



SPA TOURISM AS A DEVELOPMENT DRIVER OF RURAL DESTINATION

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Abstract:

Looking at rural destinations as places that have the potential for tourism development, it is necessary to see in which direction they can be developed and what advantages the destination has from such development. Particularly highlighted are the potentials for the development of spa tourism, as it has been shown that health care has become a primary need, and the health motive is one of the primary factors of attraction. The paper is based on research on the Vrdnik health resort and their visitors' opinions. Respondents from five countries, 322 of them, participated in the research. The conclusion was reached that the respondents very well distinguish wellness and spas as a part of health tourism from medical places where sick people go, and that together wellness and spa tourism represent a sustainable product of rural destinations. In other words, prevention is much more important than rehabilitation.

Keywords:

wellness and spa, tourism, prevention, rural destination development, Vrdnik.

INTRODUCTION

If we look at rural areas as attractive, sustainable tourist destinations, then it is clear that tourism must contribute to rural development. As a holistic (integral) discipline, sustainable rural development must include tourism and recreation as one of the key components of self-sustainability (Perić et al., 2020). Development to be sustainable, it must include in its integral part those types of services that enable sustainability, namely tourism and recreation (wellness and spa) (Dryglas & Salamanga, 2018). Self-sustainability is a state of existence in which no interaction with others is required. In the context of rural development, self-sustainability would imply the offer of those types of tourism that could be fully implemented in the rural environment (Wu et al., 2023). Tourists must be attracted to certain attractions offered by rural areas, and if there are no natural attractions, then the offer is based on anthropogenic, created ones (tradition, gastronomy, and the like). However, the greatest advantage is in rural areas, which represent a combination of the two (Vujko et al., 2019). Thermo-mineral springs are a natural treasure that can be used for the development of spa tourism, which, lately, has not only been a place for rehabilitation and

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recovery and for visiting tourists of the third age, but a place for prevention, enjoyment and relaxation with plenty of cultural contents. This means that in such rural areas, the tourist offer could be enriched with different cultural contents that would attract tourists and have the “power” to extend the tourist season. These are manifestations, concerts, exhibitions, colonies, camps and the like. Everything that can be organized in a rural environment and that can help tourists make decision to stay a few nights longer at the destination (Chen *et al.*, 2023). Rural areas cover about 90% of Serbia and about 43% of the total population lives in them. Rural tourism in Serbia is a significant factor of multifunctional rural development, which is confirmed by numerous theoretical and empirical studies. Serbia has great potential in the offer of rural tourism, due to preserved nature, and traditional and autochthonous values (Petrović *et al.*, 2017). Indigenous values represent such tourist attractions that can independently attract tourists because people from all over the world come to destinations that offer something unique, different, and locally oriented. Rural destinations in Serbia abound with such attractions. From gastronomy, music, folk customs and traditions, to the charisma and hospitality of the people, the offer that can be experienced in the rural destinations of Serbia is something that cannot be experienced anywhere else in the world.

With over 350 potential spa destinations, the rural areas of Serbia have the potential to develop this form of tourism as an integral part of it. So, the potential exists, but it is necessary to change people’s awareness that spa places are places of rest and enjoyment where the rural landscape contributes to a richer and better atmosphere. Going one step further, it is necessary to show the importance of the natural environment on health. Nature has the “power” to have a beneficial effect on human health through various forms of relaxation (Gustavo, 2010). Therefore, the combination of wellness and spa tourism in a rural environment has a win-win effect. Sustainable development, viewed in the context of the development of destinations intended for health tourism, can be defined as something that allows continuous duration and that proves to help people. This proved to be especially significant in the wake of the last Covid pandemic.

One way is through research to show the benefit from such a determination of the destination to the local population because the local population must have a basic interest in the sustainability of development so that future generations can benefit (Vujko *et al.*, 2021). The local population must opt for a certain direction of development. Without this commitment, we cannot talk about the sustainable development of tourism. For this to happen, the local population must be familiar with all the factors of sustainable development, and above all the economic indicators of sustainability. First of all, this includes various positive economic aspects of that development, such as investments, jobs, female entrepreneurship, and the like. All of these are sustainable forms of tourism development that directly empower the local population and the rural destination and through economic benefits are visible and tangible (Chen *et al.*, 2023).

Bearing in mind the needs of modern man and the speed of life, which implies permanent exposure to stress, the so-called “health resorts” where those who visit such places can find the necessary peace and restore balance are of exceptional importance (Deery *et al.*, 2014). One such place is Vrdnik. Vrdnik (Serbian Cyrillic: Врдник; pronounced [vřdɲi:k]) is a village located in the municipality of Irig, northern Srem (Syrmia), in the Serbian province of Vojvodina. It is located at the southern slopes of Fruška Gora, at the border of the national park (Jocić, 2013). The thermal waters in the Vrdnik spa with a temperature of around 32 degrees are extremely healing, especially for heart and rheumatic diseases. Thanks to the thermal waters in the spa, there are several centers for treatment and rehabilitation, as well as for analysis and intervention by doctors to determine therapy. On the other hand, in recent years, Vrdnik has been known for having exceptional service, when it comes to prevention, i.e. the wellness and spa program (Jocić, 2013).

Some scientists claim that the concept of wellness is more than a movement, it is a way of life. Wellness helps people to maintain balance and “be well” (Huijbens, 2011) in today’s time where stress and various other obstructive conditions prevail. Although wellness has only recently been discussed from a scientific perspective, human efforts to live in harmony with oneself and the environment have long been known (Hallab, 2003). The contemporary understanding of wellness came into being in 1959, when an American doctor, H. Dunn, created the definition of wellness used today. According to Dunn, wellness is a lifestyle that promotes a positive mood and brings harmony to body, spirit and mind; these three elements holistically define man (Mak *et al.*, 2009). Today’s view of wellness is made up of two most important aspects of life: one is what we consume, and the other is how we feel. Food greatly affects a person’s health, and so, in addition to promoting a balanced diet, wellness also promotes an active life (Smith & Kelly, 2006). Correctly understood, wellness affects the senses



of taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing (Lehto *et al.*, 2006). In addition to all that, wellness also promotes the way someone rests, what kind of environment they have, what music they listen to, etc. In fact, “being good” is the essence of life, and wellness helps someone feel good and positive, which is the key to success in the fight against stress and everyday problems. According to Marvel (2002), it is precisely this way of thinking that allows a person to be in a good mood and positive, regardless of everyday life.

The research was part of a wider research project carried out during 2022 (March-June), and this paper started from the hypothesis that visitors to the Vrtnik spa distinguish prevention from rehabilitation, that is, they are familiar with the term “wellness”. Such an offer represents the backbone of the development of rural areas because tourists who come to such destinations are first and foremost healthy people. Healthy people spend more, can eat well and enjoy gourmet restaurants, which in rural areas are permeated with tradition and represent independent motives for tourist arrivals (Vujko *et al.*, 2020). Also, people who care about their health are looking for additional, complementary tourist motives, so different manifestations on the topic of gastronomy, tradition and ethnic value are also welcome. All in all, the spa offer is and should be one of the most important tourist products of rural areas, at least for those destinations where there are conditions for such development.

METHODOLOGY

The research was a combination of quantitative (statistics and web analysis) and qualitative methods (questionnaire, discussion and written documents). Bibliographic speculative was used in the phase of defining the theoretical framework, and descriptive method for data processing and results interpretation. The data was collected by the survey method. Namely, it must be noted that the results are only a part of the study conducted in the period from March to June 2022. The first part of the work was research in the field and data collection through direct survey, conducted among the visitors of the Vrtnik Spa. The questionnaire was composed of several groups of variables. One group of variables had open-ended questions, while the other had answers offered on a Likert scale of 1-3 (yes, no and I don’t know) and 1-5 (very important, important, I don’t know, not important and not important at all).

The obtained data were processed with appropriate statistical methods of a descriptive and comparative nature, which enabled the explanation of the research results and the drawing of certain conclusions. One form of the analysis of the data was the chi-square test (Pearson Chi-Square Test). It was used to determine whether a received (observed) frequency (responses) deviated from the frequencies that were expected. Practice is to always start from the premise that there are certain values of the difference in responses. In order to detect differences in the responses measured on the basis of statistically significant differences in the distribution of the dependent variable in relation to independent, and statistically significant differences are taken of those for which $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

By examining Table 1, it can be seen that the majority of participants was from Italy, followed by visitors from Croatia and Slovenia. This is not surprising, considering that during the Covid pandemic, EU countries had a large number of infected people.

Table 1. Country of origin.

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	BiH	59	18,3
	Croatia	72	22,4
	Slovenia	72	22,4
	Italy	82	25,5
	Montenegro	37	11,5
	Total	322	100,0

Source: Author’s.



Table 2 shows the respondents' familiarity with the term "wellness and spa", in relation to the country from which the visitors come. Respondents answered in the form of free answers, and the answers were grouped by similarity. Some of the most frequent answers are: Relaxation and relaxation through massages and other treatments (62), Anti-stress programs (42), Being healthy (41).

Table 2. Familiarity with the terms of Wellness and spa.

Country of origin							Total
What do the terms 'wellness' and 'spa' mean to you?		BiH	Croatia	Slovenia	Italy	Montenegro	
	Being healthy and happy	7	11	14	7	2	41
	Work on yourself	5	1	19	1	1	27
	Disease prevention	4	11	10	6	6	37
	Being fit	1	14	11	12	0	38
	Feeling good in your own skin	16	2	4	13	0	35
	Relaxation and relaxation through massages and other treatments	21	2	2	29	8	62
	Anti-stress programs	2	23	1	6	10	42
	Escape from everyday life	1	3	8	4	6	22
	Socializing and having fun	2	5	3	4	4	18
Total		59	72	72	82	37	322

Source: Author's.

When it comes to the Pearson Chi-Square Test, comparisons are made depending on the country from which tourists come. Referring to the data from Table 3, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in participants' responses depending on the country they come from, since $p = 0.000$.

The respondents' familiarity with the term "wellness and spa" tells us that this form of tourism has good potential for development. Also, this fact indicates that people have a need to spend their free time in such destinations that offer a wide range of activities related to relaxation, "escape from everyday life" and the like. People need peace, quiet, relaxation, and nature. Such people travel to destinations that provide them with treatments that they enjoy as healthy people. Observing the experiences of some destinations from the environment (Vujko *et al.*, 2019), it can be seen that the largest percentage of guests of such destinations are healthy people for whom prevention is very important. They travel, enjoy the heterogeneity of the offers, and spend their free money funds in a wide variety of ways.

Table 3. Pearson Chi-Square test.

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	181,011	32	0,000

Source: Author's.

The data from Table 4 tell us how recognizable Vrdnik is as a wellness and spa center. Namely, all respondents answered that it is a recognizable place and that they would be happy to recommend it. In recent years, several very luxurious hotels have been built in the town, which offer their guests a very rich wellness and spa program. From treatments with mud, chocolate, and aromatic oils, through various massages, saunas, baths, treatments etc. Also, wellness and spa centers organize consultations on nutrition, exercise and health. It can be said that the Vrdnik already stands out on the wellness and spa tourist map of Serbia.



Table 4. Opinion about Vrdnik.

		Country of origin					Total
		BiH	Croatia	Slovenia	Italy	Montenegro	
Is Vrdnik a recognizable place of wellness and spa tourism?	Yes	59	72	72	82	37	322
Total		59	72	72	82	37	322

The question related to whether respondents distinguish wellness and spa tourism from rehabilitation and health-healing tourism can be found in Table 5. It is interesting that the vast majority of respondents (305) answered that there are no sick people in the hotel where they stayed. This means proportionally that people who want balance in life come to Vrdnik, that is, people who recognize the true meaning of the terms ‘wellness’ and ‘spa’. Wellness and spa centers have stood out in a time known as the Covid-19 time. Namely, it has been medically confirmed that strong immunity helps in the fight against this vicious disease. Centers that offer wellness and spa programs have stood out as highly recognized destinations in which people have to wait a long time for confirmation of the reservation. People from all over the world go to wellness and spa centers in the hope that they will strengthen their immunity (Connell, 2013).

Table 5. Observations.

		Country of origin					Total
		BiH	Croatia	Slovenia	Italy	Montenegro	
Do you see sick people in your hotel/guesthouse where you are staying?	No	57	69	72	72	35	305
	I don't know	2	3	0	10	2	17
Total		59	72	72	82	37	322

Source: Author's.

Table 6. Pearson Chi-Square test.

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	12,456	4	0,014

Source: Author's.

Referring to the data from Table 6, it can be concluded that there are no statistically significant differences in respondents' answers since $p = 0,014$ (Tabela 6).

Based on the previous questions, we wanted to hear opinions about the importance of prevention for health. The vast majority of respondents (317) answered that prevention is “very important”, while 4 respondents said that prevention is “important”. This confirmed the initial hypothesis of the work that visitors of the Vrdnik Spa distinguish prevention from rehabilitation, that is, it was shown that they are familiar with the term of “wellness”.

Table 7. Respondents' opinion about importance of prevention.

		Country of origin					Total
		BiH	Croatia	Slovenia	Italy	Montenegro	
Do you see sick people in your hotel/guesthouse where you are staying?	Very Important	56	72	70	82	37	317
	Important	2	0	2	0	0	4
Total		58	72	72	82	37	321

Source: Author's.



There was no statistically significant difference in the next question Table 8), but it is a logical sequence considering that some respondents did not answer this question.

Table 8. Pearson Chi-Square test.

	Value	df	Statistical significance (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	6,068	4	0,194

Source: Author's.

CONCLUSION

The terms “rural tourism” and “sustainable tourism” have become essentially synonymous, indicating the close and mutual dependence of tourism and the rural environment and cultures within which they occur. People who pay attention to themselves and their health, come to spa and wellness tourism destinations, but also choose rural areas and stay in them. Greenery and healthy food, tradition and gastronomy represent the basis of quality and the concept of integral management of rural destinations (Vujko and Delić-Jović, 2021).

Improving the quality of traditional, local food and handicrafts provides opportunities not only to provide the guest with a special, rural and locally recognizable experience, but also to support the rural economy and tradition. Strengthening the links between food production, agriculture and maintenance of the landscape of rural areas provides opportunities for integral quality management. The main reason why guests choose certain rural destinations is that they want to enjoy the quality of natural landscapes and man-made facilities. Maintaining the quality of the environment is important both for the recognition of the destination and for sustainability. The provision of transport and other local services should meet the needs of guests and the local population and reflect the environmental protection policy (Vujko and Delić-Jović, 2021).

On the other hand, certain rural destinations have predispositions for the development of wellness and spa tourism. Wellness and spa tourism markets are experiencing a growing trend year after year. The growing tendency of these markets comes as a result of a change in the attitudes of the population, which is increasingly focused on improving health and quality of life, which is manifested, among other things, through the use of the services of these centers (Hadzik *et al.*, 2014). Wellness, as a lifestyle, represents the aspiration of each individual towards achieving a perfect balance between spirit and body (Gustavo, 2010). On the other hand, spas, as traditional places for recovery and rehabilitation, are increasingly turning to prevention and precisely wellness as a business concept. The visitors are the ones who dictate the market rules, and there are more and more of them who are aware that prevention is more important than rehabilitation. Vrdnik presents an example of good practice in how the traditional transitions into the modern and contemporary.

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