

TRENDS IN RURAL TOURISM: THE ENGINE FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Ana Jovičić Vuković¹ [0000-0003-0022-674X], Lazar Pavić² [0009-0004-7039-6212]

Abstract

Over the past half-century, rural areas have experienced a decline in vitality due to various reasons, primarily caused by emigration and a decline in population. However, in recent years, especially during and after the pandemic period, rural tourism has become extremely attractive to tourists and has become a factor in revitalizing rural areas. Rural tourism, as a selective form of tourism, encompasses numerous resources, spaces, and activities that not only attract tourists but also bring significant quantitative and qualitative changes to rural settlements and the lives of local communities. The positive changes affected by the development of rural tourism are undeniable on different levels - destination level, national level, local community level or rural household level. However, it is crucial that rural tourism, given the sensitivity of rural areas, develops in a planned, careful, and sustainable manner. The aim of this paper is to highlight the trends in the development of rural tourism and the positive and negative aspects of its development. The paper will present good practices in the development of sustainable rural tourism in the Municipality of Irig (Vojvodina, Serbia). Economic benefits for all relevant stakeholders, protection of natural resources and the introduction of new ecological practices, protection, and revitalization of cultural heritage, involvement of local population in the planning and development of rural tourism, with active support from the government and non-governmental sectors through education and financing, must be key directions in the sustainable development of this form of tourism.

Key words: rural tourism, sustainable development, Municipality of Irig (Vojvodina, Serbia), trends in tourism.

1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, rural tourism has been steadily increasing, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this growth further.

¹ Novi Sad School of Business, Serbia, dr.ana.jovicic@gmail.com

² University of Maribor, Faculty of Logistics, Slovenia, lazar.pavic@um.si

Most rural areas around the world are facing population decline and changes brought about by industrialization and urbanization, particularly intensified in the last decades. These processes have led to a decrease in farmers' incomes, reduced agricultural employment, weakened vitality of rural communities, and infrastructure degradation.

Governments in many countries, with the support of local and regional agencies, are working to find solutions for the revitalization of these areas. Rural tourism is recognized as a significant factor in the recovery and preservation of nature, landscapes, historical sites, and traditional lifestyles. Rural areas often have unique customs and identities, and natural features such as mountains, rivers, and lakes further enhance their appeal for tourism.

Rural tourism is evolving to meet the changing needs and preferences of travelers who are seeking authentic, sustainable, and immersive experiences. By embracing these trends, rural communities can continue to attract visitors and contribute to local economic development.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the trends in the development of rural tourism. The paper will present the case of sustainable rural tourism development in the Municipality of Irig, Vojvodina, Serbia.

2. Tourism in Rural Areas

Rural areas can vary greatly in character – they can be suburban areas, villages in plains, or pastures in high mountains. Although there is no single definition, it can be observed that rural settlements can vary in size but are typically small, with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants and a lower population density. Additionally, agriculture is the dominant activity, and the influence of tradition and history is strong. The OECD defines a rural area as a region with a population density of 150 people per square kilometer.

Nearly all rural areas worldwide face problems of population decline and economic and political changes brought about by the powerful trends of industrialization and urbanization. These trends have intensified in recent decades, leading to a significant decrease in farmers' incomes, a reduction in agricultural employment, a decline in the vitality of rural settlements, a deterioration in the quality of infrastructure, and other issues.

Governments in many countries, in cooperation with their regional and local agencies, are trying to find ways to revitalize rural areas. Rural regions hold exceptional importance as they often act as custodians of a country's natural and cultural heritage (Singh et al., 2023). In this sense, rural tourism is recognized as one of the ways to revitalize rural areas (Yang et al., 2021). Rural areas are often characterized by unique customs and identities, traditional ways of life, historical landmarks, and natural resources such as mountains, nature reserves, rivers, lakes, and more, which attract tourists and make them appealing for tourism development.

Rural tourism can be most simply defined as any tourist activity in a rural setting. The terms often mentioned, and sometimes mistakenly equated with rural tourism, are village tourism and agritourism. Both are narrower concepts than rural

tourism. Village tourism involves tourist activities in villages, while agritourism refers to tourist activities in agritourism accommodation units.

Rural tourism has several key characteristics: it always takes place in rural areas and, on the one hand, is based on the heritage, traditions, and specific way of life and activities of the local population, and on the other hand, it is carried out in direct contact with nature. In this sense, rural tourism can take various forms, including selective types of tourism such as sports-recreational tourism, camping tourism, gastronomic and wine tourism, health tourism, cultural tourism, event tourism, religious tourism, ecotourism, and many other forms of tourism that can be realized in rural areas.

Rural tourism is based on small entrepreneurship, positively impacts the diversification of activities in rural areas, and ensures higher employment levels for the local population, with a particular focus on hard-to-employ categories such as youth, women, and the elderly.

3. Emerging Trends in Rural Tourism

Rural tourism has experienced significant growth over the past two decades, with rapid and sustained expansion following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For rural tourism to develop successfully, several fundamental elements are necessary – space with its natural and cultural resources, people with their knowledge and skills, and products that reflect the tradition of a specific place or area.

In addition, understanding the key trends in this field is crucial. The forms and trends in tourism that are shaping rural tourism are:

- **Authentic experience:** Farm stays, traditional life experiences, and farm-to-table dining are becoming increasingly popular. These allow visitors to truly experience the rural and local way of life from participating in traditional crafts to learning about regional history and customs (Anzardo et al., 2021).
- **Eco-tourism and connection to nature:** Travelers are becoming more conscious of their environmental impact and are seeking accommodations and activities that prioritize sustainability. Nature-based activities such as hiking, biking, camping, and wildlife watching are driving the growth of tourism in rural areas (Funduk et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023).
- **Wellness tourism and mindful holidays:** Rural destinations are offering a range of wellness retreats, yoga classes, and spa treatments, catering to travelers seeking relaxation and rejuvenation (Ekonomou et., 2023).
- **Digital detox:** The trend towards disconnecting from technology where visitors in rural environments can experience the escape the hustle and bustle of urban life (Cai & McKenna, 2024).
- **Slow travel and extended stays:** Travelers are opting for longer stays in rural areas, allowing them to fully immerse themselves in the local culture and experience a slower pace of life. Additionally, rural destinations are a common choice of digital nomads (Jovičić Vuković, 2022).

- **Gastrotourism:** Rural areas are renowned for their fresh, locally sourced produce and unique culinary traditions and can offer farm-to-table cuisine. Visitors are seeking authentic local products to support the local economy (Arion, 2024).

Rural tourism is evolving to meet the changing needs and preferences of travelers who are seeking authentic, sustainable, and immersive experiences. By embracing these trends, rural communities can continue to attract visitors and contribute to local economic development.

Despite the positive trend of rural tourism development, the sector continues to face notable challenges related to the professional and skill development of its key stakeholders, including entrepreneurs and staff.

Moreover, rural tourism requires the support of various stakeholders. Support for the development of rural tourism is provided through the aid of national, provincial, and local institutions and organizations. This assistance is not only realized through financial incentives such as subsidies and loans but also through education, the development of specific skills needed for tourism work, as well as empowering and educating individuals in entrepreneurial knowledge and skills (Chan, 2023)

4. Rural Tourism in Serbia: Case of Irig Municipality

Rural tourism development brings numerous benefits (Dašić et al, 2020). Through rural tourism and the stay of foreign tourists, "invisible export" is realized, significantly affecting a country's economy. Tourism provides an opportunity for less developed areas to reach the level of developed ones in terms of opening new jobs, self-employment, and local investments. Additionally, rural tourism helps reduce disparities in economic development between rural and urban areas and regions, decreases migration from rural to urban areas, and promotes rural infrastructure development. Furthermore, it increases employment and creates better living conditions.

A particularly significant effect of this development is preserving and revitalizing traditional architecture, gastronomy, customs, and folklore while introducing foreign tourists to a particular area's culture and way of life, holds social and political significance. A substantial positive impact of rural tourism is reflected in the preservation of cultural heritage and the nature of a country (Job et al., 2020).

Local communities that have recognized the importance of rural tourism development in their municipalities achieve diversification of activities, additional collective income, creation of new jobs, improved living and working conditions, increased sales of local products, and more through rural tourism.

An example of the best practices of rural tourism development in the Republic of Serbia is the municipality of Irig, that potential lies in the area's rich cultural, historical, and natural heritage.

The municipality of Irig is located in the northern part of the Republic of Serbia, in Vojvodina, in the central part of Srem on the southern slopes of Fruška Gora. The municipality's territory is at the highest altitude of all municipal centers

in Vojvodina. Irig has a rich history and numerous cultural values. It abounds with beautiful landscapes offering views of forests and fields and fresh air. The municipality of Irig has the Fruška Gora National Park, a spa with thermal mineral springs in Vrdnik, eight medieval monasteries, and many cultural monuments. It is also home to numerous wineries and hosts various events. All of the mentioned potentials highlight the possibilities for developing various selective forms of rural tourism, including:

- Sports and recreational tourism – the area is suitable for activities such as hiking, cycling, horse riding, camping, hunting, fishing, and other activities
- Cultural tourism is realized through visits to Fruška Gora monasteries, wine routes, visits to cultural monuments, or events;
- Business tourism – the construction of modern conference spaces and the adaptation of existing ones has made the destination attractive for organizing meetings, congresses, seminars, and workshops;
- Health and Spa & Wellness tourism is developed through the use of thermal waters in the hotels in Vrdnik Spa;
- Ecotourism is realized through activities within Fruška Gora National Park, including bird watching, beekeeping, nature study, and other activities focused on nature conservation;
- Ethno tourism is achieved through visits to ethno galleries, gastronomic tourism, i.e., consumption of locally produced food, and learning about customs and old crafts, among other things.

To better understand the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Irig, it is necessary to examine changes in the number of tourists and overnight stays over a ten-year period (2013-2023).

The changes in the number of domestic and foreign tourists, in total numbers, as well as in the number of overnight stays during the ten-year period from 2013 to 2023 in the municipality of Irig, are evident (Table 1). The number of domestic tourists in the observed period increased by 4.2 times, while the number of foreign tourists increased by 17.3 times, with the total number of tourists in 2023 higher by 73,303. When looking at overnight stays, a total increase of 143,065 is also noted, with foreign tourists' overnight stays increasing by 2.1 times, and foreign tourists overnight stays increasing by 15.3 times in 2023 compared to 2013. In the years after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic (2022 and 2023), there was a significant increase in the number of tourists and overnight stays, particularly in the case of foreign tourists.

Table 1: Tourist turnover in the municipality of Irig – period 2013-2023

| Year | Tourists' arrivals | | | Tourists' overnight stays | | |
|-------------|--------------------|---------|--------|---------------------------|---------|---------|
| | Domestic | Foreign | Total | Domestic | Foreign | Total |
| 2013 | 15,095 | 1,475 | 16,570 | 72,869 | 4,093 | 76,962 |
| 2014 | 12,210 | 2,271 | 14,481 | 52,911 | 6,833 | 59,744 |
| 2015 | 15,404 | 2,690 | 18,094 | 57,379 | 7,331 | 64,741 |
| 2016 | 19,959 | 3,618 | 23,577 | 92,258 | 8,351 | 100,609 |
| 2017 | 23,783 | 5,015 | 28,798 | 91,848 | 12,288 | 104,136 |

| Year | Tourists' arrivals | | | Tourists' overnight stays | | |
|------|--------------------|---------|--------|---------------------------|---------|---------|
| | Domestic | Foreign | Total | Domestic | Foreign | Total |
| 2018 | 22,691 | 5,123 | 27,814 | 90,361 | 11,721 | 102,082 |
| 2019 | 23,249 | 5,451 | 28,700 | 91,978 | 12,903 | 104,881 |
| 2020 | 28,719 | 2,848 | 31,594 | 86,722 | 6,313 | 93,035 |
| 2021 | 53,545 | 8,293 | 61,838 | 124,415 | 19,620 | 144,035 |
| 2022 | 64,318 | 15,054 | 79,372 | 63,349 | 38,523 | 201,187 |
| 2023 | 64,252 | 25,621 | 89,873 | 157,380 | 62,647 | 220,027 |

Source: Internal documentation of the Irig Tourist Organization

By observing the number of tourists and overnight stays in the first seven months of 2024 (Table 2), it can be concluded that the most visited month was July, when 6,651 domestic and 4,149 foreign tourists stayed in the municipality of Irig. In terms of overnight stays, the highest number of both domestic and foreign tourists was also recorded in the month of July

One of the key reasons for the increase in tourist arrivals and the number of overnight stays is the significant improvement in tourism and accommodation offerings. The opening of luxury accommodation facilities, the enhancement of accommodation quality, and its quantitative growth stand out as catalysts for development. In 2012, the municipality of Irig, with Vrdnik Spa as the central point of rural tourism development, began significant changes in its accommodation structure. That year, alongside the existing Termal Hotel, the luxury Premier Aqua Hotel opened, followed by the ethno-complex Vrdnička Kula. In 2019, the Fruške Terme resort hotel started operating and expanded its spa capacities over the years. In 2022, the hotel became part of the Accor chain under its Movenpick brand through a franchise agreement. The entry of an international hotel chain is particularly important for the destination and the region, as hotel chains are standard-bearers and initiators of change in all aspects of the hospitality and tourism industry.

Table 2: Tourist turnover in the municipality of Irig for the year 2024

| 2024 Month | Tourists' arrivals | | | Tourists' overnight stays | | |
|---------------|--------------------|---------|--------|---------------------------|----------|---------|
| | Domestic | Foreign | Total | Foreign | Domestic | Total |
| January | 4,348 | 2,151 | 6,499 | 9,442 | 4,989 | 14,431 |
| February | 5,631 | 1,937 | 7,568 | 11,275 | 3,823 | 15,098 |
| March | 5,599 | 2,154 | 7,753 | 11,928 | 4,139 | 16,067 |
| April | 5,222 | 2,458 | 7,680 | 11,277 | 4,785 | 16,062 |
| May | 5,758 | 3,774 | 9,532 | 12,609 | 8,072 | 20,681 |
| June | 5,895 | 3,539 | 9,434 | 14,892 | 7,438 | 22,330 |
| July | 6,651 | 4,149 | 10,800 | 17,907 | 10,207 | 28,114 |
| Total | 39,104 | 20,162 | 59,266 | 89,330 | 43,453 | 132,783 |

Source: Internal documentation of the Irig Tourist Organization

It is also necessary to address the diversification of accommodation facilities in the Municipality of Irig. According to internal data from the Irig Tourist Organization from 2024, there are 2,336 beds distributed across 1,015 registered accommodation units, most of which are located in the Vrdnik spa (916

accommodation units and 2,094 beds). The types of accommodations available in the municipality include rooms, apartments, studio apartments, holiday homes, rural tourist households, guesthouses, resorts, lodges, bungalows, and hotels, which have the largest number of accommodation units (429) and beds (1,003) overall.

Tourism development in the Irig Municipality has brought positive changes reflected in the activation of the tourism offering, the development of new services and products, the improvement of local infrastructure, a higher level of local participation in activities and events, and the growth of investments. For the local community, tourism development has increased employment opportunities for all categories of the population, raised the standard of living, facilitated the sale of local products, provided opportunities for business diversification, and more.

5. Conclusions

Rural tourism, while representing a small portion of the overall tourism market, plays a crucial role in revitalizing rural economies. It generates jobs, fosters economic growth, and preserves local traditions, culture, and natural resources.

For rural tourism to be sustainable, it must be carefully planned and developed in accordance with sustainability principles. This includes protecting natural resources, promoting ecological practices, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring active community involvement in the development process. Government and non-governmental support through education, financing, and capacity-building is essential to achieving these goals.

The sustainable development of rural tourism, as seen in the Municipality of Irig, offers a model for how rural communities can thrive while maintaining their cultural identity and preserving their natural environments.

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