



ENHANCING ST. SAVA CHURCH VISITORS' ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCE IN ORDER TO SET UP THE STRATEGIC POSITION ON THE GLOBAL MARKET

Jelena Gajić^{1*},
Igor Stamenković²,
Danijel Pavlović¹,
Slobodan Čerović¹

¹Singidunum University,
Belgrade, Serbia

²University of Novi Sad,
Faculty of Sciences,
Department of Geography,
Tourism and Hotel Management,
Novi Sad, Serbia

Abstract:

As a huge number of domestic and foreign tourists visit Belgrade each year and usually visit St. Sava Church, the largest Orthodox Church in the Balkans, it is necessary to define more precisely strategic position of Church on the cultural and religious tourism market. In order to find out visitors' expectations versus experience and impressions, the quantitative survey was conducted and five core elements of authentic experience namely spiritual; cultural; environmental; secular; and educational were analysed. The aim of this paper is to consider the visitors' experience and impressions after visiting St. Sava Church to define its image and positioning strategy at the local and global touristic maps.

Keywords:

religious tourism, experience, St. Sava Church strategic position, Serbia, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, there was an increase in the number of tourists in the Republic of Serbia from India, China, Russia, but also from smaller Asian and Arab countries, which represents large market niches. At the same time, Serbia is also recording significant growth in this field. According to the data of the Republic Bureau of Statistics, in 2018, over 3.2 million tourists stayed in Serbia, which is an increase of 12% compared to 2017. Of the total number of tourists, more than half are foreign tourists (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2019). Of the selected tourist places, measured by the number of realized overnight stays, foreign tourists mostly stayed in Belgrade, followed by Novi Sad, Zlatibor, Vrnjacka Banja, Kopaonik, etc. Guests were mostly tourists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, China, Turkey, Germany, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Russia.

Serbia and the city of Belgrade can certainly expect an increase in the number of visits in the coming period. That is why it is important to continue to develop and improve tourism offer in even more attractive and inspiring ways.

Over the last two decades within changing global political landscapes, religion has retained a significant place as a social movement with a complexity of structures (Raj and Griffin, 2015; Raj, 2016).

Correspondence:
Jelena Gajić

e-mail:
jgajic@singidunum.ac.rs



Religious tourism as one of the oldest types of tourism represents a current, but insufficiently explored topic in terms of its contribution to economic, social and spiritual development not only in the world (Griffin, Raj, 2017; Afferni, Ferrario, 2016; Kartal, et al, 2015; Raj, Morpeth, 2007) but in Serbia as well (Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, 2016, 2015; Nikolić, 2010, Stamenković, et al, 2017, Božić, et al, 2017; Stamenković, 2009, 2006). This *touristic form* has a significant benefit in terms of economics; at the same time, the protection of cultural and historical heritage, preservation of material and moral values, cultural exchange and promotion are also essential part of its contribution to the people of the world. (Griffiths, Wiltshier, 2019; Afferni, Ferrario, 2016; Raj, Griffin, 2015). Having that in mind, religious tourism can contribute to the economic and social sustainability of the religious tourism destinations, religious sites, and attractions at the same time promoting preservation, and valorizing tangible and intangible religious and cultural values of the religion and its historical and cultural heritage.

Global and local changes in the lifestyle – the impact of digital technologies on communication and business, media availability, the growing need for specific, outstanding experiences, searching for peace, changes in economic power – all of mentioned factors have led to increasing interest in this form of tourism and very diverse motivations of contemporary tourists, from those we can define as sacred to the more secular sightseers (Griffin, Raj, 2017; Nyaupane et, al., 2015).

On 30 January 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and issued a set of Temporary Recommendations the consequences of the pandemic on tourism and travel will be felt in the next few years. Especially in air transport and hotel industry, but also in other service sectors and industries (World Tourism Organization, 2020). The religious tourism and pilgrimage are one of the most affected forms of tourism by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the rediscovery of religious tourism and pilgrimage introduced thinking in new forms to find spirituality and develop alternative religious movements (Raj, 2012, p. 96) religious tourism presents a promising and very strong form of tourism, especially for emerging tourism destinations such as Serbia. This form of tourism may enable stronger development of future tourism in Serbia, but also be a basis for post-COVID-19 tourism recovery. The religious tourism and religious sites and attractions development could be seen as a possible way for post-COVID-19 tourism sustainable recovery regarding the potential of this type of tourism to attract more religious tourists and pilgrims to visit St. Sava Church and other religious tourism sites in Serbia.

Statistical data indicates that religious tourism has 300-330 million international visitors and 18 million dollar (from activity) as revenue per year (UNWTO, 2014; Griffin, Enongene, 2019); in accordance to some prediction, it could be double in the future. Despite the growing trend of religious tourism, there is space for its improvement in every sense: better utilization of all potential sacral and cultural objects, raising the awareness of various active and potential visitors, increased recognition and support within the community (Griffin, Raj, 2017, 2015). These arguments pose challenges for new theoretical approaches and comprehensiveness of religious tourism research in Serbia and its impact on a number of vitally important segments of people's lives and the society as a whole. Religious tourism increasingly appears in the tourist offer of Serbia, which additionally indicates the necessity for a scientific as well as practical approach to its study (Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, 2016, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious tourism at the moment is an emerging market (Pavlović, Raj, 2018) and could become even more competitive, both according to the offer of other religions but also according to secular offers (Einstein, 2008). In order to achieve appropriate benefits, it is necessary to apply and integrate marketing concept in positioning this type of tourism (Griffiths, Wiltshier, 2019; Kartal, et.al, 2014). It should be considered in particular in the case of religious objects, not primarily as an economic category, but above all as a cultural, educational, spiritual and psychological concept, with emphasis on elements like *image, perception, experience, involvement*. All the activities have to be *consumer oriented*, focused as much as possible in a straight line on all kinds of potential users – from casual visitors and secular tourists, to dedicated pilgrims or ordinary members of the local community.



If we truly agree and accept as the basis that “*the Church is not walls, but people!*”, it is clear that the visitor is in the focus of the process of positioning religious sites/objects. However, the stakeholders and community in general should systematically and strategically support the development and positioning of a religious facility (Griffiths, Wiltshier, 2019; Piva, et al, 2019).

The strategic creation of the image of a religious object is a complex issue. It should be harmonized and integrated with other tourism offers of the destination on which it is located. It is very important to understand and incorporate *the diversity of our target* into the conceptual frame as well as every tactical outcome – individual and collective “meanings”, needs and expectations could vary to a certain level among the visitors of the same place, and all the experiences are to be upgraded and improved in every sense. At the same time, all relevant stakeholders from the environment should be not only invited and involved but deeply connected, in order to select the functional (tangible) and psychological (abstract) characteristics of a sacred place which could be used in positioning strategy and communication platform (Griffith, M., Wiltshier, 2019; Govers, Go, 2009).

The biggest church in the Balkans, Orthodox St. Sava Church, and its’ positioning present a challenge primarily for the Church, then for the State, relevant institutions and experts, local people and stakeholders all of whom have to take part, to support and participate in the process of positioning this religious and cultural object/attraction. Today, it is a place of cultural and historical heritage, a place of pilgrimage, a tourist attraction, as well as a place of various events and manifestations. The Church has high value from the aspect of the number of tourists and pilgrims who visit it (according to internal sources, about 1.5 to 2 million people visit the Church per year, and it is the second frequently visited place in Belgrade, after Kalemegdan Fortress). Cortese, D’Ambrosio, and Petracca (2019, p.2) point that religious tourism can create synergy with cultural tourism in order to contribute to the sustainable development of the destination and increase the number of overnight stays in it. At this point, we may emphasize the valorization of Orthodox St. Sava Church in both cultural and religious ways while at the same time emphasizing the potential and importance of this cultural and religious facility in attracting more tourists to visit Belgrade. In this way valorization of St. Sava Church, its promotion and better positioning as the religious, spiritual, and cultural value can contribute to the long-term sustainable tourism offer of Belgrade as a tourism destination. This approach certainly allows future development of sustainable tourism activities (focusing on economic and cultural aspects) in the form of spiritual (Sirirat, 2019) and religious tourism regarding the importance of St. Sava Church in a religious, spiritual, and cultural manner for sustainable tourism development.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the survey was to analyse visitor motivation, visitors’ experience, associations regarding the Church, emotions and attitudes towards the Church (after visiting st Sava Church), factors that influences their visit in order to define its image and positioning strategy at the local and global touristic maps and to set up the strategic position of St Sava Church as the symbol of Belgrade, Serbia (the important site for developing cultural, educational, religious tourism, etc.) as well.

The quantitative pilot survey was conducted during November, 2019. The random sample consisted of 200 visitors of st Sava Church; 160 domestic and 40 foreign visitors participated in the survey. The methods used were face to face interviews with the visitors after their visit of the Church. This survey was carried in order to define the framework for further research that will enable to use different kinds of sampling methods and collect data from different target group.

RESULTS

Following results enable various information for defining clear image and competitive position of the St. Sava Church, indicates new challenges for further research. The very first next step should be recognition of need for continuous and overall research - surveys with different segments of visitors as well as stakeholders in Belgrade and Serbia.

- ♦ The main motive for visiting the st Sava Church for domestic tourists was their inner, personal religious need, to fulfill religious need (63,35%), than to visit it as a tourist site (14%), to be alone (9%) and other motives.



For foreign visitors, the main motive (52%) was to visit the popular site, than to get some new information about this famous site (25%), to experience something extraordinary (10%), to fulfil religious need (5%), etc.

- ◆ Overall experiences for domestic and foreign pilgrims after visiting st Sava Church were positive feelings and extraordinary experience (98% domestic; 78% foreign). The main factors that influence their feelings are: special atmosphere (40%) and spiritual experience (30%), church architecture (21%), etc. for domestic visitors; for foreign visitors the most important was church architecture (60%), special atmosphere (17,50%), etc.
- ◆ Perception of domestic visitors of st Sava Church are: the biggest Serbian orthodox church (29%), the most important symbol of Serbia (18%), the symbol of Serbian religion (17%), the symbol of Serbian history and culture (14%), etc. Perception of foreign visitors of st Sava Church were: the most impressive site (25%), the symbol of national history, culture and religion (17%), the biggest orthodox church (17%), the most important site in Serbia (15%), etc.
- ◆ The main perception of the Church for domestic visitors was that it is the biggest Serbian Orthodox Church, symbol of Serbian religion and national and state symbol. For foreign visitors, it is the most important site of Serbian history, culture and religion, than visual impression is dominated.
- ◆ Their suggestions regarding the services quality are related with the importance of personal contacts, additional services/activities and more promotional activities within different type of media (traditional and digital) – for domestic visitors; more flyers, brochures, leaflets, booklets and other promotional materials, personal contact and additional explanation/guide in different languages would be valuable for improving foreign visitors' experience.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The obtained data showed that enhancing visitor's attitudes and experience requires the strategic approach of defining dimensions and activities that make the unique experience and competitive position of the St. Sava Church in the religious tourism market.

The pilot research was the starting point and based on this research, the plan is to continue collecting data in order to improve the promotion and positioning strategy of the St. Sava Church in a tourism manner. Valuable data collected at various times of the year and seasons from various target group (tourists, pilgrims, etc.) would enable the inputs for decision makers in the church and other tourism stakeholders.

Development and implementation of a sustainable tourism policy must be based on a number of principles and approaches (Stojanović, 2011). Eligibility criteria and the principles most commonly used in sustainable tourism are ecological sustainability, social sustainability, cultural sustainability, economic sustainability, educational element, local participation, and protection principle (Mowforth, Munt, 2003). Long-term sustainability in this paper mostly focuses on economic elements of the sustainability of St. Sava Church as an attraction and a part of the tourist offer of the destination. This paper is focusing the attention on attracting more tourists to the destination based on the positioning and promotion of St. Sava Church to encourage and maintain long-term sustainability. Subsequent research will focus more on collecting data on wider range of sustainability indicators emphasizing the importance of economic and social sustainability of this tourist attraction as part of the tourism destination product.



REFERENCES

- Afferni, R., and Ferrario, C., (2016) "Religious Tourism and Italian Sacred Mounts: experiences of networking and cooperation at a UNESCO site," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 2. doi:10.21427/D7NM7Z
- Božić, S., Stamenković, I., Ivkov, M., Vujičić, M., (2017), *Motivi posete sekularnih turista i hodočasnika Manastiru Tavna*, Univerzitet Singidunum, Beograd, doi:10.15308/Sitcon-2017-126-131.
- Cortese, F., D'Ambrosio, I., & Petracca, M. (2019). A possible synergy between culture and religion for the sustainability of tourism of Pompeii. *Sustainability*, 11(8), 2231.
- Einstein, M., (2008), *Brands of Faith, Marketing religion in commercial age*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis, NY.
- Govers, R. & Go, F.M. (2009). *Place Branding: Glocal, virtual and physical, identities constructed, imagined and experienced*. Basingstoke, Hampshire (UK): Palgrave Macmillan, UK.
- Griffin, K., Enongen, V., (2019), *Tackling the Problems of Deficient Data when Planning form Religious Tourism Management, Managing Religious Tourism*, CABI, International, UK.
- Griffin, Kevin and Raj, Razaq Dr. (2017) "The Importance of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: reflecting on definition, motives and data, *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 2. doi:10.21427/D7242Z
- Griffiths, M., Wiltshier, P., (2019). *Managing Religious Tourism*, CABI, International, UK.
- Kartal, B., Mustafa, T., Atli, H., (2015), Examining the religious tourism potential of Manisa, Turkey with marketing perspective, *Tourism Review*, Vol.70., no.3, pp.214-231.
- Mowforth, M., Munt, I., (2003). *Tourism and Sustainability: Development and New Tourism in the Third World*, London: Routledge.
- Nikolić, V., (2010), *Verski turizam i Srpska pravoslavna crkva*, doktorska disertacija, Beograd.
- Nyaupane, G., Timothy, D., & Poudel, S. (2015). Understanding tourists in religious destinations: A social distance perspective. *Tourism Management*, 48, 343–353.
- Pavlović, D., Raj, R., (2018). Religious tourism as an Emerging Market for Central-East European Countries, 10th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference, Santiago de Compostela, Spain - Book of proceedings, Jun, 2018.
- Piva, E., Cerutti, S., Raj, R., (2019), *Managing the Sacred: A Governance Perspective for Religious Tourism Destination, Managing Religious Tourism*, CABI, International, UK.
- Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, D., (2015), Pilgrimage in the 21st century: Case Studies three sanctuaries in Serbia, *Religija i tolerancija*, Vol.XIII, No24, Jul-Decembar.
- Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, D., (2016), *Hodočašća u XXI veku: studije slučaja tri svetišta u Srbiji Kalemegdanska Sv. Petka, Bogorodica Đuniska i Majka Božja Tekijska*, Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu.
- Raj, R. (2016) *Sacred Journey, Tourism*, in Jafari, J and Xiao, H. (2016) 2nd edition of the *Encyclopedia of Tourism*, Springer Publishing, USA.
- Raj, R. and Griffin, K.A. (Eds.) (2015) *Religious tourism and pilgrimage management: An international perspective*. CABI, Wallingford.
- Sirirat, P. (2019) "Spiritual Tourism as A Tool for Sustainability: A Case Study of Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 9. doi:https://doi.org/10.21427/9nyd-w868
- Stamenković, I. (2006) *Religiozni turizam i pravoslavlje*. Novi Sad: Prirodno matematički fakultet, departman za geografiju, turizam i hotelijerstvo.
- Stamenković, I. Lj. (2009) *Odnos hrišćanskih crkava prema verskom turizmu: magistarska teza*. Novi Sad: Prirodno matematički fakultet, departman za geografiju, Univerzitet u Novom Sadu.
- Stamenković, I., Božić, S., Ivkov, M., (2017), *Sakralni objekti opštine Aranđelovac u funkciji razvoja religijskog turizma*, Univerzitet Singidunum, Beograd, doi:10.15308/Sitcon-2017-148-153.
- Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia (2019), Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia.
- Stojanović, V. (2011). *Turizam i održivi razvoj*, Departman za goegrafiju, turizam i hotelijerstvo, PMF, Novi Sad.
- World Tourism Organization, (2020). Joint statement on tourism and COVID-19 19- UNWTO and who call for responsibility and coordination, News Release (26. February 2020), Madrid.