest Festival, which takes place every October. This festival is accompanied by the Assembly of Original Folk Creativity, all in honor of wine and grapes. In addition to social values, the municipality of Topola boasts natural values that allow for large fruit and grapevine plantations. Thanks to this, there is a large number of wineries in the region, which, transitioning from family production to higher-market levels, produce wines with a distinct character. The development of viticulture in the Oplenac region began in 1903 when King Peter Karađorđević founded the Wedding Winegrowers' Cooperative, consisting of winemakers and vineyard owners from all the wine-growing villages around Topola. Wines from the Topola area can be found on the tables of the most prestigious locations in Europe.

Following global trends in winemaking, high standards are applied in wine production, nurturing and preserving the acquired experiences and culture of the

Oplenac region, creating wines with a distinctive character. Wineries are also a significant motivation for tourists to visit the municipality of Topola.

The product of rural tourism is correlated with the natural environment, which is a primary resource in attracting attention to tourism trends (Tasić, 2018).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the contribution of natural and social values to the quality of rural tourism ($n=35$)

Respondent's opinion		frequency	(%)
Do natural values contribute to the quality of the rural tourism offer?	Yes	33	94,3
	No	2	5,2
Do social values contribute to the quality of the rural tourism offer?	Yes	30	85,7
	No	5	14,3

Table 2. Descriptive statistics – Quality of natural and social values ($n=35$)

Quality component	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Modus	Min.	Max.
Natural values	3,88	0,708	4	3	5
Social values	3,52	0,734	4	2	5

The quality of natural and social attractions for rural tourism in the municipality of Topola was rated as "very satisfactory" by the majority of respondents. The average rating for the quality of natural values was 3.88, while social values were rated at 3.52. The standard deviation value shows the deviation of the data from the arithmetic mean of the statements, while the mode represents the most frequent rating assigned to the statement (Table 2).

Accommodation and food offerings for rural tourists are provided in various facilities built in rural areas. Accommodation facilities differ in terms of technical and architectural characteristics, size, and the type of services offered. These facilities must meet certain conditions, which are regulated by specific standards regarding categorization, as well as the number and quality of rooms, equipment, and amenities (Regulation on the Conditions and Manner of Performing Hospitality Activities, Manner of Providing Hospitality Services, Classification of Hospitality Facilities, and Minimum Technical Conditions for Arranging and Equipping Hospitality Facilities ("Official Gazette of the RS" Nos. 48/2012 and 58/2016, Article 12).

According to estimates by local tourist organizations, the Republic of Serbia has approximately 10,567 beds in rural households (Cvijanović and Ružić, 2017). Accommodation facilities and their equipment are significant motivators when selecting a destination. The authenticity of the facilities reflects old times and reminds visitors of a period when life was quieter and in harmony with nature. They also have spiritual and traditional value, as they speak of the time of ancestors. The hospitality service facilities in rural areas of the municipality of Topola are characterized by authentic/traditional Šumadija-style architecture, with 65.7% of respondents stating that the authenticity is at a high level (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive Analysis of the Authenticity of the Architectural Style of the Facilities ($n=35$)

Respondent's opinion		frequency	(%)
Are the accommodation facilities and facilities for providing services in the rural areas of the municipality of Topola, characterized by an authentic style of construction?	Yes, to a greater extent	23	65,7
	Yes, to a lesser extent	10	28,5
	He	2	5,7

Table 4. Descriptive statistics - Quality of accommodation facilities and capacities for catering services (n=35)

Quality component	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Modus	Min.	Max.
Accommodation facilities and catering services	3,85	0,709	4	2	5

The average rating of the quality of accommodation facilities and capacities for providing hospitality services in rural households in the municipality of Topola is 3.85, indicating that the quality was rated as "very satisfactory." Based on this, Hypothesis H3 was confirmed: "The quality of accommodation facilities and capacities for providing hospitality services in rural areas of the municipality of Topola is satisfactory." Based on the statistical indicators (Table 9), it can be seen that the average rating was 3.75, the standard deviation was 0.709, and the most frequent rating was 4 (Table 4).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on everything, it can be concluded that the municipality of Topola has social and natural resources that can serve as motives for tourist visits. Preserving the authenticity of the construction of buildings and the equipment of those that preserve the spirit of the old times can be a prerequisite for fulfilling tourists' desires for rural life, customs, and traditions.

This form of tourism can be successfully developed in the municipality of Topola, but it is necessary to have greater involvement from the local community and a stronger marketing approach in promotion.

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