



Rural Tourism as a Tool for Sustainable Development of the Srem District in Serbia

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Received: December 21, 2023
Accepted: February 10, 2024
Published: May 28, 2024

Keywords:

Rural tourism;
Srem district;
Sustainable development;
Brand



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Abstract: *The beginning of the twenty-first century is characterized by numerous changes in all areas of life. These changes give us the right to anticipate some global trends in the field of economy and business of the population in rural areas. Contemporary trends in the field of business in rural areas actualize tourism as the most important component of integral rural development and indicate that significant changes are expected in that area. The twenty-first century will be a period in which the needs and expectations of domestic and foreign demand will become increasingly refined, therefore it will be necessary for rural tourism to represent a combination of different aspects and a value perception of the presentation of rural life. Family farms will be differentiated by the success of product and area branding, while intangible marketing assets such as brands, market knowledge, relationship with customers, and distribution coverage, will become a significant value of the region. The main goal of the research is to assess the potential and opportunities for the development of a new program of rural tourism in the Srem District in Serbia based on sublimated and analyzed indicators for seven municipalities, which will contribute to the affirmation and development of rural tourism in the region.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Srem region is characterized by fertile soil, which has had a significant impact on the development of agriculture. This, however, has also played a crucial role in the growth of rural tourism within these areas, providing an additional avenue for income for families residing in the countryside. Many engage in this form of tourism as a supplementary activity alongside agriculture, with a particular focus on the development of organic farming.

The advantages of rural destinations in the Srem area include a favorable geographical location, excellent transportation links, as well as multiculturalism, multiethnicity, and multiconfession- alism. Additionally, the preservation of original features in Pannonian-style rural settlements, encompassing morphology, internal and external physiognomy, and appearance, contributes to the charm of these locations. The richness of national heritage and folklore, including customs, costumes, food, dialects, and handicrafts, further enhances the appeal of the region. The local population, cultural institutions, and influential individuals actively contribute to the develop- ment of sustainable forms of tourism. Moreover, the area boasts a wealth of cultural heritage, cultural values, and assets, many of which are under protection.

Tourist destinations in the Srem district offer diverse and attractive traditional environments, often surrounded by natural beauty and historic houses. Ethnic workshops, museums, exhibi- tion spaces, windmills, farms, and various cultural attractions provide a unique vacation ex- perience. To preserve national consciousness, a variety of events are organized, enriching the

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overall tourism experience. Rural tourism in the region encompasses visits to national and nature parks, monasteries, cultural heritage sites in rural areas, various excursions, and the enjoyment of rural landscapes, including stays on farms. Through rural tourism, visitors can actively participate in rural activities, experience local traditions, and adopt the lifestyle of the indigenous population through personal contact (Drča, 2013).

The potential benefits that the Srem district can derive from the development of rural tourism and related forms are numerous. These include the creation of conditions for new job opportunities, employment for women and young people, marketing agricultural and food products, revitalization of villages and rural areas, and fostering awareness among the local population regarding the preservation of rural values.

2. METHODS OF RESEARCH AND DATA SOURCES

Collective awareness and responsibility, more than ever, are deeply rooted in the present, facing life challenges. Socio-economic and political changes, of which we are witnesses, influence our existence and consequently should change our patterns of behavior, thinking, and action. They direct us both to questions and to the search for answers in creating mechanisms and models for survival and survival.

As one of the world's largest industries and one of the fastest-growing sectors in the global economy, tourism has a multifaceted impact on people's lives, the social community, and the environment. The concept of planned and sustainable tourism development can be applied to all types of destinations, including the development of mass tourism, as well as the development of various tourism niches. Finding the right balance between development dimensions, which will guarantee the long-term sustainability of the area, is today a skill and art of product and area branding creators.

Local self-governments, regions, and states derive significant benefits from proper tourism planning. Due to the growth of tourism and its numerous and diverse impacts on both the national and local economy and society as a whole, local self-government needs to adopt a plan or tourism development program in order to effectively manage these effects.

A professional and independent analysis of the state and resources of the local community in the Srem Administrative District was conducted through observation and analysis. Through descriptive analysis, we obtained data on rural tourism and the problems arising from the national and institutional framework of the subject research.

Using the empirical method as an important analytical method, the processing of empirical data was conducted, applying statistics and mathematics. The statistical method was used to collect, present, analyze, and interpret numerical data. The analysis is based on data from relevant state institutions - the Republic Statistical Office, documentation of the City Administration of Sremska Mitrovica and the Municipal Administration of the municipality of Šid, data from the Regional Srem Chamber of Commerce, the documentation base of the Ministry of Agriculture, strategic documents of higher order, internet presentations of tourist agencies in the Srem region, as well as on surveyed problems and needs of the local population – stakeholders, which were obtained through a questionnaire. The proposals obtained were valorized by the authors in this paper.

Defining and identifying the basic factors of heterogeneity of rural space in the function of comprehensive consideration of the complex rural reality of the Srem District are the basic starting points of this paper. The main research goal relates to the identification of potential development nuclei in the function of creating a Marketing plan for sustainable rural tourism development in the Srem District.

3. STUDY AREA

The future economic vitality of municipalities in Srem is determined less by available resources and geographical location, and more by strong leadership and effective strategy. This is essential for creatively connecting and efficiently combining various development factors, creating a foundation for successful tourism development that contributes to social, economic, and ecological progress.

The strengths of these municipalities lie in their natural and immovable cultural assets, serving as potential drivers for tourism development. Additionally, there is a substantial construction fund comprising residential and commercial spaces, along with a well-established utility network. Public services and the IT sector have also been well-developed. The tables presented below contain data and indicators crucial for assessing the potential intensity of tourism development in the Srem district. Simultaneously, these indicators can serve as a foundation for initiating new, specific activities aimed at affirming and branding these municipalities as rural zones with distinctive characteristics.

Table 1. Overview of Basic Data and Numeric Indicators for the Development of Rural Tourism in the Srem Administrative District

Area	Srem Administrative District
It includes the following cities and municipalities:	Sremska Mitrovica Town, location Sremska Mitrovica Municipality of Šid, location Šid Municipality Indija, location Indija Municipality Irig, location Irig Municipality Ruma, location Ruma Municipality Stara Pazova, location Stara Pazova a Municipality Pećinci, location Pećinci
The number of agricultural households engaged in another profitable activity (non-agricultural) and the number of rural tourist household	739/ 300/51
Average age	43,6 years
Number of inhabited places	109 (7 urban and 102 rural)
Surface area	762km ²
Cultivable areas	229,195 hectares/arable land and gardens, 213,715 orchards, 5,153, vineyards 1,172 and meadows and pastures 7,409 hectares/ 7.82 ha
Average holding size	34% of farms have a cultivable area of up to one hectare.
Climate conditions	Steppe continental climate, with a medium annual temperature of 10,8°C
The number of agricultural households (2022)	21.818
Population (2022)	284,436 inhabitants, which is 27,842 or 9.1% less compared to the last census, when 312,278 inhabitants lived here
Rural settlement with the biggest and the smallest by the number of inhabitants (2022)	Laćarak - 10638 Erem - 100
Density of population (in h./km ²)	89,58 inh./km ²
Average age /2021./	43,7 years
Number of young people aged 15-29	46.932
Absolute decline population 2002/2011	9.1%
Number of employees/ number of the unemployed (2022)	95243 9800

Tourist overnight stays in 2020	164.508
Domestic	139.739
Foreign	24.769
Tourist overnight stays in 2021	257.611
Domestic	204.312
Foreign	53.299
Main economic branches	Agriculture is the main economic branch in Srem, and it participates with 36.3 percent in the social product of the region. In second place in terms of participation in the social product of the region is the processing industry, which is represented by 20.3 percent.
Incentives for regional development in thousands of RSD for the Srem district in 2020	4.328.373.000,00
in 2021	4.537.980.000,00
Natural values	Fruška Gora National Park, Fruško Gora Monasteries, Sava River, 12 natural assets and the Zasavica Special Nature Reserve
Typical products of the areas	Srem kulen, Fruškogorsk linden honey, Srem cheese, traditional cuisine
Leading tourist centers	Sremska Mitrovica (Imperial Palace, Srem Museum), Stara Pazova, Ruma (Borkovačko lake, Bara Zasavica, Bara Trskovača), Fruškogorsk monasteries, Šid (Memorial House of Sava Šumanović)
Length of roads/km/	1.150 km

Source: Made on the basis of the author's theoretical-empirical material/Vital statistics, Republican Bureau of Statistics

In the following table is a presentation of indicators of the arrival and overnight stays of foreign and domestic tourists of the Srem district, through a schedule/period of two years, and the types of tourist places are municipalities and cities of the Srem district. (Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of basic data and figures of the area covered by the Strategy

Criterion/Municipality	Sremska Mitrovica	Indija	Irig	Pećinci	Ruma	Stara Pazova	Šid
Surface (km ²) (2021)	762KM ²	385KM ²	230KM ²	489KM ²	582KM ²	351KM ²	1687KM ²
Number of settlements (2021)	26	11	12	16	17	9	19
Population – mid-year estimate (2021)	73345	45642	9942	19175	48966	65792	30153
Density of population (population / km ²) (2021)	97	119	43	39	88		44
Road length /km/	262	188	107	118	215	125	173
Incentives for regional development in thousands of RSD for the Srem district in 2020	607.677	417.397	632.228	424.306	656.936	1.203.182	373.687
in 2021	427.561	668.394	380.464	533.334	383.403	1.702.766	411.804
Proportion of territory under forest (%)	13%	2%	19%	17%	16%	0%	32%
Tourist arrivals, 2020-2021	2.340 4.311	1.068 1.512	33.372 56.569	978 1516	12.214 16.453	9.018 17.750	2.923 2719
Tourist overnight stay in 2020							
In total:	5.911	5.664	102.751	978	12.214	9.018	2.923
Domestic	4.679	4.759	96.438	694	7.665	6.788	1.783
Foreign	1.232	905	6.313	284	4.549	2.230	1.140
Tourist overnight stay in 2021							
In total:	7.917	6.826	157.436	1.516	16.453	17.750	3.935
Domestic	5.607	6.129	137.816	1.288	9.841	11.948	1.973
Foreign	2.310	697	19.612	228	6.612	5.802	1.962

Source: Made on the basis of the author's theoretical-empirical material/Vital statistics, Republican Bureau of Statistics

Based on the data from the preceding tables and the Srem District Agricultural Census of 2022, a total of 21,818 agricultural farms were officially registered. This figure represents 15.46% of the total number of households in the Province which is a 13% decrease compared to the 2012 census. Legal entities and entrepreneurs own a substantial share, accounting for 23% of the total number of agricultural holdings in Srem. The average size of an agricultural holding in the region is 10.9 hectares. Notably, 70% of farms utilize agricultural land below 5 hectares, while 10% have land exceeding 20 hectares.

Regarding the type of farms in Srem, the most prevalent are those specialized in arable farming (40.8%), followed by mixed agricultural farms combining crop and livestock production (23.7%), and specialized farms for pig and poultry breeding (19%). Other categories include specialized farms for breeding cattle, sheep, and goats (3.3%), those for permanent plantings, vines, and fruit (2.8%), and specialized farms for vegetable and flower cultivation and other horticulture (1.6%). Additionally, there are mixed farms with livestock production (4.8%), mixed farms with vegetable production (3.3%), and a small percentage of unclassified farms (0.3%). Srem possesses favorable conditions for integral and organic production. However, the number of agricultural producers with certified organic products, and those in the conversion process, remains remarkably low compared to the potential. The areas dedicated to organic production have been increasing yearly, reaching 23,527 hectares in 2022 which is a 12.2% rise from 2020. Thus, additional support is crucial, both in the certification process and in the organic production itself, given its unique nature.

The challenges facing rural development in Srem are evident in several aspects. Firstly, agriculture remains the predominant economic activity in the majority of municipalities. Secondly, the infrastructure is inadequately developed, and existing facilities are not adequately maintained or are dysfunctional in terms of both current and future needs. Additionally, there is a notable lack of institutional development, along with pronounced disparities in the level of development among individual municipalities.

As indicated in the preceding tables, Srem possesses considerable resource potential for the advancement of rural tourism. This potential is rooted in diverse features of the terrain, such as Fruška Gora, the Danube and Sava rivers, as well as sources of thermal and mineral water. Furthermore, the region benefits from a relatively favorable climate, abundant flora and fauna, multiculturalism, multiconfessionalism, traditional folk architecture, gastronomy, and more. Despite these favorable conditions, the existing capacities for rural tourism are not fully realized. There is also underutilization of rural tourism facilities, coupled with the inadequate development of additional supporting services in rural tourism, hindering the generation of supplementary income.

Due to the heterogeneity of the natural resources in rural areas of Srem, three primary types of rural areas can be identified. Based on their characteristics, the potential for sustainable rural tourism development can be determined, specifically focusing on natural resources within these areas:

1. **Highly Productive Agriculture and Integrated Economy Area:** This region encompasses the rural areas of the Municipalities of Sremska Mitrovica and Ruma, where agriculture stands as the dominant economic sector. However, due to the excessive use of chemicals and other agrotechnical measures, the natural resources in this area have been partially compromised, diminishing the potential for sustainable tourism development. In this context, tourism development relies more on anthropogenic factors than on natural

resources. As a result, the area is well-suited for advanced forms of rural tourism, including demonstration, gastronomic, farming, wine, religious, excursion, and partially eco-rural tourism, particularly in protected areas.

2. **Mountain Economy-Oriented Area with Emphasis on Natural Resources:** This region characterizes the Municipalities of Šid and Irig and is primarily focused on the mountain economy, showcasing marked demographic backwardness and economic underdevelopment. Despite these challenges, the area boasts a wealth of preserved natural resources. The agricultural sector, including cereals, buckwheat products, organic baby food, marmalades, jams, compotes, fruit syrups, and juices, holds significant potential. Industrial vegetable processing is also a noteworthy aspect. Viticulture and fruit growing play a crucial role, with the Fruškogorje apple and apple brandy plantation in Irig being particularly important. In the upcoming period, there is considerable opportunity to leverage the resource potential for the development of various forms of rural tourism, including agricultural, ethnic, gastronomic, wine, educational, eco-rural, event, sports, and religious tourism.
3. This region is characterized by an economy with a high degree of workforce employment, not requiring extensive spatial occupation, large-scale transportation, environmental pollution, and widespread expansion, and spans across the rural areas of the municipalities of Inđija, Stara Pazova, and Pećinci. Within this area, there are favorable conditions for the development of various forms of tourism, including gastronomic, farming, ethnic houses and farms, sports, events, and shopping tourism. Additionally, in the field of crafts, there exists growth potential, particularly in coppersmiths and other craft workshops (specializing in cake, kuglof, local area souvenirs, weaving, and embroidery), household services, and traditional crafts characterized by small-scale economic activities.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In the context of this study, a survey was conducted to assess the needs of owners of rural tourist accommodations, and their suggestions for the development of rural tourism in the Srem region were gathered. The research was conducted using a questionnaire during the period of April-May 2023. Contact was established with municipal tourism organizations, which provided data on registered individuals involved in tourism-related activities. The respondents were then contacted by phone, and the purpose and structure of the questionnaire were explained to them. Verbal consent was obtained from those who expressed a willingness to participate.

A total of 12 owners of rural accommodations took part in the research, distributed by the municipality as follows: 5 respondents from Sremska Mitrovica, 5 respondents from Irig, and 2 respondents from Stara Pazova.

The findings revealed that all respondents with overnight accommodations promote their offerings on platforms dedicated to lodging services, such as booking.com and airbnb.com. Additionally, half of the participants are active on social networks like Facebook and Instagram.

Furthermore, 75% of the respondents were registered as farmers, with the remaining participants engaged in various other activities, primarily in the catering sector.

Accommodation services are provided by 91% of the respondents, but only 41.7% offer the option of preparing meals for guests. Additionally, seven households cultivate fruit and allow guests to pick and consume it, two households focus on vegetables, and one of the aforementioned

households, besides fruit, provides guests with the opportunity to purchase brandy, jam, and homemade cured meat products. Some participants mentioned that, apart from renting accommodation, they can offer guests to purchase of domestic products, to rent bicycle with planned routes for bike paths, or to rent a boat, canoe, or board.

Of particular interest for our research is the fact that 62.5% of the respondents report having over 30% foreign overnight guests (details below), suggesting a potential opportunity to further develop tourism in Srem to make it more appealing to international visitors. Half of the respondents express satisfaction with the income derived from this activity, while the remaining 50% are dissatisfied. Despite 54.5% indicating that they view it as a secondary rather than primary occupation, 66.7% express intentions to contemplate expanding or renovating their facilities and services.

Following the formal inquiries, participants were invited to share recommendations and suggestions based on their experiences, aiming to identify areas for improvement to foster the development of tourism in a more positive direction.

The consolidated suggestions include the need for increased advertising and marketing support.

While the collaboration with the Municipality's tourist organization is currently robust, it is recommended that they consolidate offerings from various locations and present them to the rural tourist households. This approach aims to facilitate extended guest stays by providing diverse experiences such as horse-stable tours, museum visits, monastery tours, and quad rentals. The idea is that guests would be inclined to choose our location for a vacation, leading to reduced accommodation costs (specifically in Stari Banovci).

Infrastructure improvements are deemed necessary, exemplified by instances like Ležimir facing water shortages. Enhancements to pedestrian and hiking trails are also needed, as observed in Vrđnik.

Monasteries often house women's dormitories, but the rural tourist households have significantly reduced their operations. The surveyed households suggest that creating a clearer itinerary for monastery visits could encourage people to opt for private lodgings. Educating the community about tourism regulations is crucial. Respondents emphasize the importance of external assessments to better comprehend areas requiring improvement and change. State assistance is sought through subsidies and promotional efforts, utilizing funds from higher levels of government to foster tourism development. Lastly, there's a call for networking among entities in the tourism industry at the municipal level. This collaboration is envisioned to benefit not only tourism but also the local economy and the self-governance structure.

5. BRANDING OF THE REGION OF SREM DISTRICT

Even today, when Slovaks from Vojvodina are mentioned, the immediate association is often with the naive painter Zuzana Halupova and her depictions of orderly villages adorned with blue-painted houses (Kosanović & Vještica, 2021). While this work does not focus on an artistic interpretation of the famed painter's blue villages, it draws on this association as a guide for establishing a brand perception of Srem's tourism potential. This branding is seen as instrumental in fostering the sustainable development of rural and suburban settlements, including

agricultural farms, aligning with current trends and environmental considerations. The pursuit of these objectives aligns closely with the research goals and involves seeking out strategies from various authors to implement effective and feasible actions in the rural areas of Srem.

In crafting the tourist offerings of Srem, emphasis should be placed on forms of tourism that can be swiftly developed without substantial initial investments, ensuring competitiveness in the tourist market. Consequently, the growing and sought-after domain of rural tourism becomes a focal point in this endeavor.

5.1. Development concept proposal

The following key objectives are deemed essential:

- Establishment of a distinctive tourist identity for Srem.
- Creation of a unique Srem production profile.
- Economic empowerment of the region.
- Ensuring widespread community benefits.
- Generation of income through innovative ideas.
- Development of the tourism brand value for Srem, aiming at successful regional positioning and enhanced competitiveness.

To achieve the sectoral goal, the implementation of the following tasks is imperative:

1. Preparation of Project Documentation:

- Essential for the elaboration and execution of positioning activities.
- Involves product and area differentiation concerning competition.
- Facilitates the pursuit of funding from local self-government, national, and international projects.

2. Integral Marketing Plan:

- Recognizing that brands thrive on fostering emotional connections with consumers.
- Aims to promote a sense of love and intimacy with the target audience.

6. CONCLUSION

Considering the diverse array of natural, cultural-historical, and gastronomic resources within the municipalities of the Srem district, there exists a significant opportunity for tourism to evolve into a pivotal economic sector. The realization of this potential hinges on effective marketing of an integrated rural tourism product in the foreign market, contingent upon ensuring high-quality standards in the rural tourist offerings. Such efforts would not only attract international guests but also lead to the realization of “invisible exports,” contributing favorably to the country’s balance of payments.

The development of rural tourism carries both social and political significance, as it fosters cultural understanding, offering insights into different ways of life and promoting better cross-cultural comprehension (Njegovan et al., 2015). Consequently, it becomes imperative to align rural development programs with the training of residents in rural areas to embrace new technologies, thereby diminishing isolation in crucial regions and accentuating local conditions and opportunities.

Local Government Units (LGUs) play a pivotal role in rejuvenating rural areas by championing the promotion of tourism products in the Srem district. This effort is intricately linked with the

overarching policy of economic development, emphasizing the importance of cultivating competitive advantages rather than merely comparative ones (Kosanović et al., 2019).

A robust presence of tourist brand products and areas in the market, coupled with strategic development-oriented tourism concepts, is integral to enhancing the competitiveness of agrarian goods and areas. This entails elevating product quality, creating and promoting reputable brands, and thereby ensuring a sustainable trajectory for all facets of overall sustainable development.

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