



THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF SLOW TOURISM - A CASE STUDY OF WESTERN SERBIA

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Abstract:

Western Serbia, as a crossroad of different cultures and an area of rich material and cultural heritage imbued with exceptional natural values, has rich potential and developed rural tourism. However, rural tourism can be significantly improved and used in a more adequate way. The chance for the possible development of rural areas can be reflected in changes in the way of thinking and habits of modern tourists, who pay more and more attention to authenticity. Also, there is a chance to define a new horizon for tourism based on the discovery of traditional food and rural communities. This type of tourism can represent slow tourism. The main goal of the paper was to show the link between rural and slow tourism, as well as the possibility of applying the concept of slow tourism in the rural areas of Western Serbia.

Keywords:

slow tourism, rural tourism, Western Serbia, SWOT analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism represents one of the alternative forms of tourism which generates an increasing number of tourists (Košić, 2009). As Serbia has an exceptional potential for the development of rural tourism, which has not been adequately utilized (Bratić *et al.*, 2021), it is necessary to define new horizons for tourism that will be based on traditional food and discoveries in rural communities. The potential for rural development can be observed in the changing mindsets and behaviors of modern travelers, who value authenticity more and increasingly—particularly when choosing food for consumption by tourists. The idea of slow tourism, which has emerged as a response to the fast-paced lifestyle of today, is one of these solutions. It can be understood as a new travel niche or as an approach of traveling in general. Slow tourism is characterized as a type of tourism that emphasizes slowness, unhurriedness, simplicity, but also disconnection from the hustle and bustle of everyday life (Serdane, 2020). In this connection, there are destinations that can be called “slow”, which highlights their character that makes them suitable for slow tourism (Noor *et al.*, 2015). A rural area can have certain characteristics of a “slow” destination because it belongs entirely to the natural environment, with the presence of a traditional community structure that is reflected in a lifestyle that fascinates tourists and drives them to participate in it (Kastenholz & Lima, 2013).

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Western Serbia is a vast region that includes a few geographical and traditional micro-regions, which represent a geographical and natural-anthropogenic complex, i.e. a space of intertwined actions of nature, people, and a rich inventory (Markovic, Pavlovic, 1995). It is a predominantly rural region that uses its potential in the development of rural tourism (Perić *et al.*, 2020). Western Serbia is important for the development of tourism in Serbia in general, because 43.7% of the total number of tourists who spent the night in Serbia in 2021 stayed in Western Serbia and Šumadija (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022). Therefore, it is very important to research the topic of the possibility of further development of tourism in this region, primarily in literature, so that planners in the tourism industry can be guided by it.

While numerous studies have been done on the relatively new concept of slow tourism (Mavrić *et al.*, 2022), not much has been done on the relationship between slow and rural tourism (Farhadi Uonaki *et al.*, 2022) or how slow tourism is perceived in rural areas and destinations. In a similar manner, slow tourism is a relatively new concept in Serbia, and our study contributes significantly to the repository of knowledge on this topic. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to investigate the possibility of applying the concept of slow tourism in the rural areas of Western Serbia, as well as to show all the benefits of this development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Slow tourism is a type of tourism in which travelers who want to experience quality travel experiences through getting to know the culture, history, tradition, and gastronomy of the local population participate. Through slow tourism, tourists explore destinations at their own pace without a predetermined schedule or imposed time limits. Slow tourism supports staying in sustainable rural, cultural, or eco-destinations, where the social, economic, and environmental components of a destination's sustainability have the same impact and should all be considered equally. Therefore, slow tourism takes place predominantly in rural, less populated areas, which are rich both in natural and cultural values (Božović *et al.*, 2022).

It is possible that rural areas are the most effective places to implement slow tourism because of the socially constructed perception of them as having lower levels of consumption than urban locations (Noor *et al.*, 2011). A rural destination, with a slow way of life, could potentially be considered an "avenue for slow tourism" (Noor *et al.*, 2015), given that rural tourism fosters the preservation of the environment, culture, as well as a slow way of life (Joffe *et al.*, 2004). The style of rural areas is characterized by a slower pace of life that presents tourists in rural destinations with experiences that are closer to the natural environment and traditional heritage (Liu, 2006). It is the "slow" experiences that reflect the unique characteristics of the local community, highlighting the importance of heritage and community lifestyle (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011). In addition to the preservation of tradition and culture, the ecological characteristics of the rural area and green practices that can be enabled through the implementation of slow tourism, the characteristics of the rural area in the service of slow tourism are important (Noor *et al.*, 2011).

In their research, Noor and colleagues (2015) state the similarities between rural and slow tourism (Table 1), considering the relevant literature on the mentioned forms of tourism. Seeing the similarities between both types of tourism, they introduce a working definition of slow tourism in a rural destination: "Slow tourism is a type of tourism in a rural environment that is small-scale and consists of a psychological approach to travel emphasizing authentic experiences, ecological sustainability opposed to the consumption of modern society" (Noor *et al.*, 2015, p. 4). Therefore, rural destinations represent an ideal place for implementing slow tourism.



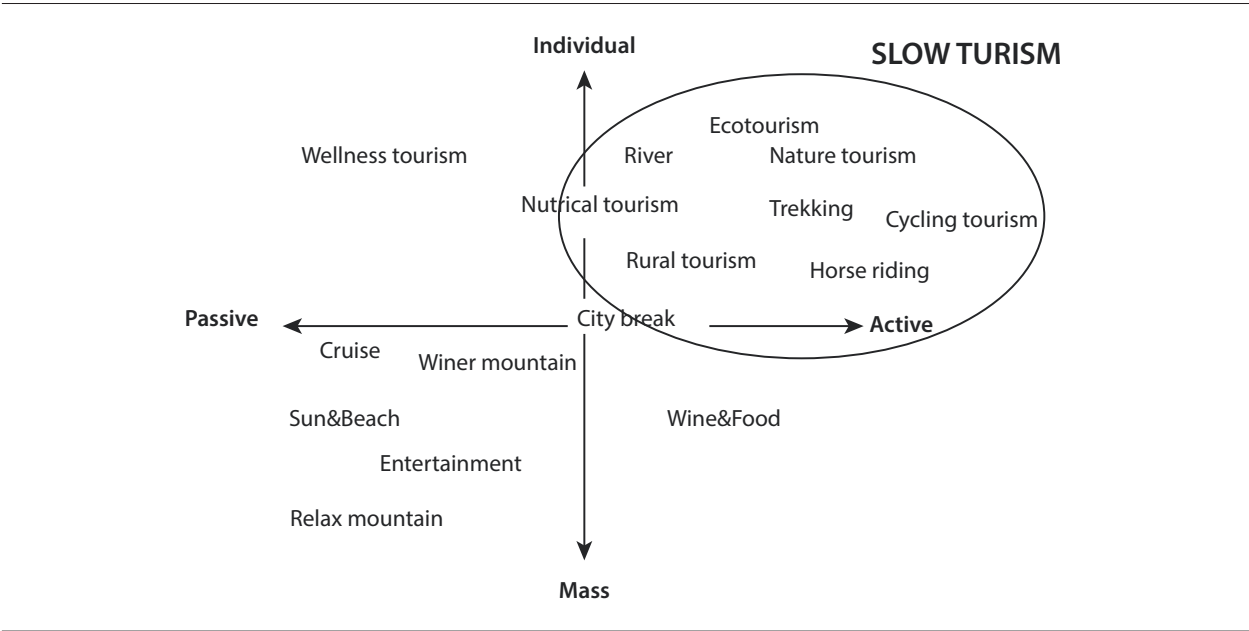
Table 1. Similarities in the concepts of slow tourism and rural tourism.

Slow tourism	Rural tourism
Small scale (Markwell <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	Small scale (Blanco, 1996)
Authentic (Markwell <i>et al.</i> 2012)	Authentic (Marie & Vilard, 1977)
Environmental sustainability (Lipman & Murphy, 2012)	Environmental sustainability (Mansfield & Jonas, 2006)
Against modern consumption (Conway & Timms, 2012)	Against modern consumption (Sharpley, 2002)
Psychological (Gardner, 2009)	Psychological (Voase, 1995)

Source: Noor *et al.*, 2015.

As slow tourism overlaps with different types of tourism, the spectrum of activities associated with slow tourism is very wide and depends only on the imagination of the offer and the wishes of the consumer, i.e. tourist. Thus, a comprehensive framework was created, and unique criteria were established for distinguishing the activities that most fully describe slow tourism (Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1, the authors established two axes to classify tourism activities. These are the “passive-active” and “individual-mass” axes. Slow tourism activities appear when “active” activities meet “individual” activities. It should be noted that “individual” activities refer not only to individual travelling but also to travelling in small groups. The activities advocated by slow tourism are characterized as all those activities that are in line with eco-tourism, rural tourism, staying in nature, trekking and the like.

Figure 1. Activities included in slow tourism.



Source: Dall’Aglia, 2011, p. 6.

Although the topic of rural tourism has been researched both in Serbia (Bratić *et al.*, 2021; Demirović *et al.*, 2020) and in Western Serbia (Perić *et al.*, 2020; Vesić *et al.*, 2022), the topic of slow tourism is still in the beginning (Božović *et al.*, 2021; Božović *et al.*, 2022; Marić *et al.*, 2021; Lunić *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, only one research was conducted that connects slow and rural tourism in Western Serbia (Božović, 2023). Therefore, this paper makes a significant contribution to fill the gap in the scientific literature on this developing topic.



METHODOLOGY

The paper is aimed at building a theoretical basis based on which it is possible to see the possibilities of linking rural and slow tourism, as well as the implementation of slow tourism in rural areas. For this reason, through qualitative criteria, a framework was built that will check whether slow tourism has the characteristic elements of a rural destination. To that end, the authors, after a detailed review of the literature, singled out the elements characteristic of slow tourism and which are associated with rural tourism. To determine which human, natural, cultural, and social resources are most involved in slow tourism, as well as what predominates in tourism activities and services in the destination, various local values were analyzed (Nunes & Cooke, 2021). For this reason, a SWOT analysis of the application of slow tourism in the rural areas of Western Serbia was conducted.

RESULTS

After a detailed review of the literature on rural, slow tourism and their linking, priority tourism products common to all destinations in the territory of Western Serbia were investigated, to gain knowledge about the potential and future direction of tourism development. Also, current models of tourism management in destinations were investigated, and examples of good practice that can be used as an example for further tourism development were listed.

The priority tourist product of Western Serbia

The tourism development strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025 defines 18 priority tourist destinations that are important for completing the tourist product of Serbia. Tourist destinations are defined according to the infrastructure and superstructure developed so far, accessibility and realized traffic. In the territory of Western Serbia, rural tourism is a type of tourism that is common to all priority tourist destinations. The interest in rural tourism in Western Serbia is constantly increasing, given the existence of still attractive and “unspoiled” rural areas. To an increasing extent, the interests of tourists in staying in nature are highlighted. More and more visitors show interest in getting to know the culture, customs and living conditions of the place and surroundings where they stay during their vacation. Motives for coming to the countryside, such as peace, pure nature, interaction with new people (hosts), healthy food, “slow food” (enjoying food), easy pace, physical activity, are responsible for the emergence and survival of rural tourism as tourism oriented to the individual guest and his needs. Western Serbia has great tourist potential for the development of this type of tourism, however, despite the exceptional perspective in the region of Podrinje and Valjevo, it is still modest in scope. Both tourism regions in their tourism development strategies state plans to support the development of rural tourism as an important potential of the regions. Therefore, the possibility of opening new tourist facilities, improvement of tourist infrastructure, opening of local handicraft facilities, branding of rural products, etc. is mentioned (Bozovic, 2023). On the other hand, the tourist region of Western Serbia has many households on its territory that meet the high standards and requirements for the provision of catering services prescribed by current regulations (Table 2).



Table 2. Accommodation capacities in the villages of the Western Serbia region.

Municipality/city	Number of facilities	Number of rooms	Number of beds
Prijepolje	13	35	77
Arilje	14	40	90
Bajina Bašta	7	27	76
Čajetina	46	74	258
Kosjerić	13	44	117
Ivanjica	49	119	312
Lučani	7	41	108
Nova Varoš	51	167	758
Požega	9	31	84
Užice	32	71	168
Sjenica	4	15	60
In total	245	664	2.108

Source: Author- based on the tourism development program of the Western Serbia tourist region from 2020 to 2025.

Many households in this region own buildings of characteristic traditional architecture, such as sculptures, dairies, mills, and the like. There are many marked cycling routes in the region, and routes that link several destinations are of special quality. Most accommodation providers offer hiking trails. Some households own family workshops for woodworking, making souvenirs, pottery workshops, workshops for making traditional folk costumes, tasting centers, which can only be improved in terms of a better-quality offer within the wider local community. As for other contents in accommodation facilities in the territory covered by the tourist organization of the region of Western Serbia, most households are engaged in the production of organic/healthy and high-quality food (gardens, greenhouses, fields). Therefore, the link between agriculture and rural tourism is significant. In this manner, the placement of domestic products through the preparation and serving of meals is greatly facilitated. Many households process agricultural products (sweets, juices, jams, ajvar...), some of them even organize the preparation of winter food, but not cooking schools. The processing of these products provides insignificant additional household income. Production of meat, meat products and dairy products on farms is limited, which is compensated by other agricultural farms in the local community, producers of the same (Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, 2016).

Tourism management authorities

For tourism to develop in an adequate way and to follow modern trends in tourism, it is necessary to have permanent tourism management bodies that will monitor this development. An example of good domestic practice is the existence and successful work of the tourist organization of the region of Western Serbia, which has existed since 2006 and is the only regional tourism organization in the Republic of Serbia, formed in accordance with the Law on Tourism as a DMO (Destination Management Organization) in the process of establishment. In the management structures, in addition to representatives of the public sector - local tourist organizations, there are TOS (Tourist Organization of Serbia), the association of hoteliers, associations of travel agencies, representatives of the Regional Development Agency Zlatibor and the Regional Chamber of Commerce of Užice. Such an organization should stimulate the formation of Regional Tourism Organizations in other parts of the Republic of Serbia, which would eventually grow into regional DMOs (Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, 2016). Cities and municipalities in the tourist region of Western Serbia are characterized by different levels of tourism development. The municipality of Čajetina is a dominant destination that participates with more than 50% in tourist traffic. It is followed by Bajina Bašta, Užice and Nova Varoš, while other destinations in the region have tourist potential, but little tourist traffic is realized in them.



This step improved the management of the destination, created a new tourism product at the regional level, contributed to better marketing, visibility, and positioning of the destination on the tourist map of Serbia and the region (Bozovic, 2023).

SWOT ANALYSIS

SWOT analysis is intended as a set of the most interesting suggestions, proposals and ideas that can be found in scientific papers or obtained based on an overview of the researched area of Western Serbia. Based on the previous studies conducted in Western Serbia (Bozovic, 2023; Ivanovic, 2013) as well as based on field research and study of the region, the conclusions presented in the SWOT analysis were reached.

Table 3. Swot analysis of the application of slow tourism in rural areas of Western Serbia.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• geographical position, • great cultural potential, • great natural potential, • many rural tourist households, • authentic architecture, • authentic gastronomy	• insufficiently developed infrastructure (roads, connectivity...), • insufficient education about modern forms of tourism
Opportunities	Threats
• networking of destinations • creating a unique tourist product, • attracting new segments of tourists, • desire of the local population to get involved and support the further development of tourism	• focusing only on individual attractions in the area • lack of financial resources • departure of young people from rural areas, • lack of support staff • slow administration at the state level • absence of a clear strategy for further sustainable development

Source: Author's.

The main strengths of Western Serbia are reflected in its favorable geographical position. Important roads and tourist routes pass through the territory of Western Serbia, which represent a necessary condition for the survival and development of a tourist region (Romelić, 2008). Western Serbia has a favorable geographical and touristic position because it is located at the intersection of roads that connect Western and Southern Europe, Vojvodina, and Belgrade with the coast (Montenegro and southern Dalmatia). Also, a great strength is reflected in the fact that Western Serbia is characterized by a high complementarity of natural and anthropogenic values that have a favorable effect on its tourism position. Natural geographical units that influence the favorable tourist position of Western Serbia are certainly mountains and rivers, which are suitable for rural and slow tourism. Authentic architecture and recognizable gastronomy that can be seen in many rural tourist households is a factor that attracts many tourists (Bratić, 2021).

The potential for collaboration areas and developing a distinctive tourism offering that would draw in new tourist demographics represents the opportunity for future growth. International travel trends highlight the need and motivation of contemporary individuals to return to tradition, the natural world, and an unspoiled environment, with a focus on rural areas. Slow tourism has the potential to become one of the most important and strategic avenues for the future development of rural areas when it complies to sustainable development principles, preserves local customs and culture, and occupies an important part of the market. Eventually, improved cooperation is required between all communities within the Western Serbian area. Collaboration is essential to building a name for slow tourism and promoting it as a distinct travel option for Western Serbia and all of Serbia (Bozovic, 2023).

Weaknesses and threats for future development are insufficiently developed infrastructure that makes life difficult for the local population, as well as access to tourist destinations, as well as the increasing migration of young people from rural to urban areas. Also, insufficient education in tourism can be a threat, as well as focusing on only individual attractions in Western Serbia, thereby neglecting lesser-known destinations with a lot of potential.



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Worldwide tourism trends highlight the need and desire of modern society to return to tradition, the natural world, and an unspoiled environment, with a focus on rural places. Slow tourism has a propensity to take up a sizeable portion of the market. By adhering to sustainable development principles and fostering the local way of life, slow tourism emerges as one of the most important and practical avenues for the long-term development of rural areas.

The territory of Western Serbia is a predominantly rural area that uses its potential to the greatest extent for the development of rural tourism, which is also the priority type of tourism in this region. It is also important to note that rural destinations such as Western Serbia, with a slow lifestyle, could potentially be considered an ideal place for the development of slow tourism based on the characteristics of this type of tourism.

There is also a need for better cooperation between all communities in the territory of Western Serbia. Cooperation is necessary to create a brand and to better market the products of slow tourism as a unique tourist product of Western Serbia and the whole of Serbia. Such a united region, apart from representing a space for building competitiveness, would have a greater chance of being recognized as key to cooperation with European funds that would contribute to the further development of tourism. The creation of a unique tourist product can be implemented through networking and education aimed at raising the quality and competitiveness of the entire region of Western Serbia.

Based on the creation of a unique tourist product and the development of slow tourism, a new business model can be developed. Namely, personalized trips, due to their value and acquired experiences, often lead tourists to spend more (Valls *et al.*, 2019). As emotions increase and material value decreases, consumption undoubtedly increases (Kazeminia *et al.*, 2016). This may mean that a higher quality service rich in experiences could enable better profitability. As stated by Lowry and Back, if we are what we eat, the same could be said: we are represented by the choices of our travels (Lowry & Back, 2015).

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