

Article

The Appeal of Rural Hospitality in Serbia and Italy: Understanding Tourist Motivations and Key Indicators of Success in Sustainable Rural Tourism

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Abstract: Rural tourism is growing as travelers seek authentic experiences with local traditions, culture, and heritage. This form of tourism plays a key role in the sustainable development of rural areas by effectively utilizing rural resources. To ensure its continued success, best practices must be adopted to enhance the visitor experience while ensuring long-term viability. Research on rural tourism in the villages of Sremski Karlovci, Irig, and Vrdnik in Fruška Gora (Serbia) and Pienza, Montalcino, and San Gimignano in Tuscany (Italy), involving 357 tourists, identified four key factors influencing their experiences: ‘Organic Heritage’, ‘Authentic Comfort’, ‘Authentic Flavors’, and ‘Warm Farmstead’. These factors show that the motivations driving tourists to rural destinations and village accommodations are universal. However, Tuscan villages attract more tourists due to their superior infrastructure, diversified offerings, and strong international promotion, attracting wealthier tourists who tend to stay longer and spend more. Stakeholder research (58 participants) confirmed that Fruška Gora must improve infrastructure, diversify experiences, and strengthen promotional efforts to enhance sustainability and competitiveness. These changes are essential for the long-term success of rural tourism businesses in the future.

Keywords: rural tourism; agritourism; sustainability; rural hospitality; rural heritage; farmstead; Fruška Gora; Serbia; Tuscany; Italy



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1. Introduction

In recent years, rural tourism has experienced significant growth, attracting visitors who are eager to escape the fast-paced nature of urban life (Lazović et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2025; Ye et al., 2025). The charm of rural hospitality stems from its capacity to deliver distinctive experiences that are frequently absent in city environments (Tang et al., 2025). A major draw for tourists seeking rural hospitality is the opportunity to engage in authentic cultural experiences (Cheng et al., 2025). Rural regions present a wide array of unique customs and traditions that urban settings typically do not offer. According to Moliterni et al. (2025), visitors may have the chance to observe traditional craft-making, participate in local festivals, or involve themselves in time-honored agricultural practices. These

immersive experiences enable tourists to forge a deep connection with the local culture, enhancing their travel narratives and cultivating a sense of belonging that is often missing in metropolitan areas (T. Liu & Chen, 2024). Increasingly, tourists are placing a premium on authenticity in their travel decisions, and rural hospitality serves as a platform for meaningful interactions (Cammarota et al., 2025). Engaging with locals not only elevates the travel experience but also deepens the appreciation of diverse cultures (Qiu et al., 2024). Cultural exchanges can encompass activities such as sharing meals made from local ingredients or learning about traditional dance and music (Moliterni et al., 2025). Such moments foster enduring memories and cultivate a deep appreciation for the host community, motivating tourists to revisit and recount their experiences (Suárez et al., 2025). Feeling “at home” and surrendering to the peace and homely atmosphere that can be felt in traditional rural accommodation, tourists find the necessary “oasis” where they are treated with respect and friendly consideration (Adeyinka-Ojo, 2018). According to Ruiz-Ballesteros and González-Portillo (2025), rural hospitality acts as an entry point to genuine cultural encounters that align with tourists’ aspirations for significant travel, thereby propelling the expansion of rural tourism as a sustainable and viable sector.

The study started from the initial hypothesis H that the motives and needs that attract tourists to rural destinations are universal. Tourists opting to utilize their leisure time in villages share similar needs and are drawn by comparable motivations (Farmaki, 2012; Kumar et al., 2021; Q. Li et al., 2025). Considering the frenetic pace of modern life, certain researchers assert that there is a growing demand for rural destinations (Kastenholz et al., 2006). This rising interest is reflected in the expanding offerings within rural tourism (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017), indicating that, alongside the tourist demand, there is an escalating necessity for the activation of a greater number of authentic dining establishments (Mwesiumo et al., 2022). Taking into account the variations in tourist traffic between regions that may appear similar and the universal motives and needs of travelers, a pertinent question emerges: *why are some villages more visited than others, and why is tourism more developed in them?* In this context, the study highlights two distinct tourist regions: Fruška Gora villages in Serbia and Tuscany in Italy.

While both Tuscany and Fruška Gora villages are acknowledged as significant tourist destinations (Randelli et al., 2014; Nastić et al., 2024), they exhibit notable differences in tourist traffic volume. Tuscany, recognized as one of Italy’s most frequented regions, draws millions of visitors annually (Randelli & Martellozzo, 2019), whereas Fruška Gora villages, according to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2025), attract merely around 100,000 tourists each year—a figure that pales in comparison to that of Tuscany. To verify the correctness of the initial hypothesis H, it was necessary to ask a few more questions: *What motives are primary when making decisions about where to stay when rural tourism is in question? That is, what are the needs that tourists try to satisfy by choosing rural accommodation and rural tourism facilities?* Assuming that tourists will give uniform answers, a survey was conducted among 357 respondents in three villages in Fruška Gora and three villages in Tuscany, to show that rural motifs alone are not enough to attract a large number of tourists. With that, the main objective of the research was imposed: to ascertain the requirements necessary for the flourishing of rural tourism within a village and, in light of its available resources, to secure a rightful position in the vibrant tourist market. In order to determine this, research was conducted among the leading stakeholders of all six villages, both in Fruška Gora and in Tuscany. In this study, “success” in sustainable rural tourism is understood not only in terms of tourist volume but also includes factors such as average length of stay, accommodation capacity, visitor satisfaction, destination infrastructure, diversity of tourism offerings, and community engagement. These indicators were assessed through both tourist surveys and stakeholder interviews,

reflecting a combination of economic, social, and qualitative factors that shape the viability and competitiveness of rural tourism destinations.

2. Literature Review

Tourists are increasingly drawn to rural accommodation for a variety of reasons, including economic benefits, authentic experiences, and a desire for tranquility (Kristensen et al., 2019). This growing interest in rural tourism not only provides travelers with a respite from urban life but also supports local economies and helps preserve cultural heritage. Numerous researchers pointed to similar motives when it comes to the choice of rural destinations (Lewis & D'Alessandro, 2019; S. X. Yang & Xu, 2022; Y. Zhang et al., 2022; J. Zhao & Zhu, 2025). Also, tourists have similar needs and attitudes when it comes to choosing a rural household. However, there are numerous studies that confirm that some villages are more visited than others, regardless of similar natural-geographical or social-geographical predispositions (Lin, 2024; Bolaños-Martinez et al., 2025; Goodburn, 2025; Q. Zhang et al., 2025). Resources are potential assets that are not sufficient in themselves for tourists to choose them as tourist destinations. The development of tourism in villages is reflected through several indicators that need to be studied and through examples of good practices applied in less developed villages in order to achieve competitiveness and reach a higher level of tourism development. To ensure the success of sustainable rural tourism, stakeholders must focus on economic, environmental, and social indicators, which will help maintain the balance between tourism growth and the preservation of natural and cultural resources, ultimately fostering resilient rural communities (Giambona et al., 2024; Gaonkar & Sukthankar, 2025).

2.1. Exploring Tourist Motivations for Choosing Rural Accommodation

The motivations for choosing rural accommodation among tourists are multifaceted, encompassing economic, experiential, and social/psychological factors. As travelers seek more cost-effective, authentic, and tranquil experiences, rural tourism continues to gain popularity (D. Li et al., 2024). This trend not only benefits tourists seeking a break from urban life but also positively impacts rural communities by stimulating local economies and preserving cultural heritage (Q. Yang et al., 2025). As the tourism landscape evolves, understanding these motivations is crucial for stakeholders in the industry to cater to the changing preferences of travelers and to promote sustainable tourism practices that benefit both visitors and hosts alike (Karsokiene et al., 2025).

One of the most compelling reasons tourists choose rural accommodation is economic motivation (J. Liu et al., 2023). Rural lodging often presents a more cost-effective alternative to urban hotels, which can be prohibitively expensive, especially in popular tourist destinations. According to J. Liu et al. (2023), a family seeking a vacation may find that a charming countryside cabin or a bed-and-breakfast offers significantly lower rates than a comparable urban hotel room, allowing them to allocate their budget toward activities and experiences rather than accommodations. According to Losada et al. (2017), many rural areas provide local discounts and promotions aimed at attracting visitors. These incentives not only lower the overall cost of the trip but also encourage tourists to explore lesser-known regions, thereby distributing tourism more evenly across various locales (Bojović et al., 2024). Importantly, this shift toward rural tourism contributes to the local economy through sustainable tourism practices, where spending remains in the community. Tourists who choose rural accommodation often support local businesses, such as farms, artisans, and restaurants, fostering a cycle of economic benefit that can lead to job creation and community development (Vujko et al., 2024).

Beyond economic factors, experiential motivations play a crucial role in the decision-making process of tourists. Many travelers are driven by a desire for the unique and authentic experiences that rural settings can offer. Unlike the typical urban vacation, rural destinations often provide opportunities for outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, and horseback riding, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in nature and appreciate the tranquility of their surroundings (Rejón-Guardia et al., 2023). According to Sthapit et al. (2024), a tourist may choose a rural retreat in the mountains to enjoy activities like mountain biking or bird watching, experiences that are often limited in urban environments. According to Constantin and Popescu (2025), engaging with local culture and traditions becomes a highlight of rural travel. Tourists may participate in farm-to-table dining experiences, local festivals, or workshops that showcase traditional crafts, providing a deeper understanding of the region's heritage (Adom, 2019). Such opportunities not only enrich the travel experience but also create lasting memories, making rural stays increasingly appealing to those seeking adventure and authenticity (Mteti et al., 2025).

Lastly, social and psychological motivations significantly influence tourists' preferences for rural accommodations. Many individuals and families are drawn to the quieter, less crowded environments that rural destinations provide, seeking relaxation and an escape from the hustle and bustle of urban life (Pesonen & Komppula, 2010). The serene landscapes and slower pace of rural living offer a perfect backdrop for rejuvenation and reflection. Moreover, shared experiences in rural settings can strengthen family bonds, as families often engage in group activities such as hiking, cooking together, or participating in local events (M. Yang et al., 2024). These shared moments can lead to improved relationships and create cherished memories that last a lifetime. According to Woosnam et al. (2024), rural accommodations often foster social connections and community interactions, as guests may meet fellow travelers or engage with local residents. This sense of community not only enhances the travel experience but also allows tourists to feel more connected to their surroundings, ultimately enriching their overall journey (Lengerer, 2025).

2.2. Assessing the Success of Sustainable Rural Tourism

The success of sustainable rural tourism can be assessed through multiple indicators encompassing economic, environmental, and social and cultural dimensions. These indicators provide a holistic framework for evaluating the impacts of rural tourism and its ability to sustain both the environment and local communities. Economic indicators serve as the backbone for assessing the success of sustainable rural tourism. According to Abdurakhmanova and Ahrorov (2025), regions that promote rural tourism often experience an influx of visitors who contribute to the local economy by spending money on accommodations, dining, and attractions. This economic activity can lead to improved infrastructure, such as better roads and enhanced public services, which further supports tourism and benefits residents (Y. Zhao et al., 2025). According to Maziliauske (2024), rural tourism generates job creation and employment opportunities, addressing common issues of unemployment and underemployment in these areas. According to Panić et al. (2024), investment in infrastructure, such as eco-friendly lodges and local markets, serves not only the tourists but also enhances the quality of life for residents, creating a symbiotic relationship between visitors and the community. According to Salvatore et al. (2021), in rural Italy, tourism-related job creation not only provided employment opportunities but also improved community infrastructure, showing the direct link between tourism development and local economic benefits. This demonstrates how the influx of tourists, combined with sustainable practices, can lead to significant long-term economic growth and stability.

Environmental indicators are equally crucial in determining the success of sustainable rural tourism (Yanan et al., 2024). A core component of this approach is the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. The reduction of carbon footprints through the implementation of eco-friendly practices, such as utilizing renewable energy sources and promoting sustainable transportation options, further exemplifies successful environmental indicators (Zahoor et al., 2024). Communities that engage in composting, recycling, and sustainable agricultural practices not only reduce their environmental impact but also enhance their appeal to environmentally conscious travelers. According to Abu Elsamen et al. (2025), community involvement in environmental stewardship initiatives, such as tree planting and wildlife conservation projects, fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among residents. These initiatives not only contribute to environmental sustainability but also strengthen community bonds and enhance the overall tourism experience by offering visitors authentic interactions with local conservation efforts. In Costa Rica, the establishment of protected areas, coupled with the promotion of ecotourism, serves as a prime example of how conservation efforts can boost both biodiversity and tourism (X. Li et al., 2025). Additionally, local community-driven environmental projects, such as wildlife conservation and tree planting, create opportunities for tourists to engage directly with sustainability efforts, offering them a richer, more authentic travel experience.

Social and cultural indicators play a pivotal role in evaluating the success of sustainable rural tourism by emphasizing the preservation of local traditions and cultural heritage. Community engagement and stakeholder participation in tourism planning are essential for fostering an inclusive approach that respects local values and priorities (Panić et al., 2024). According to Maziliauske (2024), the improvement of the quality of life for local residents is a significant indicator of success. By involving residents in decision-making processes, tourism development can align with community interests, leading to more successful outcomes. In the case of rural communities that actively engage in tourism planning, the results show not only improved community life but also the preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring that tourism supports both the economy and the identity of the region (Turčinović et al., 2025). For example, the implementation of tourism that respects and highlights local traditions can provide financial resources for community development, which in turn enhances the quality of life for local residents.

To provide a clearer linkage between sustainability indicators and empirical findings, the following Table 1 summarizes the key dimensions and their practical implications for regions like Fruška Gora and Tuscany.

Table 1. Sustainability dimensions in rural tourism: key indicators and practical implications from Fruška Gora and Tuscany.

Dimension	Key Indicators	Practical Implications for Sustainability (Fruška Gora and Tuscany)
Economic	Job creation Income diversification Infrastructure investment	Improving road networks Enhancing digital infrastructure Diversifying tourism offerings (e.g., cultural festivals, adventure tourism, wine tourism, artisanal workshops) Leveraging cultural heritage for tourism growth
Environmental	Resource conservation Reduced carbon footprint Eco-friendly practices	Promoting eco-friendly infrastructure Support conservation initiatives Reducing environmental impact through sustainable vineyard management, biodiversity support, and waste reduction practices
Social/Cultural	Community engagement Heritage preservation Stakeholder collaboration	Fostering local involvement Promoting cultural heritage Enhancing community well-being through tourism training, capacity building, and educational tourism experiences

3. Materials and Methods

In our research paper, we adopted a pragmatist epistemological approach (Healey, 2009). In the context of researching rural tourism development, the pragmatist epistemological approach has been selected as the most suitable framework. Pragmatism is particularly relevant when combining multiple research methods to explore complex real-world phenomena, such as the factors influencing tourism development in villages. This study involves both tourists who have visited six villages and key stakeholders in rural tourism, necessitating a flexible and problem-solving-oriented approach. Pragmatism allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The research incorporates survey-based data from tourists, which provides measurable insights into their motivations, attitudes, and experiences, as well as qualitative research with stakeholders, which captures expert perspectives on infrastructure, investments, marketing strategies, and challenges in rural tourism development. By combining these different data sources, pragmatism facilitates a holistic analysis of the dynamics shaping rural tourism. Unlike epistemological positions that emphasize either objective reality (positivism) or socially constructed meanings (constructivism), pragmatism prioritizes practical outcomes and real-world applications. It focuses on how knowledge can be applied to solve specific problems, making it particularly relevant for tourism research aimed at improving villages’ revitalization and sustainable rural development. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify effective strategies for enhancing tourism in rural villages, drawing on both empirical data and stakeholder insights. By emphasizing “what works” in different contexts, pragmatism ensures that the research findings are not only theoretically robust but also practically applicable, offering valuable recommendations for local policymakers, tourism entrepreneurs, and community members.

The research was carried out in two distinct phases. The initial phase involved 357 tourists who stayed in the villages of Fruška Gora, specifically Sremski Karlovci, Irig, and Vrdnik, as well as in Tuscany, in the villages of Pienza, Montalcino, and San Gimignano, comprising 140 tourists from Serbia and 217 tourists from Italy (Table 2). Spanning from April 2024 to August 2024, these villages were visited multiple times to conduct on-site research through personal interactions.

Table 2. Tourism profiles of selected villages in Fruška Gora and Tuscany: visitor trends and key attractions.

Region	Village	Annual Visitors	Average Stay (Nights)	Accommodation Capacity	Notable Features
Fruška Gora	Sremski Karlovci	~35,000	2.2	250 beds	Wine tourism, heritage architecture
Fruška Gora	Irig	~30,000	2.0	180 beds	Monasteries, wine cellars
Fruška Gora	Vrdnik	~35,000	2.5	300 beds	Spa tourism, rural wellness
Tuscany	Pienza	~400,000	3.8	700 beds	Renaissance town, Pecorino cheese
Tuscany	Montalcino	~500,000	3.6	800 beds	Brunello wine tourism
Tuscany	San Gimignano	~1,000,000	3.2	1000+ beds	Medieval towers, high tourist influx

Source: Authors.

The structure of respondents who participated in the research is as follows: The sample consists of 45.9% male and 54.1% female respondents. This indicates a relatively balanced gender distribution, with a slight predominance of female participants. The majority of respondents belong to older age groups. Only 4.5% are between 18 and 25 years, while 7.8% fall within the 26–35 age range. The most represented age groups are 51–65 years (33.1%) and over 66 years (29.1%), followed by the 36–50 age group (25.5%). This suggests that the surveyed population primarily consists of middle-aged and older individuals. The educational level of respondents varies, with 11.2% having completed only elementary school. The largest portion has a secondary school education (38.4%), while 35.6% have completed high school or college. A smaller but significant portion (14.8%) holds a master's or Ph.D. degree. This distribution suggests that the majority of visitors to these destinations have at least a secondary education, with a considerable number having pursued higher education. Regarding visit frequency, 20.7% of respondents are first-time visitors, while 47.1% visit occasionally (1–2 times per year). A notable 32.2% visit frequently (3 or more times per year). These data indicate a strong level of repeat visitation, with nearly one-third of the respondents demonstrating a high degree of loyalty to the destination. In the case of Tuscany, the survey of 217 tourists reveals a diverse international visitor profile. Italian tourists make up the largest group, accounting for 67 visitors (30.9%), reflecting the strong domestic interest in this region known for its cultural and culinary heritage. British tourists are the second-largest group, with 39 visitors (18.0%), followed closely by Swiss tourists at 34 visitors (15.7%) and Austrian tourists at 31 visitors (14.3%). American tourists also form a significant portion, with 26 visitors (12.0%), indicating the region's strong appeal to travelers from the United States. Finally, German tourists represent 20 visitors (9.2%), further highlighting Tuscany's popularity among Western European markets. For Fruška Gora, the tourist profile is more regionally concentrated, reflecting its appeal to visitors from neighboring countries. Based on the survey of 140 tourists, Serbian tourists form the largest group, with 88 visitors (62.9%), demonstrating strong domestic interest in this culturally rich and naturally beautiful destination. Hungarian tourists are the second-largest group, with 20 visitors (14.3%), followed by Montenegrin tourists with 18 visitors (12.9%) and Bosnian and Herzegovinian tourists with 14 visitors (10.0%). This distribution highlights Fruška Gora's position as a popular destination within the Western Balkans, with a significant portion of its international visitors coming from nearby countries.

Factor analysis was used to separate four factors/variables. The study analyzed the data from both Fruška Gora and Tuscany together as a single dataset. Tourists were offered a set of 20 variables that had to be answered on a five-point Likert scale: 1—Strongly Disagree, 2—Disagree, 3—Neutral, 4—Agree, 5—Strongly Agree. These variables were developed exclusively through expert consultations, supported by an extensive and detailed analysis of various literature that deals with the opinions of tourists in rural tourism contexts. The literature review provided valuable insights into the factors influencing tourist decisions, behaviors, and experiences, which were then refined through expert input. The selection process aimed to ensure that the variables comprehensively address key themes such as sustainability, digital engagement, and rural tourism experiences.

Factor analysis is used in this context to identify underlying dimensions (or factors) that explain the patterns of responses among the 20 variables included in the survey (Table 3). Instead of analyzing each variable separately, factor analysis groups related variables into broader constructs, making it easier to interpret the data and understand the key drivers of tourists' motivations and attitudes toward rural tourism.

$$X_i = \lambda_1 F_1 + \lambda_2 F_2 + \lambda_3 F_3 + \varepsilon_i$$

where X_i represents observed variables, λ represents factor loadings, F represents the extracted factors, and ε is the error term.

By performing factor analysis, the study was able to extract four distinct factors: **Organic Heritage**, **Authentic Comfort**, **Authentic Flavors** and **Warm Farmstead**, that were consistent across both regions. This suggests that the key motivations of tourists in both destinations are largely similar, reflecting the experiential and emotional appeal of farm stays, agricultural engagement, and community interactions. These factors help explain the main themes influencing tourists' experiences and preferences in rural tourism, guiding both tourism providers and policymakers in enhancing rural tourism offerings. The use of a Likert scale ensures that responses capture varying degrees of agreement, allowing for a nuanced understanding of tourist perceptions.

The "**Organic Heritage**" factor encapsulates the profound relationship among food, sustainability, and cultural identity within the realm of rural tourism. Accommodations that present organic, locally sourced meals and facilitate engagement with traditional culinary practices attract visitors who prioritize authenticity. By offering organic food selections, hands-on cooking experiences, and acknowledging the significance of food in rural existence, travelers cultivate a deeper appreciation for the local lifestyle. This aspect underscores the importance of food not only in elevating the quality of a rural experience but also in safeguarding and promoting the traditions that characterize these destinations.

The "**Authentic Comfort**" factor highlights the importance of emotional and social connections in rural tourism. Travelers are drawn to rural destinations not only for their natural beauty but also for the opportunity to engage with local life, experience heartfelt hospitality, and enjoy a warm, cozy atmosphere. By participating in rural activities, forming bonds with hosts, and embracing the peaceful charm of village accommodations, visitors develop a lasting appreciation for the authenticity and comfort that define rural tourism. This factor underscores the idea that true rural experiences go beyond sightseeing; they create meaningful connections and a sense of home away from home.

The "**Authentic Flavors**" factor emphasizes the significance of traditional food in rural tourism, reinforcing the idea that culinary heritage is a vital part of a region's identity. Visitors who seek authenticity are drawn to destinations where they can taste local dishes, participate in cooking experiences, and explore the deep-rooted connection between food and culture. Rural accommodations that highlight these elements not only enhance the tourist experience but also contribute to the preservation and promotion of culinary traditions. Through flavors, rural tourism becomes a sensory journey that leaves a lasting impression on travelers, making their stay both delicious and meaningful.

The "**Warm Farmstead**" factor embodies the emotional and experiential significance associated with rural tourism. Individuals visiting rural farmsteads are motivated by more than just a place to stay; they seek a connection. They desire to engage with nature, comprehend the rhythms of agricultural life, and experience a sense of welcome and belonging within the rural community. A distinctive and enriching travel experience arises from the interplay of active involvement in farming activities, the serene comfort of rural accommodations, and the genuine hospitality offered by local hosts. Consequently, this factor underscores the critical roles of authenticity, comfort, and human connection in crafting a successful rural tourism experience, rendering it an attractive option for travelers in pursuit of relaxation, immersion, and personal growth.

Table 3. Variables used and statements.

Variable	Statement
v1. Organic stays	The rural accommodation offers fresh, organic food options.
v2. Traditional tastes	I appreciate the opportunity to taste local, traditional dishes during my stay in rural areas.
v3. Local flavors	The food provided in rural accommodations reflects the local culture and traditions.
v4. Rural experience	I believe that eating locally grown food is an important part of the rural experience.
v5. Cooking traditions	I enjoyed learning how to cook traditional dishes during my stay in rural accommodations.
v6. Culinary experiences	The opportunity to participate in cooking workshops or classes made my stay more memorable.
v7. Authentic cooking	I appreciate the hands-on experience of cooking traditional meals with local ingredients.
v8. Farm experience	I enjoyed participating in agricultural activities like working in the fields.
v9. Rural connection	The experience of working in the fields made me feel more connected to rural life.
v10. Authentic experience	The opportunity to work in the fields added to the authenticity of my rural experience.
v11. Animal interaction	The opportunity to work with or care for animals was an important part of my rural experience.
v12. Animal connection	I felt relaxed and connected to nature while spending time with animals.
v13. Rural immersion	The rural accommodation allowed me to experience life on a farm, including animal care.
v14. Welcoming hosts	The hosts in rural accommodations are welcoming and friendly.
v15. Personalized service	Rural hosts provide personalized attention to guests.
v16. Authentic hospitality	I prefer rural accommodations because of the warm and authentic hospitality.
v17. Genuine care	I feel that rural hosts genuinely care about my experience.
v18. Cozy atmosphere	Rural accommodations provide a cozy and homely atmosphere.
v19. Home feeling	Staying in rural accommodations makes me feel like I am at home.
v20. Relaxed comfort	I feel comfortable and relaxed in rural accommodations.

The second part of the study covered the relevant stakeholders of the villages of Fruška Gora and Tuscany. A total of 27 stakeholders from the area of Sremski Karlovci, Irig, and Vrdnik, as well as 31 stakeholders from the area of Pienza, Montalcino, and San Gimignano in Tuscany (owners of rural accommodation, wineries, and local tourist organizations), were examined using a face-to-face interview technique in order to obtain an answer to the question: why are some villages more visited than others, and why is tourism more developed in them?

At the end, the Pearson chi-square test was used. The objective was to determine whether tourists from different regions (Tuscany vs. Fruška Gora) perceive rural tourism experiences differently. The use of the Pearson chi-square test is important because it helps reveal whether tourist preferences, attitudes, and experiences differ based on their status as visitors to Tuscany or Fruška Gora. Understanding these differences is crucial for tourism development, as it allows stakeholders to tailor offerings to meet the specific expectations of different visitor groups. Responses exhibiting statistically significant differences are defined by a *p*-value of less than 0.05.

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$$

where O is the observed frequency and E is the expected frequency.

- In summary, the research design and methods applied at each stage are as follows:
- Literature Review and Theoretical Framework → Identifying key concepts: rural tourism, experiential tourism, community engagement, competitiveness of rural destinations → Method: Systematic Literature Review (SLR), Content Analysis.
- Selection of Case Study Locations → Choosing six rural villages—Sremski Karlovci, Irig, Vrdnik (Serbia), and Pienza, Montalcino, San Gimignano (Italy) → Method: Case Study Research, Purposive Sampling.
- Data Collection—Survey Design → Developing a structured questionnaire with 20 Likert-scale questions focusing on tourists’ motivations and experiences → Method: Survey Method, Questionnaire Design.

Fieldwork and Data Collection → Conducting surveys with 357 tourists and 58 key stakeholders (June–August 2024) → Method: Structured Interviews, On-Site Survey Research.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) → Identifying latent factors shaping tourist experiences (Organic Heritage, Authentic Comfort, Authentic Flavors, Warm Farmstead) → Method: Factor Analysis (EFA), Principal Component Analysis (PCA).

Pearson Chi-Square Test → Examining differences in tourist responses based on destination (Tuscany vs. Fruška Gora) → Method: Chi-Square Test of Independence.

Comparative Analysis of Local Communities → Comparing stakeholders' perspectives on tourism challenges, infrastructure, and development strategies → Method: Qualitative Thematic Analysis, Cross-Case Comparative Analysis.

Interpretation of Results and Discussion → Analyzing findings in the context of sustainable rural tourism and destination competitiveness → Method: Qualitative Content Analysis, Statistical Interpretation.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations → Providing strategic recommendations for sustainable rural tourism development in Serbia → Method: Policy Analysis, Strategic Development Framework.

Similarities of Rural Tourism in Fruška Gora and Tuscan Villages

Fruška Gora villages (Serbia) and Tuscan villages (Italy) share many similarities in landscape, cultural–historical heritage, wine tradition, and tourist potential. The villages of Sremski Karlovci, Irig, and Vrdnik in Fruška Gora, as well as Pienza, Montalcino, and San Gimignano in Tuscany, exude authenticity and represent precious examples of the harmony of nature and history. Both regions are recognizable by their wine tradition. Sremski Karlovci stands out as a historical center of viticulture in Serbia, known for bermet and top wines that have been produced here for centuries. Irig, as part of the Fruška Gora villages wine route, is home to numerous wineries that nurture traditional wine production methods, while Vrdnik offers a special experience of the taste of Fruška Gora villages with its wine cellars and local specialties. On the other hand, in Tuscan villages, Montalcino is proud of its famous Brunello di Montalcino, one of the most prestigious Italian wines, while San Gimignano produces Vernaccia di San Gimignano, a white wine that has a long history and is considered a symbol of quality (Abraben et al., 2017). Pienza, although more recognizable for its superior pecorino cheese, also belongs to a region rich in vineyards and wine traditions. The natural landscapes of Fruška Gora villages and Tuscan villages add to their similarity. Rolling hills covered with vineyards, orchards, and pastures give these areas a special charm. Both regions are characterized by rich vegetation, old village roads, and the isolation of houses scattered over spacious green areas, while the mild climate and fertile land enable the successful development of agriculture and viticulture.

The cultural–historical heritage of these villages testifies to centuries of rich history and the importance they had in their regions (Panić et al., 2024). Sremski Karlovci exudes baroque architecture and the spirit of past times, while numerous monasteries in Iriga, like those from the medieval period of Serbia, represent spiritual and historical monuments of exceptional importance. Vrdnik is recognizable by the Vrdnik tower, and the Vrdnik-Ravanica Monastery, places that bear witness to the stormy history of this region. Similarly, San Gimignano, with its famous towers and medieval architecture, portrays the spirit of the past, while Pienza, built as an ideal Renaissance city by Pope Pius II, fascinates with its urban harmony. Montalcino, with its 14th-century fortress and rich historical heritage, is another proof of the importance of these villages throughout the centuries.

In addition to rich history and tradition, both regions have strong tourist potential (Parišić et al., 2025; Chastain & Islar, 2024). Here, lovers of rural tourism, wine, and history find authentic country houses, small family hotels, and wineries that offer a unique experi-

ence of the local way of life (Nesto & Di Savino, 2016; Surla et al., 2025). Pedestrian and bicycle paths lead through areas filled with vineyards and historical sights (Bojović et al., 2024), offering visitors the opportunity to actively explore these regions (Festa et al., 2020).

All these similarities make the villages of Fruška Gora and Tuscany special places where past and present intertwine, and nature and culture come together in harmony. Their authenticity, tradition, and hospitality ensure their place among the most beautiful rural destinations in Europe, attracting visitors in search of relaxation, gastronomic delights, and unforgettable scenes of untouched nature (Ferrari et al., 2018; Borović et al., 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the factor analysis (Table 4) produced a model that classifies the variables into four distinct factors, which together account for 82.028% of the variance. Examination of Table 4 reveals that four factors exhibit an Eigenvalue greater than 1, indicating that the extracted factors are both adequate and sufficient.

Table 4. Total variance explained.

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4.467	29.779	29.779	2.608	17.390	17.390	3.317	22.111	22.111
2	3.252	21.677	51.456	2.986	19.906	37.295	3.267	21.780	43.891
3	2.808	18.718	70.174	3.374	22.494	59.789	2.681	17.871	61.762
4	1.778	11.854	82.028	2.655	17.697	77.486	2.359	15.724	77.486
5	0.861	5.739	87.767						
6	0.517	3.444	91.211						
7	0.378	2.523	93.734						
8	0.239	1.594	95.328						
9	0.173	1.152	96.479						
10	0.155	1.037	97.516						
11	0.127	0.844	98.360						
12	0.107	0.711	99.071						
13	0.059	0.395	99.466						
14	0.048	0.323	99.789						
15	0.032	0.211	100.000						

Table 5 shows the extracted factors. The factors singled out are Factor 1, Organic Heritage; Factor 2, Authentic Comfort; Factor 3, Authentic Flavors; and Factor 4, Warm Farmstead. The findings presented in this section were based solely on the *tourist survey* data, including the results from the factor analysis and the Pearson Chi-Square test. The stakeholder interview data, which provided an additional context on tourism development and local perceptions, are discussed separately in the following sections.

Table 5. Factor matrix.

	Factor			
	Organic Heritage	Authentic Comfort	Authentic Flavors	Warm Farmstead
Organic Stays	0.991	−0.127	0.009	0.002
Traditional Tastes	−0.134	0.124	0.850	−0.347
Welcoming Hosts	0.011	0.321	0.447	0.815
Cozy Atmosphere	0.269	0.886	−0.079	0.025
Culinary Experiences	0.737	−0.160	−0.062	−0.098
Authentic Cooking	−0.102	0.166	0.884	−0.391
Farm Experience	−0.063	0.342	0.416	0.702
Rural Connection	0.296	0.953	−0.029	−0.020
Local Flavors	−0.120	0.158	0.806	−0.362
Authentic Hospitality	0.322	0.856	0.006	−0.142
Rural experience	0.758	−0.041	0.030	−0.086
Relaxed Comfort	−0.056	0.335	0.396	0.797

The *Organic Heritage* factor signifies the profound relationship between traditional, locally sourced food and rural tourism. It underscores the significance of fresh, organic ingredients, immersive culinary experiences, and the understanding that food is a vital component of rural culture. Authenticity is highly valued by visitors to rural destinations, who often prioritize the availability of organic food, opportunities for cooking engagement, and the richer cultural significance of local cuisine. A key characteristic of rural accommodations is the provision of fresh, organic food options. Numerous travelers specifically select rural lodgings to savor locally cultivated, pesticide-free ingredients that embody the region's agricultural legacy. Consuming organic food transcends mere health advantages; it also encompasses sustainability and the support of local farmers, aligning with the ideals of responsible tourism. The availability of such offerings enhances the overall perception of rural accommodation as environmentally conscious and dedicated to upholding traditional farming practices. In addition to simply consuming organic food, numerous visitors value the opportunity to engage in culinary workshops or cooking classes. These endeavors offer an interactive approach to connecting with local customs, enabling tourists to explore regional recipes, techniques of preparation, and the cultural importance of cuisine. Utilizing local ingredients fosters a stronger connection between travelers and the rural way of life, enhancing the memorability and interactivity of their experiences. Such activities further emphasize that food transcends mere sustenance; it is a vital component of cultural identity and heritage. Moreover, the significance of consuming locally grown food as an integral part of the rural experience is paramount. For many travelers, cuisine serves as a distinguishing feature of a destination, influencing their sense of authenticity. Enjoying fresh, locally sourced dishes establishes a direct relationship with the land, its inhabitants, and the traditions that render rural tourism distinctive. This viewpoint aligns with a rising trend among travelers who aspire to have meaningful, immersive experiences rather than engage in passive consumption.

The *Authentic Comfort* factor encapsulates the emotional and experiential dimensions of rural tourism, fostering a sense of home for visitors within a natural and inviting setting. It underscores the significance of a robust connection to rural life, heartfelt hospitality, and a snug ambiance, all of which contribute to a rewarding and unforgettable experience. In contrast to traditional tourism offerings, rural accommodations provide an intimate and immersive environment, allowing travelers to engage personally with both the destination and its inhabitants. A pivotal element of this factor is the connection to rural life facilitated through participation in agricultural endeavors. Numerous visitors value the chance to assist in fieldwork, partake in farming activities, or observe traditional rural customs. Such hands-on experiences forge a connection between travelers and the rural landscape, transforming them into active participants rather than mere spectators. By engaging in the daily routines of farm life, visitors cultivate a profound appreciation for the labor and customs that characterize rural communities, emphasizing that rural tourism encompasses not only relaxation but also cultural involvement. Another defining characteristic of authentic comfort in rural accommodations is the warm and genuine hospitality provided by hosts. Many travelers prefer rural stays precisely because of the friendliness and sincerity of the people who welcome them. Unlike impersonal hotel services, rural hospitality is characterized by personal connections, shared meals, and meaningful conversations. Visitors often feel like guests in a family home rather than customers in a business, which adds to the overall sense of belonging and emotional warmth. This element of personal care and attention is a crucial reason why many tourists repeatedly choose rural accommodation over mainstream options. Additionally, rural stays are often associated with a cozy and homely atmosphere that enhances relaxation and well-being. Whether it is a charming countryside cottage, a traditional farmhouse, or a small family-run inn, rural accommodations provide a sense of

comfort that is deeply rooted in simplicity and authenticity. The peaceful surroundings, natural beauty, and rustic interiors contribute to an environment where visitors can unwind and escape the stress of urban life. This cozy and welcoming setting makes rural tourism not only a travel experience but also an emotional retreat.

The *Authentic Flavors* factor underscores the vital significance of traditional cuisine in shaping experiences within rural tourism. It emphasizes the contributions of local dishes, interactive cooking experiences, and the profound link between food and culture to a traveler's perception of authenticity. For numerous visitors, the culinary offerings of a destination hold equal importance to its landscapes, history, and hospitality. Through culinary experiences, rural accommodations present a direct and immersive avenue to engage with local traditions and heritage. A fundamental aspect of this element is the opportunity to savor traditional dishes prepared locally. Many travelers are attracted to rural locales precisely because they provide an authentic and non-commercialized gastronomic experience. Meals that are traditionally made, often utilizing family recipes handed down through generations, embody the cultural identity of their respective regions. Visitors value the opportunity to relish homemade specialties that are typically absent from urban dining establishments or large resorts. These culinary encounters foster a more profound sense of place, enabling travelers to connect with rural life through their sensory experiences. In addition to merely enjoying traditional cuisine, a significant number of visitors appreciate the opportunity to engage in cooking with local ingredients. Through hands-on cooking workshops led by local hosts, travelers are afforded the chance to actively participate in meal preparation while gaining insights into the ingredients, techniques, and historical context of each dish. This interactive format fosters a deeper cultural exchange between tourists and their hosts, rendering the experience both more meaningful and memorable. By engaging in food preparation, visitors develop a heightened appreciation for the skill and effort that characterize traditional cooking, thereby strengthening their connection to the local way of life. Furthermore, the flavors offered by rural accommodation serve as a direct representation of local culture and traditions. Food is a vital component of a region's identity, and in the context of rural tourism, it functions as a conduit between visitors and the community's heritage. Whether it involves fresh dairy from a village's farm, homemade bread produced in a wood-fired oven, or regional specialties crafted from seasonal ingredients, each meal narrates a story about the destination's history, climate, and agricultural practices. This relationship between food and culture enriches the authenticity of the travel experience, transforming it from a mere stay into a journey through taste.

The *Warm Farmstead* factor encapsulates the comprehensive experience associated with rural tourism, wherein visitors develop a profound connection to both the natural surroundings and the individuals they meet. This experience is typically defined by three essential elements: engagement in agricultural activities, the serene comfort of rural accommodations, and the genuine hospitality of the hosts. Central to the rural tourism experience is the chance to participate in agricultural endeavors. Numerous tourists opt to explore rural locales not solely for relaxation but also to engage in hands-on experiences such as working in fields or caring for farm animals. These activities offer a distinctive and authentic encounter, enabling visitors to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the lifestyle of farming. Physical engagement in these tasks nurtures a sense of achievement and a bond with the land, thereby enhancing the overall experience and providing tourists with a more significant comprehension of rural existence. Beyond the agricultural pursuits, the allure of the "Warm Farmstead" experience is significantly enhanced by the comfort and relaxation provided by rural accommodations. Typically situated in serene and picturesque locales, these accommodations offer a peaceful retreat where visitors can momentarily escape the pressures of urban life. Whether it be a quaint farmhouse, a cozy cottage, or a modest

rural guesthouse, each setting is thoughtfully designed to foster relaxation and comfort. The tranquil environment, coupled with fresh air and the beauty of nature, instills a sense of serenity, enabling guests to rejuvenate and disconnect from the hectic pace of daily living. Equally crucial to this experience is the role of hospitable hosts, who are often more personable and engaging compared to their urban counterparts. Their warmth, friendliness, and hospitality create an atmosphere that makes visitors feel at home and integrated into the local community. Whether through offering recommendations on nearby attractions, sharing a meal, or engaging in friendly conversation, the hosts' dedication to ensuring guests feel welcomed significantly enhances the overall experience of warmth and comfort.

The findings presented in Table 6 demonstrate that no factor exhibits a statistically significant difference based on the status of visitors to either Tuscany or the villages of Fruška Gora. However, some variables exhibit marginal significance, suggesting potential differences in tourist preferences: Authentic cooking ($p = 0.062$) and cozy atmosphere ($p = 0.051$) are close to the conventional significance threshold, indicating that tourists in Fruška Gora and Tuscany may have slightly different attitudes toward home-cooked meals and the comfort of rural accommodations. Rural connection ($p = 0.006$) also falls into the marginal category, implying a possible variation in how tourists from each village perceive their connection to the rural environment. For the remaining variables, including organic stays ($p = 0.25$), traditional tastes ($p = 0.213$), local flavors ($p = 0.930$), farm experience ($p = 0.460$), and welcoming hosts ($p = 0.338$), no significant differences were found. This suggests that, overall, tourists in both destinations have similar experiences and preferences regarding these aspects of rural tourism.

Table 6. Pearson chi-square according to the stay villages (Fruška Gora and Tuscany).

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-Sided)
Organic Stays	11.135	4	0.025
Traditional Tastes	5.817	4	0.213
Local Flavors	0.862	4	0.930
Rural Experience	3.048	4	0.550
Culinary Experiences	5.876	4	0.209
Authentic Cooking	8.981	4	0.062
Farm Experience	3.622	4	0.460
Rural Connection	14.511	4	0.006
Welcoming Hosts	4.540	4	0.338
Authentic Hospitality	5.559	4	0.235
Cozy Atmosphere	9.457	4	0.051
Relaxed Comfort	2.307	4	0.679

By extracting these four factors, the motives that are primary when making decisions about where to stay when it comes to rural tourism have been determined. That is, what are the needs that tourists try to satisfy by choosing rural accommodation and rural tourism facilities? Therefore, the initial hypothesis of the study, H, that the motives and needs that attract tourists to rural destinations are universal, was confirmed.

Given that the initial hypothesis was confirmed, it was necessary to find an answer to the question: Why are some villages more visited than others, and why is tourism more developed in them? Stakeholder responses can be key to understanding the differences in the development of rural tourism between Fruška Gora and Tuscany.

In this section, the findings from *stakeholder interviews* in Fruška Gora (Serbia) and Tuscany (Italy) are presented, focusing on the main themes identified through qualitative analysis. These themes include Infrastructure and Investments, Tourist Offer and Diversification of Contents, Promotion and Recognition on the International Market, Profile of Tourists and Consumer Habits, and Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement.

- Infrastructure and Investments: As illustrated in Figure A1 (see Appendix A), one of the most notable contrasts between the two regions lies in the extent of infrastructure development. Tuscan villages enjoy a well-established road network and an effective public transportation system, facilitating easy access to its rural areas. This infrastructure makes Tuscany a more appealing destination for tourists, particularly those with higher budgets who anticipate comfortable travel conditions. Conversely, Fruška Gora villages face challenges due to poor road conditions, especially in rural areas where pathways are often unpaved or inadequately maintained. Adverse weather conditions further exacerbate these access issues. Additionally, limited internet connectivity in some villages hampers online booking systems and promotional efforts, diminishing the destination's attractiveness to tech-savvy travelers who rely on digital services. This confirms the positive impact of infrastructure development on tourism competitiveness.
- Tourist Offer and Diversification of Contents: Tuscan villages provide a rich and varied rural tourism experience that encompasses more than just nature-oriented activities. Visitors have the opportunity to discover monasteries, partake in traditional cultural events, wander through historic villages, and engage with ethnic households, thus ensuring a comprehensive experience that appeals to a wide array of interests. Crucially, there exists robust collaboration among tourism stakeholders, which aids in unifying the tourism offerings and enhancing competitiveness. In contrast, Fruška Gora villages present a more limited range of tourism options, predominantly centered around vineyards, traditional farms, and natural scenery. Although there is interest in expanding experiences to include wellness tourism, guided nature excursions, and traditional craft workshops, the region is hindered by insufficient resources for developing these additional offerings. Without investment in diversification, Fruška Gora villages continue to appear less appealing when compared to destinations such as Tuscany, where tourists can participate in a broader variety of activities.
- Promotion and Recognition on the International Market: Tuscan villages benefit from significant international visibility, bolstered by extensive marketing initiatives, including global tourism campaigns, promotions by travel agencies, and online platforms such as Airbnb. The region is frequently featured in travel guides and social media, ensuring a high level of recognition among international travelers. Conversely, Fruška Gora villages suffer from a lack of substantial international promotion and remain largely reliant on regional tourism. Although initiatives such as tourism fairs and social media engagement are undertaken, these measures fall short of positioning Fruška Gora villages as prominent rural tourism destinations in the global marketplace. Without focused international promotion, Fruška Gora may continue to be overshadowed by more well-established areas like Tuscany.
- Profile of Tourists and Consumer Habits: As illustrated in Figure A2 (see Appendix A), the villages of Tuscany draw an international audience, with many visitors opting for extended stays. Tourists tend to allocate more funds towards luxury accommodation, wine tourism, and specialized services as they pursue a high-end, immersive rural experience that significantly bolsters the local economy. Conversely, Fruška Gora villages mainly attract visitors from domestic and regional areas. The average duration of their stay is shorter, generally spanning two to three nights, and expenditure on

accommodation and activities is comparatively lower. Although some tourists partake in wine tours and local farm products, there is minimal demand for additional services such as wellness offerings or guided tours. The primary distinction between the two regions lies in their target demographics; Tuscan villages appeal to a wealthy international market willing to invest in premium experiences, whereas Fruška Gora villages depend on regional tourists with limited spending capacity, resulting in a more budget-oriented tourism model.

- Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement: The obstacles encountered by these two rural tourism destinations are not the same. Fruška Gora villages face several issues, including a shortage of specialized personnel, inadequate infrastructure, limited tourism throughout the year, weak international marketing efforts, and insufficient collaboration with local farmers. In contrast, Tuscany faces the challenge of balancing high tourist volumes with the preservation of local culture and environment. While Fruška Gora struggles with poor road conditions and insufficient investment in global marketing, Tuscany’s main focus is on managing tourism pressures and ensuring sustainability.

The stakeholder quotes included in this section reflect the diverse perspectives gathered from interviews in both regions (Table 7). Positive and negative aspects were identified based on the specific challenges and opportunities reported by local actors, providing a balanced view of the current state of rural tourism in Fruška Gora and Tuscany. All of this actually answered the question: why are some villages more visited than others, and why is tourism more developed in them? The villages of Tuscany are more visited and touristically developed than those of Fruška Gora due to better infrastructure, a more diverse offering, stronger international promotion, and a higher influx of wealthier tourists who stay longer and spend more. In contrast, Fruška Gora faces infrastructure challenges, a limited range of offerings, weak international visibility, and seasonal tourism, which reduces its competitiveness.

Table 7. Comparison of rural tourism characteristics: Fruška Gora vs. Tuscany.

Theme	Fruška Gora	Tuscany
Infrastructure	Poor road conditions, limited public transport	Well-developed infrastructure, extensive public transport
Tourist Offer	Focused on wine tours, lacks diversity	Diverse, including wine tours, cultural events, and active tourism
Promotion	Low international recognition	Strong global brand, extensive marketing networks
Tourist Profile	Shorter stays, lower spending	Longer stays, higher spending
Challenges	Limited cooperation, poor marketing	High tourist volumes, sustainability pressures

5. Conclusions

Rural tourism has seen significant growth as travelers seek to escape urban life, drawn by the unique cultural experiences that rural areas offer. Tourists are increasingly valuing authenticity, engaging in local customs, and participating in traditional practices, which foster a deeper connection with the host community. The paper explores the motivations behind tourists’ choices for rural accommodations, highlighting that these motivations are universal, yet some rural areas attract more visitors than others. A comparative analysis of Fruška Gora villages in Serbia and Tuscany in Italy reveals stark differences in tourist traffic, with Tuscany drawing millions annually compared to Fruška Gora’s 100,000 visitors.

The factor analysis identified four key factors that influence tourist preferences in rural tourism, accounting for 82.028% of the variance. These factors are Organic Heritage, Authentic Comfort, Authentic Flavors, and Warm Farmstead. The Organic Heritage factor highlights the importance of locally sourced, organic food in rural tourism, emphasizing the cultural significance of cuisine and the desire for immersive culinary experiences. Authentic Comfort focuses on the emotional connection visitors feel in rural settings, characterized by

warm hospitality and a cozy atmosphere that fosters a sense of belonging. The Authentic Flavors factor underscores the role of traditional cuisine in shaping the travel experience, with visitors valuing the opportunity to engage in cooking and savoring local dishes. The Warm Farmstead factor encapsulates the holistic experience of rural tourism, where tourists engage in agricultural activities and enjoy the serene comfort of rural accommodations. The study confirmed that the motives for attracting tourists to rural destinations are largely universal, reflecting a shared desire for authentic and meaningful experiences.

The disparities in rural tourism development between the villages of Fruška Gora and Tuscany can be attributed to several key indicators. Firstly, Tuscany benefits from advanced infrastructure, including a well-established road network and public transportation, making it more accessible to tourists, particularly those with higher budgets. In contrast, Fruška Gora struggles with poor road conditions and limited internet connectivity, which hampers its attractiveness to tech-savvy travelers. Secondly, Tuscany offers a diverse range of tourism experiences, including cultural events and historical sites, while Fruška Gora's offerings are primarily centered around vineyards and natural scenery, limiting its appeal. Additionally, Tuscany enjoys significant international visibility through extensive marketing efforts, whereas Fruška Gora lacks substantial promotion and relies mainly on regional tourism. The target demographics also differ, with Tuscany attracting wealthier international tourists who spend more and stay longer, while Fruška Gora primarily draws domestic visitors seeking budget-friendly options. Furthermore, Fruška Gora faces challenges such as a shortage of specialized personnel and weak collaboration with local farmers, which hinder its competitiveness. Ultimately, the combination of better infrastructure, diverse offerings, strong international promotion, and a wealthier tourist base contributes to Tuscany's greater success in rural tourism compared to Fruška Gora.

These answers can be used to confirm the differences in the development of rural tourism between Fruška Gora and Tuscany. Key differences include the development of the infrastructure, the diversity of the tourist offer, the recognition of the destination at the international level, as well as the differences in the spending habits of tourists. Also, stakeholder responses can help in the identification of key areas for improvement in Fruška Gora, such as investments in infrastructure, content diversification, and stronger promotion on the global market.

While this study provides valuable insights into the motivations and perspectives of tourists and stakeholders in the villages of Fruška Gora and Tuscany, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample of tourists (357) was determined based on the academic construct proposed by [Ahmed \(2024\)](#), while the sample of stakeholders (58) was selected through expert consultations and practical considerations. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives within the broader population, potentially affecting the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the use of face-to-face interviews with stakeholders, while providing in-depth qualitative insights, may introduce an element of subjective bias. Future studies could benefit from larger, more diverse samples and a more structured sampling approach to strengthen the robustness and external validity of the findings.

Practical Implications

The results of this study present numerous practical implications for enhancing rural tourism development, especially in areas like Fruška Gora that are trailing behind more established rural destinations, such as Tuscany. A significant aspect that requires enhancement is the development of infrastructure. By improving road networks and public transportation systems, accessibility for both domestic and international visitors can be greatly increased. Furthermore, the expansion of digital infrastructure, particularly in terms

of enhanced internet connectivity, is essential for appealing to tech-savvy travelers who depend on digital resources for planning their trips and enriching their experiences.

An additional significant element is the diversification of tourism offerings. Although Fruška Gora is recognized for its vineyards and scenic landscapes, enhancing its tourism attractiveness by incorporating cultural festivals, historical tours, and adventure tourism has the potential to draw a wider array of visitors. Furthermore, interactive experiences, including cooking workshops, artisanal crafts, and guided farm activities, can enhance visitor engagement and render the destination more enticing. To elevate Fruška Gora's profile in the global marketplace, it is essential to enhance its destination marketing and branding. Increasing international promotional initiatives through digital marketing strategies, collaborations with travel influencers, and alliances with global tour operators can significantly enhance its visibility. By positioning Fruška Gora as an authentic, cost-effective, and sustainable alternative to Tuscany, it may successfully draw the interest of a niche market comprising environmentally conscious travelers.

Enhancing stakeholder collaboration and capacity building is equally vital. Implementing training initiatives for local tourism operators, farmers, and hospitality personnel can elevate service quality and increase visitor satisfaction. Moreover, promoting stronger partnerships among tourism stakeholders—such as local governments, businesses, and agricultural communities—can drive innovation and bolster the competitiveness of rural tourism. Ultimately, focusing on tourists with higher spending capacities can yield enhanced economic advantages. The creation of premium tourism offerings, including boutique rural lodgings and exclusive farm-to-table experiences, has the potential to draw wealthier international travelers. By adopting sustainable tourism frameworks that prioritize authenticity and responsible travel practices, destinations can cater to the preferences of high-value tourists while simultaneously safeguarding their cultural and environmental integrity. By focusing on these aspects, Fruška Gora can bolster its rural tourism attractiveness, increase its competitiveness, and produce enduring economic advantages for the surrounding communities.

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Data Availability Statement: The aggregated data analyzed in this study are available from the corresponding author(s) upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

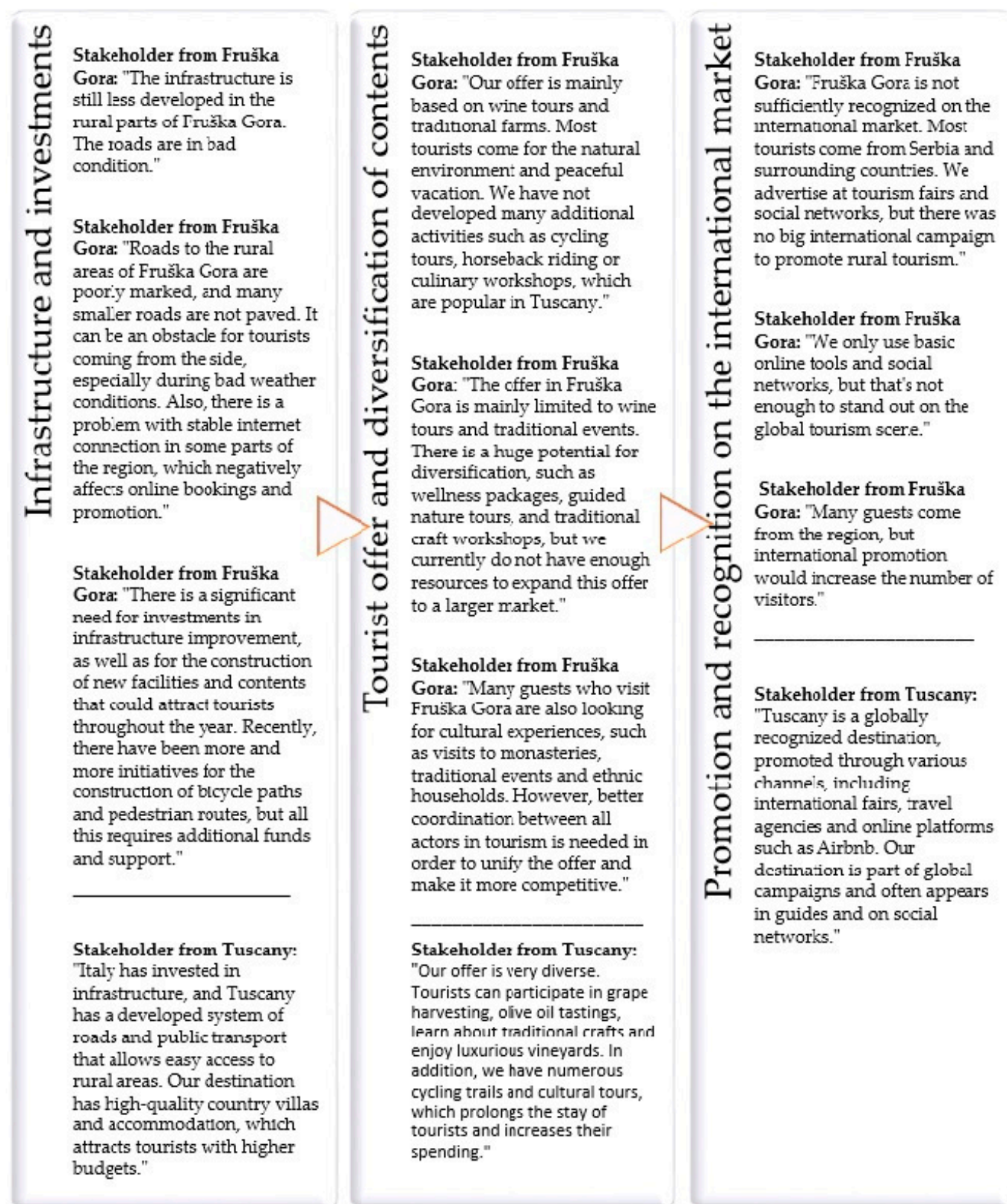


Figure A1. Comparative analysis of rural tourism development: Fruška Gora villages vs. Tuscan villages.

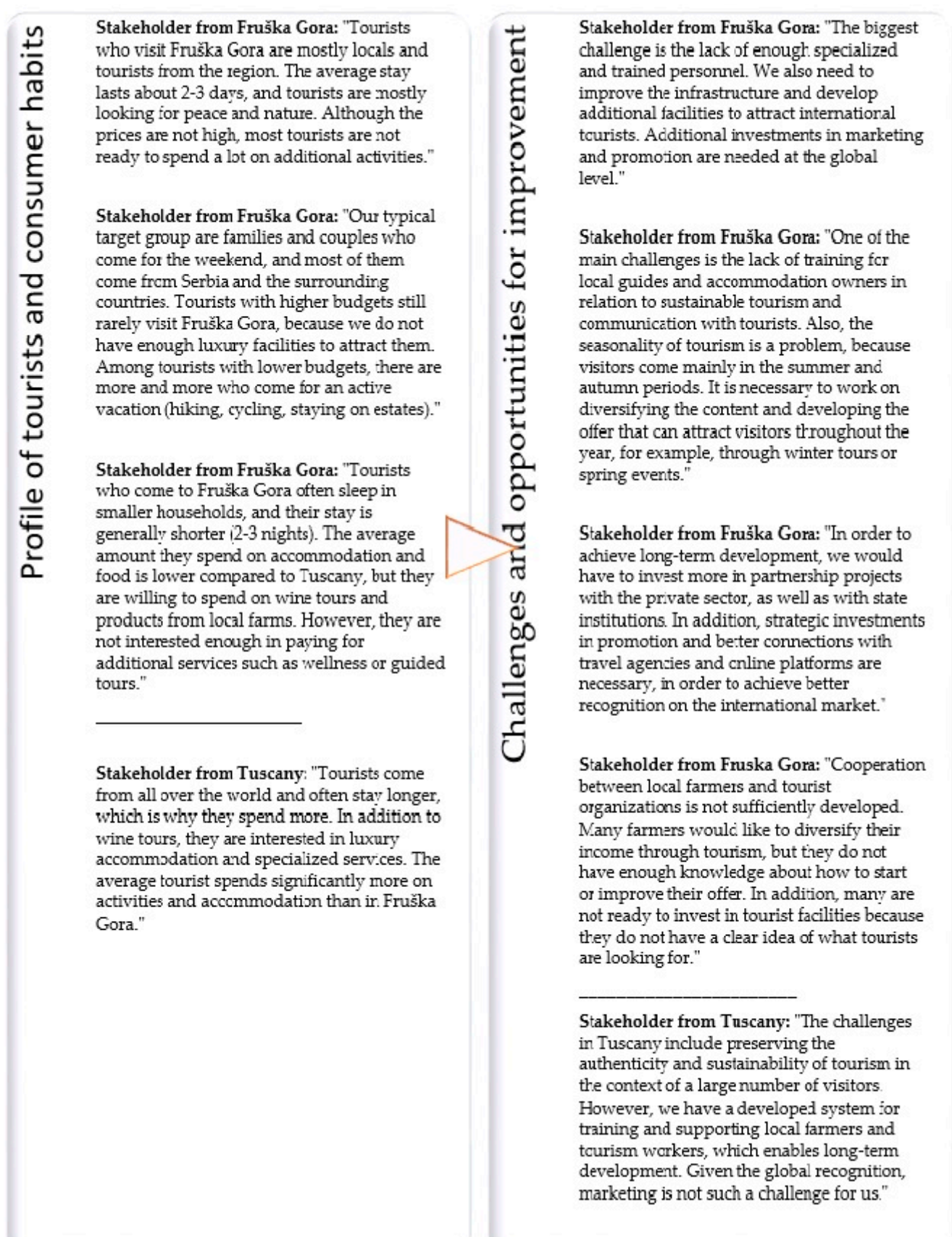


Figure A2. Challenges and opportunities in rural tourism: a comparison of Fruška Gora villages and Tuscan villages.

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