

COVID-19 as an incentive for the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia

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THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY



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6TH INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC AND PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCE
The Challenges of Today

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Conference in partnership with: The Institute of Economics, Zagreb;
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COVID-19 as an incentive for the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia

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Rural tourism, as a specific form of tourism, is experiencing an increasing demand worldwide. Reasons for this refer to the growing environmental awareness and demand for sustainable forms of tourism over time, the need to escape from the hectic everyday life, the desire of man to return to traditional values. The viral pandemic COVID-19 has additionally encouraged tourists to seek out destinations that can provide them with the above elements, and this fact reflects the possibility of strengthening the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia. It is common knowledge that tourism from Continental Croatia is poorly developed in relation to tourism in the area of Coastal Croatia. However, mass tourism is experiencing large losses. Therefore, by valorizing resources in rural areas of the Croatian continent, strengthening marketing activities through regional and national tourism institutions, and bringing together stakeholders and all other relevant actors, it is necessary to diversify and adapt the national tourism offer to the current tourism needs, which are directly related to the impact of the COVID-19 virus pandemic. Accordingly, the paper was prepared to determine the possibility of improving the development of rural tourism in Continental Croatia due to the COVID-19 virus pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether and to what extent COVID -19 can promote the development of rural tourism from the perspective of Generation Y. The methodology of the paper refers to the use of secondary and primary data sources. Secondary data includes the review of recent professional and scientific literature and its analysis by the rules of the academic community. At the empirical level, to examine and analyze the attitudes and preferences of younger generations of tourism consumers towards travel to rural tourism destinations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, research will be conducted on an appropriate sample. The research instrument will be a survey, and the collected data will be analyzed using standard scientific methods.

Keywords: rural tourism, rural development, COVID-19 pandemic, rural tourist destination

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID -19 virus pandemic has had a significant impact on the global economy. Levy Yeyati and Filippini (2021) state that "the COVID-19 global recession is the deepest since the end of World War II". Many businesses have found themselves on the verge of collapse, and some have managed to adapt to the current situation and continue doing business in other ways. With the help of online tools, most shops and businesses have managed to at least partially maintain the level of business they had before the pandemic. The tourism industry, by its very nature, was not able to adapt to the situation, and besides the huge financial losses, tourism was considered one of the main contributors to the spread of the pandemic. Also, tourism was declared as one of the most affected sectors (Almeida, Mesquita and Carvalho, 2022). To limit the spread of the virus, most countries took drastic measures by closing borders and restricting movement in general (postpone airline's services etc.) (Rahman et al., 2021). All of this had a detrimental effect on tourism, which almost came to a complete halt. Many desti-

nations were forced to cease business and tourists cancelled their reservations, and all of the above have influenced the tourist perception during and after pandemic (Kusumaningrum and Wachyuni, 2020).

However, major changes in living conditions have also affected changes in travel. New tourism trends have emerged in the past year. Technology is being incorporated more and more into the tourist experience, partly due to the fact that most tourists do their work remotely. Health is one of the most common travel motivations, and tourists increasingly want to travel to unexplored and remote destinations. Most of them seek for responsible or ecological tourism (Sasu and Epuran, 2016). This reflects the opportunity for rural destinations and rural development in general.

Rural destinations in the Republic of Croatia have great potential to take advantage of current and future trends. They are places with distinct cultural identity, located in relatively remote areas, away from urban hustle and bustle, with little or no influx of visitors. Moreover, such areas are rich in natural values, with most settlements located in the vicinity or near protected areas of nature. The paper presents the main characteristics of rural tourism and its position during the pandemic. The empirical research has studied the age group, with their tourism trends and needs to save tourism worldwide.

2. THE TERMINOLOGY OF RURAL TOURISM

The terminology of rural tourism is still used inconsistently and unprofessionally in the academic, institutional and professional space of the Republic of Croatia. Therefore, according to the rules of the profession, it is necessary to define the term rural tourism, with the aim of making a terminological distinction between numerous terms that unjustifiably serve as terminological substitutes. Tubić (2019) clarifies that there is no universally accepted definition of rural tourism in the world, which is confirmed by a cross-section of 25 relevant definitions of international and national authors, analyzed on the basis of five dimensions (characteristic, purpose of visit, attractions, scope, sustainability).

Rural tourism is a complex multidimensional activity. It does not only refer to tourism on farms, but also includes staying on them. In addition, it includes special forms of tourism such as ecotourism and other related forms of tourism based on nature, hiking, climbing, horseback riding, hunting and fishing, education, art, culture, adventure, health and sports tourism (Tubić, 2019). According to the Council of Europe definition, rural tourism is tourism that includes all activities in a rural area (Tubić, 2019, after Council of Europe, 1986). The basis for the provision of tourism services is a clean and preserved environment and various opportunities for active participation in the daily activities of the local population (Vukonić and Čavlek, 2001), but also art, culture, tradition, customs and heritage of rural tourism destinations (Pröbstl Haider, Melzer and Jircka, 2014). Tubić (2019) cites as a basic definition of rural tourism the one presented by the OECD in 1994, which reads, "Rural tourism is initially located in rural areas and is primarily in the function of agriculture. It is firmly rooted in the agricultural world, with the special characteristics of open space, contact with nature, rural heritage and society. Rural tourism must be consistent with the environment and the social community in which it takes place. The community numbers less than 10,000 people and includes farms in this area. The focus of rural tourism is on a range of sustainable businesses and the community within the rural area. The goal of rural tourism is to ensure the long-term sustainability of life in the developing region; it must be a force for the preservation of rurality, not a force for urbanization" (Tubić, 2019, 88-89 according to the OECD, 1994, 34-35). It is travel to places located in a rural environment or an

environment outside cities and tourist centers, with the specific aim of participating in non-urban activities (Personen et al., 2011).

Rural tourism is often used as a strategy for rural development. The positive aspect of such development is associated with job creation and economic development (Mitchell and Hall, 2005, after Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Fleischer and Felsenstien, 2000; Roberts and Hall, 2001). Gunn (1988) points out that the development of tourism parallels the development of five components: tourist attractions and events, tourism promotion (including marketing strategies), tourism infrastructure and overbuilding superstructure, provision of information and services to visitors, and hospitality. According to these components, tourism is developing in the right direction, but in rural tourism it is important to pay attention to additional elements related to the well-being of the local community, such as the preservation of identity and quality of life (Robinson and Murray, 2017). Active holidays, the desire to learn and a close contact with the way of life in rural areas, as the primary motives for coming, eventually turn into social and economic benefits for the local community (Tubić, 2019). Rural tourism contributes to the revitalization of the local economy and improves the quality of life, can be an additional income for farms that are mainly engaged in agriculture, opens opportunities for new social contacts, provides an opportunity to enhance cultural, historical and natural attractions, etc. (Hall, et al., 2003). This is because tourism is an industry that is highly dependent on external conditions, such as political stability, continued economic growth, peaceable conditions, and good health for travel. Tourism is also the most liberal industry because it allows people to travel without restrictions (Keller, 2020), therefore it has been considered as a sector that spreads the pandemic. The World Tourism Organization states that there were 1.4 billion arrivals worldwide in 2019, and the main destinations were France, Spain, China, the United States, and Italy, which are the countries where the pandemic occurred first and most severely (Vaishar and Štastná, 2020). Thus, on the one hand, it is extremely vulnerable to crises in the environment, and on the other hand, it can be the creator of them (Keller, 2020).

With the outbreak of the COVID -19 virus pandemic, tourism is encountering numerous problems and obstacles. Although it is not the only industry affected by the crisis, it was predicted since the beginning of the pandemic that it would be the industry that would suffer the greatest drop in profits. Accordingly, the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC) stated that that COVID-19 will cause the global tourism industry a huge loss that amounts to a minimum of 22 billion dollars (Zhu and Deng, 2020). At the COVID-19 pandemic, products and services of specific forms of tourism, especially those developing and taking place in rural areas, are becoming more and more popular, which is somewhat expected from the epidemiological level. Impaired overall security, health care, tourists "escaping" from urban centers, social dislocation, market postulates, and laws, and changed perceptions and consumer characteristics of modern tourists have increased demand for specific rural tourist forms (Tubić et al., 2022: 1001).

3. COVID-19 AS AN INCENTIVE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM

Despite the fact that tourism is suspended or restricted in most countries, the current situation in the global market may present an opportunity for rural tourism. Due to their characteristics, such as remoteness, lower concentration of tourists and natural resources, rural destinations can receive tourists even during a pandemic. Galvani, Lew, and Sotelo Perez (2020) predict that a pandemic will cause a growing number of people, businesses, and governments to adopt new ways of thinking, behaving, and acting that are more focused on sustainable development.

As Macchiavelli (2020) notes, tourist travel during a pandemic will predominantly focus on domestic tourism and on lesser known and less frequented destinations. The same is stated by Jeon and Yang (2021), who emphasize the development of various tourism activities and the use of untack-based tourism services in addition to unexplored destinations. There has also been an increase in the number of visits to second homes in rural areas. Holiday/vacation homes, summer houses, cottages or weekend homes (Hall and Muller, 2004) are generally used for a limited period of time and for recreational purposes. However, their use is not limited to owners; many tourists also choose to rent this type of accommodation (Flognfeldt and Tjørve, 2003). Currently, a large number of residents of larger cities spend their time in their own or rented houses in the countryside to avoid densely populated areas for as long as possible, as many companies practice working from home (Zogal et al., 2020). There are many holiday/vacation houses in the rural areas of the Republic of Croatia, and a large number of them have been used for tourist purposes. The restrictions caused by the pandemic will affect the behavior of tourists once the borders are open and travel is possible. For this reason, an increase in visits to friends and relatives is predicted, especially when it comes to international travel (Senbento and Hon, 2020). Accordingly, the Republic of Croatia expects a greater influx of tourists with such motives. The benefits of such visits to the destination are numerous, and one of the most important is the fact that tourists, in addition to their relatives, also visit tourist attractions on the way to the destination and during their stay there. The Republic of Croatia has the opportunity to use the tourism potential of rural areas, but also to review strategic opportunities for tourism development. In recent years, the number of tourists has increased significantly, which is why some destinations have faced certain negative aspects. The COVID -19 virus pandemic also showed the overdependence of the Croatian economy on tourism (Čorak et al., 2020).

Travel by younger generations is also one of the new trends in travel and is seen as an important segment for the recovery of the tourism industry, as this generational group is expected to play a major role in the revival of tourism. Generation Y, represent the people born between 1980 and 2002. This generation is focused on family, friendship, digital culture, enjoyment of life, and entertainment (Benckendorff et al., 2010). This generation is characterized by the highest level of education and information. They are familiar with all new technologies such as laptops, mobile phones and other gadgets (Kane, 2019). They are optimistic, ambitious, confident, creative and focused on achievements. They are also fast starters who have high expectations for the future (Gratton, 2013). When it comes to travel-related habits, Millennials travel more frequently than other generations and prefer international travel the most (Richards and Wilson, 2006). Although most have low or average incomes, they are willing to stay longer at a destination and spend most of their money on travel. They visit new, unexplored destinations where they want to learn about new cultures, volunteer, gain new experiences, experience the local culture, and meet the local people (Benckendorff et al., 2010). Moreover, this age group is extremely environmentally conscious. Kozlova (2014) points out that members of Generation Y are concerned about air, water and global warming. Such an attitude is also reflected in their tourism motives and habits, which include increasingly frequent trips to rural and natural destinations.

4. METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted during March 2021 on a convenient sample of 211 respondents via an online survey. The online survey was created using the Google Forms tool. The survey targeted younger generations of tourism consumers, i.e., respondents aged 18 to 40 years,

to explore their preferences regarding travel to rural tourism destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and future plans and motivations regarding travel after the COVID -19 pandemic. This age group was selected in accordance with predictions related to future travel trends. Generation Y are considered to be the generation that will restart tourist travel after the pandemic. The survey was anonymous and conducted by the authors of the paper.

The survey questionnaire used closed-ended questions, referring to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and travel to rural tourist destinations during and after the COVID-19 virus pandemic.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study involved 211 respondents, of whom 120 were women and 91 were men. The largest number of respondents belongs to the age group between 23 and 28 years, namely 40.8%. When it comes to education, most of the respondents have completed high school. More than half of the respondents are employed (Table 1).

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents

Features		F	%
Gender	Female	120	56,9
	Male	91	43,1
Age	18-22	51	24,2
	23-28	86	40,8
	29-34	46	21,8
	35-40	28	13,3
Education level	None	1	0,5
	Elementary school	0	0
	High school	77	36,5
	Gymnasium	19	9,0
	Undergraduate or specialist graduate professional study	46	21,8
	College	45	21,3
Employment	MSc, PhD	23	10,9
	Unemployed	28	13,3
	Employed	129	61,1
	Student	54	25,6

Source: Authors, according to the conducted research

Having identified the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, the part of the survey relating to travel to rural tourist destinations during the COVID -19 virus pandemic follows. More than half of the respondents, 128 of them, visited a destination in a rural area. Most of them have made such a trip only once. A large number also traveled two or three times, while very few traveled four or more times. When it comes to the duration of the visit, most of the respondents said that the stay lasted between one and three days (Table 2).

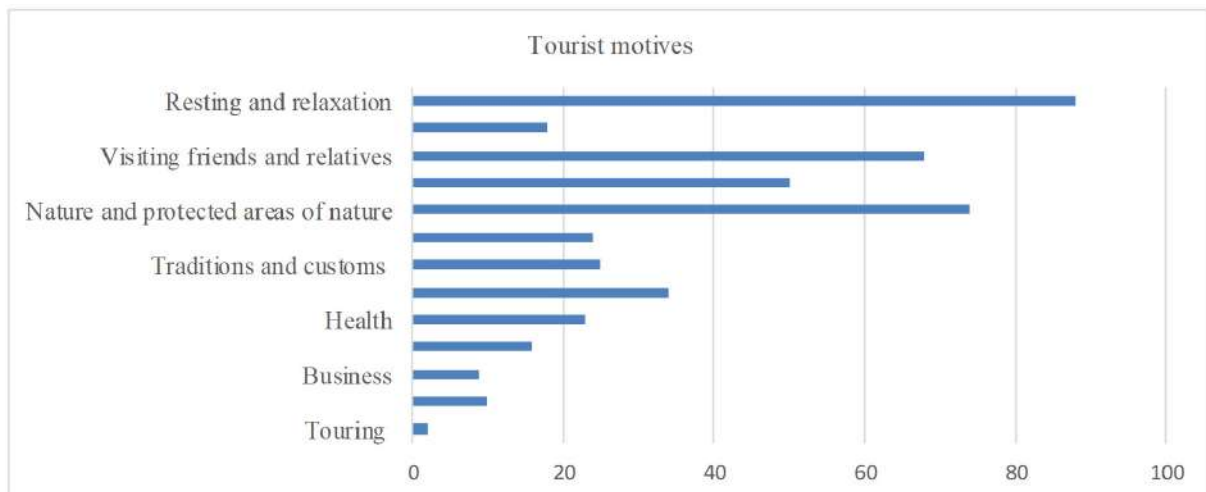
Table 2: Number and duration of visit/s

		F	%
Number of visit/s	Once	62	41,9
	Two or three times	57	38,5
	Four or/and more times	29	19,6
Duration of visit/s	One day	64	43,2
	Two or three days	68	45,9
	Four or/and more days	16	10,8

Source: Authors, according to the conducted research

In addition, the questionnaire also examined the respondents' travel motives, which play an important role in choosing a tourism destination. Respondents were offered 13 motives from which they could choose several. Rest and relaxation, spending time in nature and visiting protected areas of nature, and visiting friends and relatives were the most common motives for visiting rural destinations during the COVID -19 virus pandemic. Slightly fewer respondents indicated that sport activities such as cycling, hiking, horse riding, fishing, etc. were the main reason for visiting. Fewest chose travel, work and as expected, attending events as most of them did not take place at all. All motives are shown in Figure 1. Tubić (2019) states that the primary motives for coming to a rural area are usually the desire to learn, to experience the rural way of life and various elements of active vacation. However, due to the current specific situation that influenced changes in consumer attitudes, most respondents chose rural destinations solely for the opportunity to rest and relax.

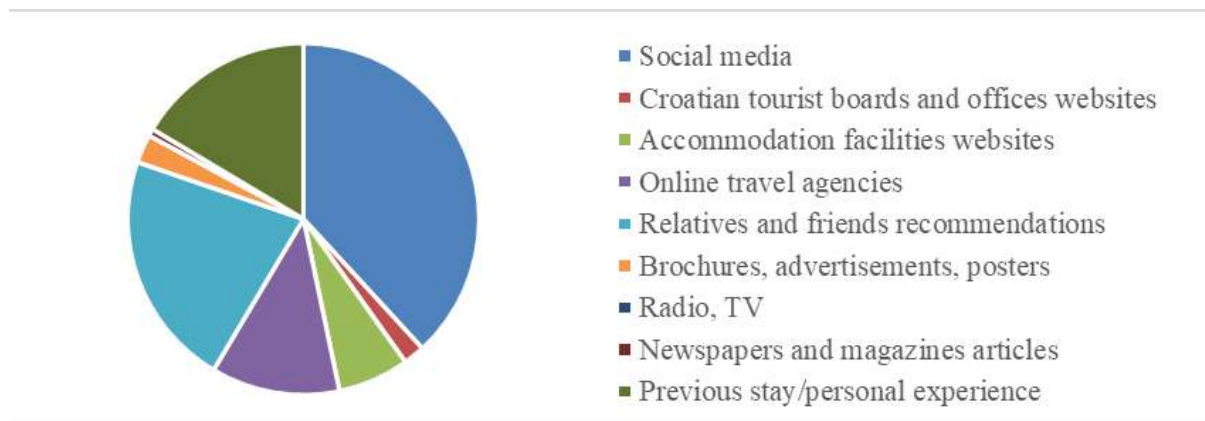
Figure 1: Tourist motives



Source: Authors, according to the conducted research

An important element in the study of travel preferences is the way in which information about the destination and its tourist offer is obtained and on the basis of which the final decision to visit is made (Figure 2). The largest number of respondents gathered information about rural destinations through social media, namely Instagram and Facebook. The connection between younger generations and technology, more specifically social networks, is already a well-known fact. By using these media, tourists become more active and service providers can more easily reach new, potential consumers (Bizirgianni and Dionysopoulou, 2013). Recommendations from relatives and friends were chosen as the second way to obtain information about the destination, and previous stay and personal experience take a slightly smaller share. Online travel agencies (Booking, Expedia) do not take a significant share, although respondents belong to the younger generation.

Figure 2: Sources of information

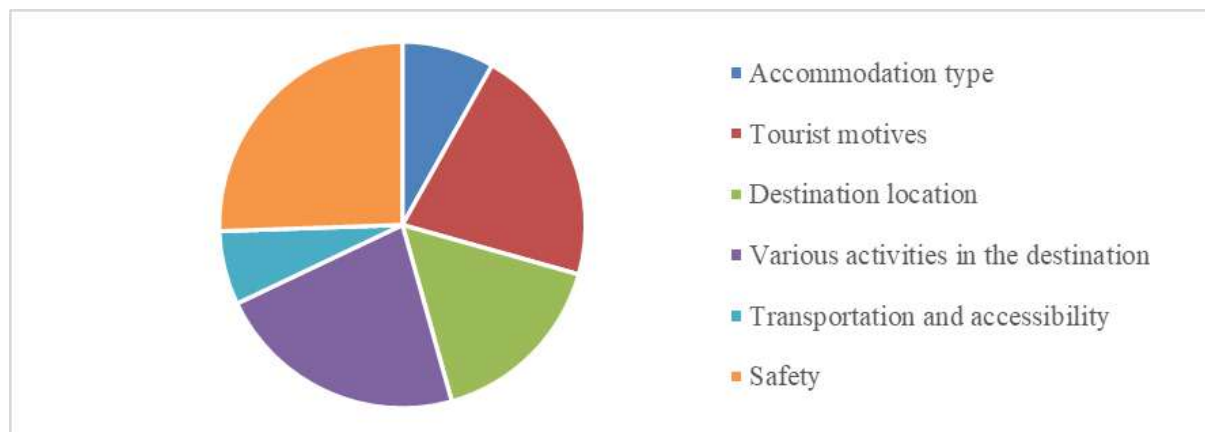


Source: Authors, according to the conducted research

The last part of the questionnaire was related to the respondents' travel to rural tourism destinations after the COVID -19 virus pandemic. When asked if they plan to visit such a destination in the future, the majority of respondents (94.8%) answered "yes". Considering the region where the destination is located, the largest number of respondents would visit Central and Eastern Croatia.

Considering that the pandemic has greatly affected almost every aspect of human life, changes in preferences regarding travel to rural tourism destinations were also examined. As many as 29.9% of the respondents say that such changes have fully taken place, while 14.2% think that the pandemic has not affected their tourism inclinations. Figure 3 shows which travel segments are most affected by the changes in preferences.

Figure 3: Travel segments affected by the changes in preferences



Source: Authors, according to the conducted research

In conclusion, a large number of respondents indicate that the changes in preferences mentioned above have the greatest influence on tourism motives. For example, resting and relaxation have become the primary motives for travel to rural tourism destinations, displacing some common motives. Safety and geographic location of the destination are also considered important segments for destination selection.

6. CONCLUSION

Despite numerous negative impacts on economies worldwide, the COVID -19 virus pandemic can serve as a kind of incentive for the development of rural tourism. The reason for this is the specific characteristics of rural tourism destinations, which correspond to current travel opportunities, but will also favor future trends, which will largely relate to staying in smaller communities. The Republic of Croatia, as a predominantly rural country, has a great potential for further development of rural tourism during and after the pandemic. This is also helped by the fact that the country is already positioned on the European and global tourism market. However, rural tourism destinations should not only rely on the existing elements of the offer, but, following the needs and wishes of consumers, improve the existing ones in accordance with new trends.

The pandemic also changed people's lifestyles, which affected travel preferences. Looking at Generation Y, which is considered the age group that will restart travel, the changes are reflected in the need to visit quieter, more remote destinations. The research found that young people typically only travel once during a pandemic, and that trip was extremely short. Rest and relaxation, as well as spending time in nature, are the main motivations for visiting rural destinations while learning and gathering information about destination through social media. Most of them plan to travel to rural areas after the end of the pandemic, mostly to destinations on Continental Croatia. The current situation has influenced the changes in tourists' motives, which will largely affect their choice of destination. Tourists will prefer places in the natural environment that have a positive impact on their health, with an emphasis on safety.

The limitations of the paper are reflected in the lack of interest and inertia of the younger population, which has no concrete reason to participate in this type of empirical research, despite repeated attempts to animate them through social networks (Facebook, Instagram) and e-mail.

Considering the fact that there is no or insufficient empirical research on this topic in the Republic of Croatia, one of the most important proposals for future research is to investigate the preferences and needs of current and future respondents, regardless of their age, as well as the limiting promoting factors for the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia from the perspective of the creators and co-creators of tourism policy, and as the promoters of the tourism offer. Moreover, this type of research needs to be conducted continuously, increasing the sample size.

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