

THE COMPETITIVENESS OF SOKOBANJA ACCORDING TO THE ASSESSMENTS OF ITS VISITORS

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Abstract:

According to the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for 2016 to 2025, Serbia has huge potential for health tourism, with over 1,000 springs, 50 spas and spaces boasting a wealth of natural therapeutic vapors and medicinal mud. Natural resources allow for the possibility of greenfield investments, which can provide accelerated regional economic development (youth employment, construction of smaller accommodation facilities, development of the service sector, agriculture) and add value to the principles of sustainable tourism development. The aim of this paper is to present the potential of Sokobanja and indicate the competitiveness of this destination in the tourist market in relation to the experiences of visitors, with potential development and investment in accordance with the principles of responsible tourism.

Keywords:

experience of visitors, spa, sustainable tourism, competitiveness, tourism market.

INTRODUCTION

The International Spa Association (ISPA) defines spas as “entities committed to increasing overall well-being through a range of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit” (ISPA, 2006) and, as such, they are natural destination resources, and they lay the foundation for spa tourism development. The comparative advantage of spa towns in the tourism market is formed on the basis of people’s attitudes towards water properties, as well as additional content made available to visitors during their stay at the destination. That is why, to meet the requirements of modern tourists, European spas include essential tourism offers of dynamic growth with the possibility of a number of different programs valorization, and Smith & Puczko (2014) point out the following: bioclimatic/healing climate, peloids in spas, healing gases, Kneipp therapy, as already applied until now springs with medical water for therapeutic use.

Dražić *et al.* (2021) indicate that, to better position spas on the tourist market, the offer needs to be more attractive and provide additional content, which are defined development plans of the space and active public-private partnerships, all with the aim of higher quality services, a better experience and attracting more visitors.

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At the same time, for the balanced development of spa towns, sustainable tourism principles must be implemented and valorized. Puczkó & Rátz (2000) point out that the sustainable development of tourism must be balanced from the aspect of natural and cultural valorization, as well as with economic sustainability.

Since travel represents the movement of individuals / groups in accordance with certain needs / possibilities, it certainly aims at the realization of the expected / imagined experience of tourists. It is the experience that a tourist has while staying at a particular destination that influences the formation of the competitiveness context. The experience is individual and subjective for each visitor, but is based on specific factors that each destination has at its disposal and in relation to which it is positioned in the tourism market. According to Popesku (2016), the competitiveness of a tourist destination is the ability/possibility of the destination to influence an increase in the number of visitors based on several factors and experiences of tourists, with an increase in tourist spending, providing them with experiences that meet expectations. The idea of competitiveness has elements of sustainability because the goal of attracting more tourists is a prerequisite for revenue growth, improving the well-being of local community, while preserving natural and cultural heritage of the tourist destination.

The competitiveness indicators of the tourist destination must be clearly defined, relevant, easy to understand and credible for visitors to give their assessment. Within the study of tourist destination competitiveness, several models have been formed, of which the Crouch-Ritchie and Dwyer-Kim models stand out. As a basis for the formation of these models, each destination's competitiveness is based on five basic segments: economic, political, socio-cultural, technological, and environmental factors (Popesku, 2016). According to Pavlović *et al.* (2016, 853) an "integrated tourist destination product creates the tourist experience, and its improvement contributes to destination competitiveness. Therefore, the tourist experience can be considered as fundamental for destination competitiveness."

This paper presents an analysis of the evaluation of the experience of visitors to Sokobanja, based on a survey filled out by the users of this spa town services.

SOKOBANJA TOURISM

Sokobanja is located in the central part of southeastern Serbia at an altitude of 400m. It is 240 km from Belgrade and 60 km from Niš. It is surrounded by lush greenery and picnic areas. It is rich in natural resources and cultural heritage and its highlights include the Ozren mountain, which rises above the spa, as well as the Devica and Rtanj mountains, the Ripaljka waterfall, lakes Bovan and Vrmdža, the Gamzigrad spa, and the remains of the Sokograd fortress, along with the archaeological site Felix Romuliana, which is on the UNESCO World cultural heritage list. Sokobanja has been known as a natural health resort since the time of Romans, and the first written documentation about it date from 1672. The foundations of health tourism in Sokobanja were laid by Prince Miloš Obrenović (Denda and Stojanović, 2017), who sent water samples to be analyzed, while recovering from aching bones in an old Turkish bath. His son Mihailo continued to work on the arrangement and construction of the spa, and at the end of the 19th century Sokobanja became a modern, balneological site, and was written about by the Austrian travel writer Felix Kanis. The great Serbian scientist Jovan Cvijić called Sokobanja the "Serbian Switzerland".

What makes the area of Sokobanja extremely healing is radon, a noble gas, which diffuses in the air and has a positive effect on many diseases (bronchial asthma, chronic bronchitis, high blood pressure, diseases of the nervous system and glands with internal secretion) (Denda and Stojanović, 2017). Favorable ionization, i.e., the presence of positive and negative ions in the air, refreshes and revitalizes the human body, while the presence of numerous medicinal plants in the surrounding area contributes to the rightful status that Sokobanja has an "air spa," and attracts a significant number of visitors to the sources of healing water. Consequently, Sokobanja is ranked as the second most important and popular spa in Serbia. (<https://mtt.gov.rs/tekst/93/2ector-za-turizam.php>)

Nowadays, offers are made in spa centers through spa & wellness centers and water parks, which affect the recognition and attractiveness of the destination (Krešić, 2007). The aim is to attract a specific targetted group of elite tourists willing to pay more, which results in high incomes at the destination level. In this regard, Sokobanja contains very different types of accommodation capacities of all levels of categorization, which have high-quality and diverse content available to guests, as well as additionally built facilities (sports fields, congress halls, water park).



The competitiveness of tourist destinations can be observed in terms of the number of arrivals, overnight stays, and tourist consumption (Pavlović *et al*, 2016). In this regard, according to the data of the competent Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications (MTTT), tourist traffic in Serbian spas during the observed period of 2019 - 2021 (Table 1) shows specific oscillations by year. (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of The Republic of Serbia, 2022)

Table 1. Tourist traffic in Serbian spas

Serbia Spas Total	2019.	2020.	2021.
Tourist arrivals	670.044	522.947	677.404
Tourist overnight stays	2.781.627	2.184.602	2.636.000
Average length of stay of domestic tourists	4,15 days	4,18 days	3,95 days
Average length of stay of foreign tourists	2,88 days	3,50 days	3,40 days

Source: Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of The Republic of Serbia (MTTT)

Quantitative competitiveness assessment of the tourist destination of Sokobanja is given according to the number of tourist arrivals, overnight stays and the average length of stay (Table 2). (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of The Republic of Serbia, 2022)

Table 2. Tourist traffic in Sokobanja

Sokobanja	2019.	2020.	2021.
Tourist arrivals	5.612	1.221	143
Tourist overnight stays	116.653	25.395	894
Average length of stay of domestic tourists	20,79 days	20,80 days	5,15 days
Average length of stay of foreign tourists	9,20 days	5,67 days	7,17 days

Source: Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of The Republic of Serbia (MTTT)

According to the data on the average length of stay in spas in Serbia, Sokobanja is significantly ahead of other spas. The year 2020 saw a decrease in the number of visitors and overnight stays in spas in Serbia, except in Sokobanja, which experienced an increase of 10.3%. The trend of growth in the number of visitors continues in 2021, with a longer number of days spent by foreign visitors (Table 2). The stay of tourists in Sokobanja is based both on rehabilitation therapies and on the individual arrivals of guests in the newly opened accommodation facilities of high category and rich content that they offer to guests.

In this regard, both medical and spa & wellness tourism, as well as sports, MICE, adventure and cultural tourism are valorized in the area of Sokobanja, thanks to its natural resources, cultural and historical heritage and additionally built attractions and facilities All are the reason for the arrival of tourists and the achievement of such indicators that Sokobanja is at the very top in terms of attendance and income (Table 3).



Table 3. Arrivals in Serbian Spas from 2021

	Serbian Spas	Total	Domestic	Foreign
	Total	677.404	602.806	74.598
1	Vrnjačka Banja	267.672	231.112	36.56
2	Sokobanja	159.131	154.815	4.316
3	Vrdnik banja	61.838	53.545	8.293
4	Palić banja	35.811	27.093	8.718
5	Bukovička banja	29.583	25.542	4.041
6	Banja Koviljača	18.588	14.49	4.098
7	Prolom banja	14.609	12.854	1.755
8	Lukovska banja	11.121	10.431	690
9	Vrujci	9.678	9.266	412
10	Ribarska banja	8.936	8.836	100
11	Gornja Trepča	7.979	7.31	669
12	Sijarinska banja	5.784	5.728	56
13	Niška banja	4.271	4.06	211
14	Rusanda	2.077	2.009	68
15	Vranjska banja	1.573	1.476	97

Source: Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of The Republic of Serbia (MTTT)

METHODOLOGY

A complex methodology was applied to collect data on the physical impacts of tourism on the analyzed destination, as well as the results of tourist movements: (1) analysis of available data (data from the competent Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia (MTTT), (2) analysis of scientific journals for the theoretical framework and regulations in the field of business practice, and (3) a structured survey to determine the evaluation of the experience of visitors to Sokobanja. Quantitative methods and descriptive statistics were used both in the analysis of tourist traffic and in the processing of research results, based on official data. The survey consists of two parts: the first refers to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, and the second assesses specific attributes of the destination's competitiveness. The obtained results were statistically processed and presented in tables and graphs.

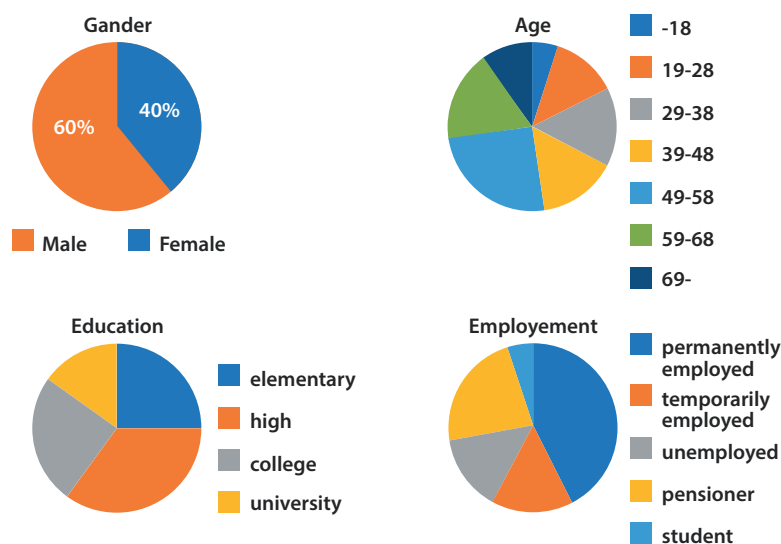


RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the assessment of the experience of visitors to Sokobanja

Based on the survey which the users of services in Sokobanja filled out, the obtained results were processed and systematized and presented in Fig 1.

Figure 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

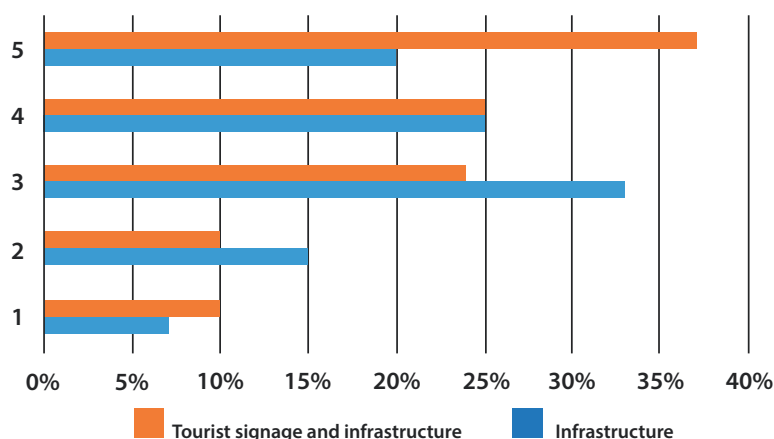


Source: Authors' analysis

It is noticeable that there were more female than male respondents. Most of the respondents are aged 49-58, whereas the smallest percentage of respondents are younger than 18. The largest number of respondents are permanently employed (42.5%), whereas the smallest number of them are students. 85% of the respondents indicated that they had been to Sokobanja before, while for 15% of the respondents this was the first time they visited Sokobanja.

Based on the analysis of the obtained results, 49% of respondents indicated poor traffic accessibility of Sokobanja. When the tourist signaling and method of informing guests were evaluated, 37% of respondents rated it with the highest rating, 20% of respondents rated the infrastructure in the place itself as adequate (Fig. 2), while 13% of respondents the quality of services requires improvement (Fig. 3). When asked whether they would recommend Sokobanja, 100% of respondents answered positively.

Figure 2. Ratings of tourists' impressions - Part I

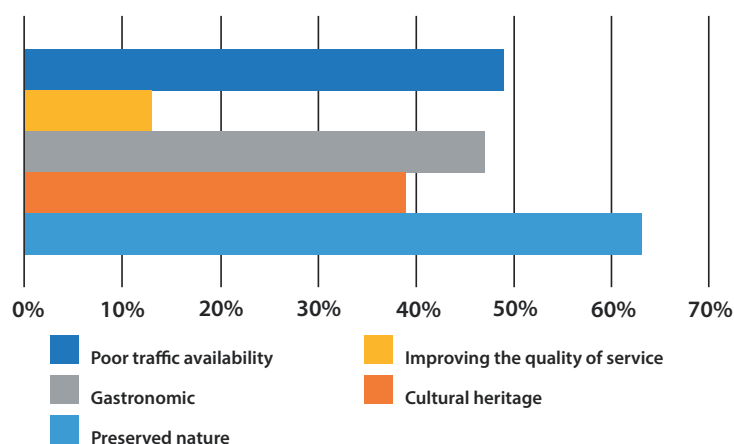


Source: Authors' analysis



The analysis of determining the rating of the visitors' experience in Sokobanja demonstrates that Sokobanja received the highest rating as a tourist destination, i.e., its preserved nature and healthy environment left the biggest impression on 63% of survey participants. 49% of visitors mentioned the poor traffic accessibility of this important destination. Surveyed visitors were most impressed with cultural heritage (39%) and gastronomic offer (47%), which confirmed the impact of tangible and intangible heritage on the attractiveness and authenticity of Sokobanja as a tourist destination (Fig. 3).

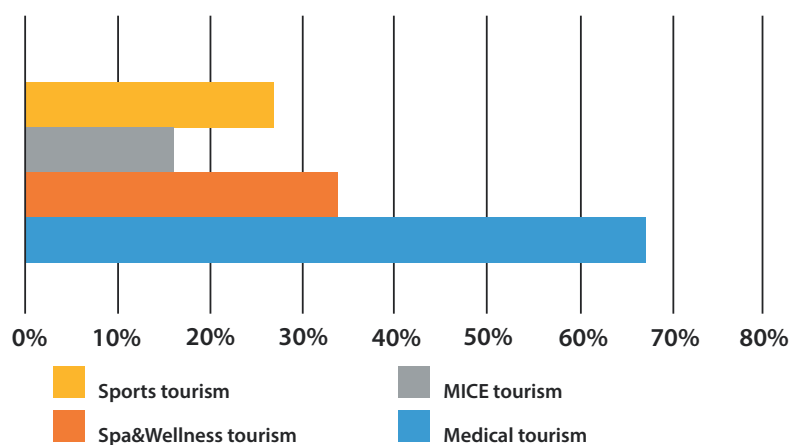
Figure 3. Ratings of tourists' impressions - Part I



Source: Authors' analysis

Given its diverse tourism resources, as well as high-quality and numerous tourism suprastructures and infrastructures, the visitors of Sokobanja singled out and confirmed which tourism products they deemed crucial for this destination (Fig. 4), in accordance with the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2016 - 2025. Medical tourism dominates, which makes sense as the site is traditionally recognized for it, but spa & wellness, sports, and MICE tourism also stand out.

Figure 4. Reason for arrival/type of tourist product in Sokobanja



Source: Authors' analysis



CONCLUSION

The evaluation of visitors' impressions and experiences is important for the competitiveness of each destination. Insight into the needs, expectations, and evaluations of visitors during their stay at the destination influence the formation of certain strategic documents that define the "next steps" needed for the corrections of tourism infrastructure and tourism suprastructure to improve the results and position of the destination on the tourism market.

Based on the research conducted on the evaluation of the experience of visitors to Sokobanja, it is important to point out that local self-government needs to act to improve the accessibility of this significant Serbian tourist destination, whose tradition has been recognized for hundreds of years. Visitors are attracted to Sokobanja because of its authentic resources and content, which contribute to its attractiveness. Since visitors indicated a certain degree of dissatisfaction in the process of providing services, it would be crucial to implement continuous training of the staff that is involved in the process of providing tourist services in Sokobanja, as this would contribute to the improvement of their previous knowledge, as well introducing them to any innovations present on the market.

The improvement related to the increase in quality of the provision of services, more promotional activities, adequate care from the aspect of sustainable management of tourism resources, both natural and anthropogenic, contribute to a more complete and higher quality formation of more numerous tourism products with the aim of positioning Sokobanja on the tourism market. The idea is to create a tourism product in an optimal and high-quality manner to ensure the prosperity of the destination and its long-term competitiveness on the market.

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