

ANALYSIS OF ACCOMMODATION CAPACITIES IN THE TERRITORY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF TOPOLA FOR THE NEEDS OF RURAL TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

The territory of the municipality of Topola is located in the heart of Šumadija. Fertile land and a temperate continental climate favor agriculture, making it the leading economic activity. Special attention is devoted to fruit growing, while viticulture is considered an activity of particular importance. The area of the municipality of Topola can be described as a place where history is still alive, as it is rich in cultural and historical heritage, events, and authentic gastronomy. As such, it provides opportunities for the local population to engage in rural tourism. The primary goal of this paper is to determine the number of rural tourism households engaged in rural tourism and to analyze the accommodation capacities of the rural area of the municipality of Topola. For the purposes of the research, a quantitative approach to public opinion polling will be used in the form of a closed and anonymous questionnaire, as well as a statistical method (sampling method). The significance of the obtained results is reflected in acquiring relevant data regarding the number of available rural tourism households and analyzing the accommodation capacities of rural tourism households in this rural area. Based on the obtained results, it was determined that a large percentage of respondents were uninformed about the existence of rural tourism households and the availability of accommodation facilities. It was also found that there are various motives for staying in rural tourism households. Respondents primarily obtain information about the availability of accommodation facilities via the Internet, especially through social networks.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Topola, rural tourism household, accommodation facilities.

JEL: Z32, R11, Q26

DOI: 10.5937/intrev2504209C

UDC: 338.485.2(497.11-22)

COBISS.SR-ID 183725577

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is of exceptional social importance because it greatly contributes to the health of the population, increases labor productivity, expands education, and brings people from different regions and countries closer together. As for the development of rural tourism in Serbia, there are a number of advantages. It is essential that there is a wide rural area where there are no potential pollutants. Agricultural land, forests, rivers, diverse biodiversity, and the preserved geo-fund of natural resources, as well as people who are mainly engaged in agricultural production and possess their own specific ways of life, culture, and customs, are concentrated in these areas.

Some modern studies of tourism classify rural tourism as an important and growing segment. Nickerson et al. [1] state that the rural area is the basic resource for the development of rural tourism, and that this tourist activity relies on the need of city dwellers for clean air, health-safe food, peace, and space for outdoor recreation. The rural area cannot be described simply or briefly. The rural areas of Serbia differ greatly from one another in economic, social, and demographic terms [2]. The concept of rural tourism, its current state, as well as its prospects for development, is increasingly being discussed, which is particularly important within Serbia's tourism offer. All lovers of a healthy environment, those who wish to enjoy the gastronomic specialties offered in these areas, and all lovers of tradition are potential tourists of these destinations [3].

The subject of this work is to review the accommodation capacities of rural tourism households in the area of the municipality of Topola. The aim of this paper is to determine how many rural tourism households are engaged in rural tourism and to analyze the accommodation capacities of the rural area of the municipality of Topola. The tourist offer will be analyzed, whose elements are based on all the natural and anthropogenic resources of the municipality of Topola that attract the attention of domestic and foreign tourists. The aim of this work is focused on the area of Topola. Specifically, this refers to a small number of rural tourism households. By examining all comparative advantages, disadvantages, strengths, and threats to the development of rural tourism, the development of rural areas and consequently rural tourism in the municipality of Topola can be realistically assessed.

The task of the work is to determine the number of rural tourism households engaged in rural tourism and their accommodation capacities, as well as to analyze their potential for tourists interested in rural tourism in Topola and its surroundings. Within the hypothetical research framework, this paper is based on the following hypothesis: The basic assumption is that in the municipality of Topola there are rural tourism households with accommodation facilities that can serve as lodging for tourists who wish to spend their vacation in rural areas. As a sub-hypothesis, it can be assumed that there are not enough accommodation facilities, as well as that tourists have certain demands and that there are limiting factors affecting their use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When discussing rural tourism, it is essential to focus first and foremost on the space and the rural environment in which rural tourism takes place. A rural area is determined by three factors: population density, land use, and community identity [4]. Many authors have dealt with the theoretical definition of the village, that is, the rural environment. What can be observed as a common element of all these definitions coincides with the definition given by the OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), which states that a rural environment is one with a population density below 150 inhabitants/km². Taking this into account, regions have been classified as dominantly rural—where more than half of the area is characterized by pronounced rural features—predominantly rural, with a rural share from 15% to 50%, and dominantly urban, which is characterized by less than 15% rural features. There are 4,243 settlements in Central Serbia, of which 3,300 are rural, or 78.5%. They can be classified into several categories: isolated, arable, livestock, suburban, specialized, mining, industrial-agrarian, spa, therapeutic, municipal centers or rural community centers, etc.

Rural tourism belongs to specific forms of tourism, which include “all activities in the rural area, characterized by a peaceful environment, preserved nature, the absence of noise, communication with hosts, local food, and familiarization with rural activities” [5]. This form of tourism implies the concept of sustainable development and the connection between people and nature. The importance of rural tourism is reflected in the interaction of agricultural production, traditional agricultural food products, the presentation of tradition,

traditional gastronomy, and tourist services [6]. Since agriculture is the dominant activity and the rural way of life is connected with elements of tradition, cultural heritage, and domestic craftsmanship, visitors are enabled to participate in these authentic activities. From the standpoint of tourism supply and demand, rural tourism can be divided into the following forms: agritourism (peasant), residential, native, sports-recreational, adventure, health, educational, transit, camping, continental nautical tourism, cultural, religious, hunting, fishing, wine tourism, gastronomic tourism, nature-based tourism, ecotourism, and others. A village (rural settlement) is classified into three categories of human settlements. It represents the basic form of territorial, social, and economic organization of the population engaged in agriculture or processing. In Serbia, agricultural households organize their residential and economic activities in two units: the first refers to residential space where they use their house and auxiliary buildings, and the second to economic activities where they use functional facilities (granaries, barns, stables, mills, etc.) [6]. Rural households that wish to engage in rural tourism must be registered according to the defined Rulebook ("Official Gazette", No. 3/2010) and are classified into four categories marked with stars [7].

RURAL TOURISM IN THE TERRITORY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF TOPOLA

The area of the municipality of Topola is rich in natural and cultural-historical heritage, events, and authentic gastronomy. It is situated in an exceptional natural environment with clean air and well-maintained trails in the Oplenac Park, providing excellent conditions for rest and recreation. The municipality of Topola offers a variety of accommodation facilities, ranging from standard hotels and private accommodation to hostels and luxury apartments. The total accommodation capacity of hotel-type facilities is around 100 beds, while hostels and motels provide over 120 beds, and several restaurants offer smaller accommodation capacities. In this area, 50 beds are registered within rural tourist households. Although the overall capacity is still modest, rural tourism in the Topola–Oplenac area has significant potential, and further investment in the coming period is highly desirable. A quick return on investment could be expected, accompanied by increased employment of the local primarily rural population and the strengthening of entrepreneurship. Accordingly, local self-government, in cooperation with the local population, should make efforts to improve the tourism offer based on all the available potentials of the municipality. In general, rural tourism represents an important component of sustainable development [8, 9]. It is largely developed on family farms (ethno-houses and rural households), whose goal is to attract tourists and generate additional income. In addition to accommodation, tourists are offered authentic food and drinks typical of the region (Tourism Development Program Topola/Oplenac 2017–2021).

When discussing tourism and its development—whether rural or any other type—accommodation and hospitality facilities represent an essential element. The municipality of Topola has 12 registered rural tourist households providing accommodation for rural tourists (Tab. 1).

Table 1. Overview of accommodation capacities of rural tourist households

No.	Facility owner	Facility address	Type of facility	No. of rooms	No. of beds	No. of stars
1.	Radmila Đorđević	Lipovac	Rural tourist household	2	5	***
2.	Miloš Radisavljević	Lipovac	Rural tourist household	1	2	***
3.	Ana Nikodijević	Ovsište	Rural tourist household	1	2	****
4.	Danka Jovanović	Lipovac	Rural tourist household	1	2	**
5.	Nevenka Ferluga Teodosić	Topola (village)	Rural tourist household	4	8	****
6.	Milena Nešić Pavković	Topola (village)	Rural tourist household	1	2	**
7.	Marion Georgi	Donja Trnava	Rural tourist household	1	2	****
8.	Svetlana Jovanović	Gornja Trnava	Rural tourist household	1	2	***
9.	Milovan Glišić	Šume	Rural tourist household	1	2	***
10.	UTR BAIKAL 979	Topola (village)	Rural tourist household	8	20	****
11.	Mirjana Pavlović	Božurnja	Rural tourist household	2	4	****
12.	Miljojka Lukić	Ovsište	Rural tourist household „MOKA“	3	5	****

Source: Internal data of the Tourism Organization of the Municipality of Topola (2021).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary material used in this study was a survey consisting of 22 questions (survey attached). A total of 35 respondents participated in the research. The survey was forwarded to the Tourist Organization of Topola, whose members completed the questionnaire. Scientific research methods were used to process the collected data, presenting relevant information in accordance with the research objective. The method of analysis served to identify and emphasize key characteristics; synthesis, abstraction, induction, and deduction were used to examine the initial hypothesis and verify certain assumptions and facts; and the descriptive method was used to analyze the data obtained through the survey. During data collection, a quantitative approach was applied in the form of a closed and anonymous questionnaire, alongside the statistical (sampling) method. The proposed hypothesis was examined using methods of verification or refutation. The research relied on domestic and foreign literature, data obtained from the questionnaire, as well as information available online. The survey questionnaire was designed to determine the level of awareness tourists have about rural tourist households and their accommodation capacities in the municipality of Topola.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

Out of the total number of respondents (35) who participated in the survey, 13 were male and 22 were female. Expressed as percentages, 37.1% of respondents were male and 62.9% were female. The age structure of the respondents was analyzed through six clearly defined groups. The first group (18 to 20 years of age) accounts for 0%, meaning that no respondent belongs to this group. The second group (21 to 30 years) accounts for 54.3% (19 respondents), thus representing the largest share compared to the other groups. The third age group (31 to 40 years) comprises 25.7% (9 respondents), while the fourth age group (41 to 50 years) comprises 14.3% (5 respondents). The fifth group (51 to 60 years) includes 2.9% (1 respondent), and the sixth, the oldest group (over 61 years), also includes 2.9% (1 respondent). The relatively low participation of the youngest population (18–20 years) may be attributed to the topic of the questionnaire itself, that is, the lack of interest among the younger demographic.

In the continuation of the analysis, an overview is provided of the respondents' employment status and their level of education. The status of the respondents was presented through four groups: pupils/students, employed, unemployed, and pensioners. The educational structure was analyzed across three groups: primary, secondary, and higher education.

Of the total number of respondents, 4 (11.4%) are pupils/students, 31 respondents (88.6%) are employed, 2 respondents (5.7%) are unemployed, and no respondent belongs to the pensioner group. When analyzing the educational structure, the highest participation is recorded among respondents with higher education (85.7%). Respondents with secondary education account for 11.4%, while those with primary education account for 2.9%.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RURAL AREA OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF TOPOLA

After analyzing the basic demographic characteristics of the respondents, the focus shifts to data concerning rural areas in the territory of the municipality of Topola.

Of the total number of respondents, 7 respondents (20%) live in a rural area, while 28 respondents (80%) live in the city. Questions regarding the interest of urban respondents in visiting the rural area, the frequency of these visits, the main motives for visiting, and the average duration of stay were analyzed.

Out of 35 respondents, 33 respondents (94.3%) stated that they visit the rural area, while 3 respondents (8.6%) said they do not. As a reason for visiting the rural area, 68.6% of respondents mentioned visiting friends or relatives, 9.8% of respondents indicated tourism as their main motive, and 17.1% of respondents cited other reasons. It can be concluded that a large percentage of respondents visit the rural area, but their primary motive is not related to tourism.

Further analysis shows that 45.7% of respondents visit the rural area every weekend, 17.1% once a month, 31.4% once every few months, and 14.3% once a year. When visiting, 51.4% of respondents spend up to three days in the rural area, 17.1% spend 4 to 6 days, 8.6% spend 7 to 10 days, and 31.4% spend more than 11 days.

Regarding awareness of the number of registered rural tourist households (NTDs) in the municipality, 28.6% of respondents were informed, while 71.4% of respondents were not. The main reason for lack of information was insufficient promotion of NTDs (94.3%), and 8.6% of respondents indicated a lack of personal interest.

Respondents also identified limiting factors for visiting the rural area. The largest percentage (54.3%) reported insufficient information about existing NTDs, 20% cited other reasons, 14.3% mentioned an insufficient number of accommodation and catering facilities, 8.6% noted poor transport infrastructure, and 2.9% highlighted a lack of natural (water bodies, fertile soil, favorable climate, diverse flora and fauna) and anthropogenic (festivals, folklore, archaeological sites, churches, monasteries) potential.

When asked how many registered NTDs they know in Topola and its surroundings, 91.4% of respondents reported knowing up to 5 NTDs, 5.7% of respondents knew 6 to 10 NTDs, and 2.9% of respondents knew over 11 NTDs. Regarding the sufficiency of accommodation facilities for tourists wishing to stay at NTDs, 60% of respondents (26) believed there were not enough, while 40% of respondents (10) thought the number was sufficient.

Analyzing the types of visitors interested in NTD accommodation, 60% of respondents believed families were the main group, 11.4% of respondents identified youth and elderly visitors, 8.6% of respondents cited business travelers, and 22.9% of respondents indicated that all visitor groups are interested in this form of tourism. According to data from the Tourist Organization of Serbia, rural tourism offers more than 10,000 beds, with approximately 6% of total overnight stays in Serbia taking place in rural tourism (<https://www.serbia.travel/en>).

When asked about motives for staying at NTDs, 40% of respondents (15) mentioned additional activities beyond accommodation and food, such as educational programs related to domestic work, participating in village activities, preparing local specialties, folklore performances, hiking, sports, running, horse riding, and water activities. 30% of respondents (11) cited good food, accommodation, parking, Wi-Fi, and recreational space for adults and children as important factors. The development of transport infrastructure influenced the choice for 11% of respondents (4), as did the hospitality of the host, while only 2 respondents indicated that authentic gastronomy was the main motive.

Regarding expenses for a stay at NTDs, 17 respondents (42.7%) would allocate up to 100 euros, 19 respondents (52.8%) up to 500 euros, and no respondents selected the options of up to 1,000 euros or over 1,100 euros.

When asked how they learn about NTD offers in Topola, 61.1% of respondents reported using the Internet, 41.7% of respondents through acquaintances, 8.3% via room rental notices issued by NTDs, and another 8.3% of respondents through the tourist association. For booking accommodations, 5.6% of respondents (2) use the municipal tourist agency, 77.8% of respondents (28) use the Internet and social networks, and 19.4% of respondents (7) use other methods.

Respondents reported the usefulness of the Internet for obtaining information about NTDs as follows: 61.1% of respondents (22) believe it helps to a great extent, 33.3% of respondents (12) said it helps to a certain degree, and only 5.6% of respondents (2) indicated that social networks do not help.

Regarding the use of social networks to obtain information and contact NTDs, 58.3% of respondents (21) use Booking, 47.2% of respondents (17) use Instagram, 41.7% of respondents (15) use Facebook, 2.8% of respondents (1) use Trip Advisor, and none of the respondents reported using Pinterest.

Considering the importance of information obtained via social networks, they are clearly an effective means of informing potential visitors about NTDs. The advantages of using the Internet are evident: 61.1% of respondents (22) reported that information about destinations and accommodation spreads fastest through social networks, 38.9% of respondents (14) believe social networks allow them to exchange experiences with previous visitors, and 44.4% of respondents (16) stated that social networks provide the opportunity to explore the tourist offer through photos and videos. According to usage statistics, the top five social networks in terms of visits in 2021 are: Facebook (100%), YouTube (85%), Twitter (90%), Instagram (85%), and Pinterest (70%) (<http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites>).

CONCLUSION

The rural area of the municipality of Topola evidently possesses considerable natural potential, provided by its geographical position, as well as significant anthropogenic potential in the form of rich cultural and historical heritage, which makes this part of Serbia recognizable. It can be concluded that this rural area has registered tourist households with available accommodation facilities that are arranged according to appropriate standards. This confirms the hypothesis defined at the beginning of this paper. The sub-hypothesis—that there are insufficient accommodation facilities and that there are specific demands of tourists along with limiting factors for their use—was also confirmed.

The direction of further research on the development of NTDs and the increase in accommodation capacities should be based on data collected from a larger number of respondents, including potential users both within and outside the municipality of Topola. Attention should also be given to better promotion and offerings of NTDs, as well as to the motivation and readiness of the state, local authorities, and investors to support the development of rural tourism in this municipality. At the same time, it is necessary to educate the local population on how to transform their agricultural holdings into rural tourist households, thereby expanding their activities and increasing income from their farms. Since the conducted research faced certain limitations due to the small sample size, there is an opportunity to expand the study in order to obtain a more comprehensive overview of the research topic.

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Article history:

Received 29 February 2024

Accepted 23 May 2024