

## THE ROLE OF TOURIST GUIDES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE GEOHERITAGE OF SERBIA

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**Abstract:** Geoheritage represents a significant potential in the tourism product of Serbia. Although essential, it is often absent enough in the tourist offer, and specialized tourist guides do not exist. Interpretation represents a specific form of mediation in the education of visitors, which is why the role of tourist guides is vital. Interpretation is a form of communication designed to interpret natural and cultural heritage through the direct encounter of visitors with artifacts and heritage. The tourist guide is the intermediary, and tourists' satisfaction often depends on their knowledge and skills. The aim of this paper is to present the role and importance of the personal interpretation of tourist guides as the main actors of geotourist education, as well as their role in creating visitor satisfaction in this specific area. Does and how much does geomythology help? What kind of storytelling is necessary for different visitor structures? What is the common denominator for all visitors to geoheritage sites - is it just pleasure or knowledge. If interpretation is also defined as a way of presenting certain artifacts with the aim of attracting visitors' attention and providing new knowledge, then tourist guides at geoheritage sites have an important role.

**Keywords:** geoheritage, interpretation, tourist guide, visitors satisfaction, Serbia

### INTRODUCTION

Studies of geoheritage and geotourism have become the focus of researchers in the last thirty years (Reynard et al., 2005; Gray, 2004; Vasiljević et al., 2009; Croft, 2018; Štrba et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020; Khalaf, 2024). Geodiversity, which refers to the diversity of geological and geomorphological features, is also closely linked to this concept. It can be defined as a property of the environment that supports life and human socio-economic functions (Lješević, 2002). Geodiversity, as the totality of geological and geomorphological diversity, and geoheritage, as a selection of representative examples of all types, are new topics (Belij, 2007). However, despite being relatively new topics, not enough has been done to promote them in the context of tourism. The term "geotourism" was first defined in the United Kingdom in 1995, with its primary goal being to promote and finance the preservation and conservation of geological and geomorphological locations (Hose, 1995). Interpretation is a form of mediation for informing tourists and other visitors and plays a significant role in geotourism (Rabotić, 2009). It can be defined as the explanation of geological phenomena to demystify geotourism. Additionally, the term was described in the Great Dictionary (Klajn et al., 2006) as the explanation of the meaning of a phenomenon, as well as the techniques of past activities such as acting, singing, playing, and reciting.

Nowadays, it is necessary that the person providing the information, apart from the basic information, communicates with the guests effortlessly and evokes emotions during the interpretation. In addition, the guide should understand the culture and needs of his guests, among which emotional needs stand out (Hurombo, 2016). These are mostly tourist guides as a live being, although the support of artificial intelligence is increasingly being used in different localities, specifically audio guides (Şen & Demir, 2023). What is being debated and conducted in numerous studies is whether audio guides can replace traditional tourist guides (Hammady et al., 2020; Ponsignon & Derbaix, 2020; Samala et al., 2020; El-Said & Aziz, 2022; Dybsand, 2024). With that in mind, this paper will explain the importance of the interpretation of the tourist guide and the awakening of emotions, emphasizing the guides' interpretation of geoheritage sites. Sheldon (2020) points out that a trip that causes great emotions in people can transform their personalities, experiencing something new that changes them. They return home under the impression of that situation.

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The authors will conduct desk research on available literature to gather data from secondary sources, collecting a wide range of information from various time periods. This will include the emergence of the terms geoheritage and geotourism up to the present day. The research will also analyze the role and significance of tourist guides in the development, promotion, and public awareness of these concepts.

The aim of this paper is to present the role of tourist guides in geolocalities as a relatively new tourism destination. The role of guides in these localities has not been sufficiently explored, so this paper will provide an insight into the importance of storytelling by tourist guides, for providing basic information about localities, but also geomyths in order to better understand what leads to the satisfaction of visitors to such localities. In this way, information that can be of great importance for creating return intent and positive word-of-mouth by tourists visiting geolocalities is obtained.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As previously mentioned, the terms geodiversity, geoheritage, and geotourism have appeared in the scientific literature for the last thirty years (Sharples, 1993; Kiernan, 1994; Dixon, 1995). According to Sharples (2002), geodiversity represents the variety of geological and geomorphological processes and phenomena on Earth. In Europe, the initial definition of geodiversity emphasized its protection or conservation to preserve this diversity for future generations. From the first definitions to the present day, the essence remains the same, with geodiversity representing a complex variety of rocks, sediments, forms, soil, and geomorphological processes in a specific area (Gordon et al., 2006). In Serbia, geodiversity is defined by the Law on Nature Protection ("Službeni glasnik RS" no. 36/09, 88/10, corr. and 14/16) as a set of geological formations and structures, occurrences and forms of geological materials and geomorphological characteristics of different composition and way of creation and diverse paleoecosystems changed in space under the influence of internal and external geodynamic factors during geological time. Geodiversity is to be protected for its numerous values and due to the threats from various factors, primarily human activities, which can seriously endanger it (Gray, 2004).

It is not possible to protect everything because that would mean protecting the entire planet Earth (Vasiljević, 2015). However, the focus can be on protecting the most representative examples of geodiversity and promoting them through geoheritage and responsible geotourism. Tourist guides play a significant role in educating tourists and promoting the geoheritage of Serbia. Specific geoheritage sites also have cultural values, including those of the physical environment influenced by humans due to their societal and communal importance (Vasiljević, 2015). These values often serve as an invitation to travel because, for traditional travelers, it is not just about the location itself but also about its intangible values and the stories it holds. Therefore, the story of the origin of Djavolja varos is often the primary motive for traveling to a geoheritage site. While the story can be read, it is more effective to hear it at the location from tourist guides, as tourists' experiences and satisfaction depend on communication skills (Ap et al., 2001; Huang et al., 2010) and their leisure activities. According to Tse et al. (1998), satisfaction can be defined as a judgment or attitude formed after service consumption, indicating that tourists form an opinion of the visited location and the tourist guide after visiting a specific geographic location. Enjoyment, excitement, fun, or knowledge contributes to passenger satisfaction (Oliver, 1997). According to Biswas et al. (2021), there is a significant connection between destination attributes (e.g., attractions, food, and safety) and the level of tourist satisfaction, whereby people on the destination should pay more attention to attributes as they lead to high satisfaction.

The concept of consumer satisfaction is crucial in modern marketing (Sivesan et al., 2013) and is particularly vital for the survival of the tourism economy. One of the most significant challenges for marketers in the tourism industry is ensuring tourist satisfaction and client retention (Oh et al., 1998). In some cases, geoheritage sites are developed to attract tourists, and catering to their needs and preferences becomes essential. This emphasizes the material and immaterial values of the location itself. Geotourism is a relatively new term that originated from "geological tourism." It refers to tourists interested in natural geological features, such as landforms and rocks, and the processes that shaped them over time (Robinson, 2008). Also, the author explains that, unlike ecotourism, geotourism does not have to occur in untouched nature.

According to Jose (2000), a pioneer in defining geotourism, geotourism involves providing interpretive content and services that highlight the values and social benefits of geological and geomorphological locations. These locations can include national parks, mines, quarries, or other similar sites. Geotourism aims to promote the preservation of these locations for students, tourists, and excursionists. A key question is who provides these services and interprets the values of

geoheritage and how it all works. Tourist guides play a crucial role in this process and should receive adequate training on geoheritage and how to present it to tourists effectively.

#### *Geolocalities in Serbia*

All information about geolocalities in Serbia can be found on the Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia website, which contains all regulations and acts related to nature protection and the central register of protected natural areas of Serbia.

As part of the Geoheritage Inventory of Serbia, the geomorphological heritage was meticulously evaluated. This process identified 152 forms, including surface karst relief (48), fluvial relief (48), erosive forms of relief (11), aeolian relief (7), paleovolcanic relief (11), glacial relief (21), and periglacial relief (6). These forms are of significant value on a global scale, with the Đerdap Gorge, Džavolja Varos, the Glacial Relief of Šar Mountain, Deliblatska peščara (the Deliblats Sandstone), and the Vratnjan Prerasti standing out, according to the Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia.

The Đerdap Gorge is also a national park in Serbia, declared in 1974. A significant part of Đerdap is made up of the Danube, which is also the largest and longest gorge in Europe. Đerdap is also one of the largest European archaeological museums in situ. The remains of Trajan's road, Trajan's tablet, Roman limes, and examples of preserved Slavic folk architecture are within the National Park. Đerdap Gorge is an important tourist center in Serbia, with an increasing number of visitors annually.

Džavolja varos is located in southern Serbia near the administrative border with Kosovo and Metohija - ten kilometers from Niš- Pristina's main road. This area was protected for the first time in 1959; since 1995, it has been a natural monument. Two phenomena are essential for this area: earthen figures and springs of acidic water with strong mineralization. Džavolja varos was nominated for the new Seven Wonders of the World. Today, this part of Serbia is an important tourist destination with fully arranged trails for visitors, and Planika AD Kuršumljica carries out tourism promotion. In terms of promoting tourist values and reviving geomorphological stories, this locality also introduced night visits to show mysticism as realistically as possible ([djavoljavaros.com](http://djavoljavaros.com))

Glacial relief of Šar Mountain<sup>33</sup>. The Šar Mountain belongs to the Šar - Pinda system, and at the same time, it is the watershed of the Adriatic, Black Sea, and Aegean basins. The park's territory is dominated by numerous cirques carved out by glaciers during the Ice Age. The park has many gorges, canyons, waterfalls, rivers, and streams. There are around 70 beautiful lakes, and the mountain is one of the most important centers in European high mountain endemism.

Deliblatska peščara (Deliblats Sandstone) - a special nature reserve - is located in Banat, in the southeastern part of the Pannonian plain, and is the largest European continental sandstone covering an area of 35,000 hectares. It was created during the Ice Age from powerful deposits of eolian silicate-carbonate sand. As the last and largest oasis of sand-steppe, forest, and swamp vegetation that once dominated the Pannonian plain, Deliblatska peščara is one of the most important centers of biodiversity in Serbia and Europe and the most significant steppe area in our country and represents a unique scientific polygon ([vojvodinasume.rs](http://vojvodinasume.rs)). Tourism is developed but there are many more possibilities for different itineraries.

The Vratnja overgrowths are located in the municipality of Negotin - Eastern Serbia. These are stone arches representing the remains of a former large cave, and there are three overgrowths here: Big, Small, and Dry overgrowth. A marked path along the Vratna river valley reaches the overgrowth. Vratna river canyon is located 30 km north of Negotin, near Urovica and the village of Vratna. It was protected in 1957. In terms of classification, it belongs to the geomorphological monuments of nature (Avramović, 2003). Not enough is being done to promote and valorize this geographical location.

#### *The importance of tourist guides in the geoheritage interpretation*

The role of tourist guides is immeasurable when it comes to tourism - numerous authors research this topic (Huang et al., 2010; Krivošejev, 2014; Syaker et al., 2021; Anđelković et al., 2022). Cohen (1985) and Huang et al. (2010) consider that tourist guides create tourist experience, which mostly depends on their performance (knowledge, skills). Tourist guides are considered storytellers who create unforgettable tourist experiences (Alazaizeh et al., 2019; Hwang et al., 2020; Weiler et al., 2002; Zahari et al., 2020). In the internet era and numerous available information, storytelling has a significant role in the tourist experience, as it creates meaning through contextualization and emotions (Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Since 1999, after the NATO bombing of the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, the activities of the Republic of Serbia on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija have been limited, so everything related to tourism development and promotion has been stopped.

According to Best (2012), the roles played by tourist guides are the pathfinder and mentor. The pathfinder is the one who guides tourists around the locality, while the mentor provides all the information related to the locality that may be interesting to tourists. In this sense, guides on geolocalities are essential, likewise in places that are not very attractive at first but gain value through good and well-presented stories and satisfactory storytelling techniques. With that, tourists have greater satisfaction, which is the key to tourism.

The less known, less attractive, or less promoted the locality, the more significant the role of tourist guides becomes. In these instances, with insufficient or unavailable information, the role of tourist guides is crucial. The ability of guides to bring localities to life and make them understandable and intriguing defines locations' success and the tourists' satisfaction (Song et al., 2012).

Hadžić et al. (2005) suggest that heritage institutions and geolocalities have the opportunity to attract visitors and turn them away based on the adequacy of cultural and natural asset interpretation and the overall attitude towards visitors.

Teaching is a particular type of conversation that requires such types of abilities as active listening, the possibility for open questions, paraphrasing, reflections, feedback, adjusting the tone and rhythm (manner) of speaking to clients, etc. (Wilson, 2010), which is the preferred ability of tourist guide. Numerous authors (Holloway, 1981; Pearce, 1982; Fine & Speer, 1985; Mancini, 2001) consider the tourist guide a teacher. However, the emphasis is on feedback, the way of presentation, and the storytelling technique, which determine the success of the tourist guide and tourists' satisfaction. There are localities where organizing a kind of theater related to geomythology is possible. Since museum theaters are organized in museums, geomythology theater could be organized on geolocalities because what we see is easier to understand than what we hear. It is considered that myths and geology are connected in numerous ways, while some geomyths are based on major geological events (Piccardi et al., 2007). The researchers found a term better known as geomythology, which represents the study of mythology associated with science (Hakim et al., 2021).

All myths need help with interpretation and presentation, as they are essential for their understanding and a complete tourist experience. The relationship between geosciences and myths is studied by geomythology, which is understood as an explanation of the geological and geomorphological features using supernatural forces and beings. The geomythological aspect concerns the cultural, historical, and spiritual meaning or value of geodiversity. Also, it can be included in the holistic concept of geotourism, meaning that geotourism should contain abiotic, biotic, and cultural components (Kircher et al., 2015). It can be argued that the role of tourist guides is crucial, whereby tourists need somebody who can explain them stories and also take care of their safety, as not all attractions are easily accessible. In addition, myths and legends are closely related to local wisdom and stories in the visited area, which is essential from a historical or heritage perspective. Things like this are often broken as they need strong evidence in the field of science (Hakim et al., 2021).

### *Interpretation*

The heritage interpretation is based on some older methods, some of which are still current today. This methods dates back to the end of the 19th century and connects with the formation of the first national parks on the territory of the United States of America (Tugas et al., 2005). Therefore, it was necessary to explain the geomorphological and geological processes while adapting everything to the tourists in order to be able to understand and experience certain geoprocesses properly. According to Lew (1987), tourist attractions encompass observed landscapes, activities contributing to memorable experiences, and a broad range of offerings catering to tourist needs. In addition to historical sites and amusement parks, tourist attractions include services and skills essential for meeting visitors' needs. Interpretation is a way to help others understand the importance of heritage (Carter, 2001) and, therefore, geoheritage, which is far more complex and demanding when it comes to interpretation and explanation to tourists. The Association for Heritage Interpretation (<https://ahi.org.uk/>) explains interpretation as something that "enriches our lives by engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening – a fundamental understanding of places, people, events and objects from the past and present". Visitors experience attractions to receive the story of the locality and its significant physical, natural, social, aesthetic, or spiritual characteristics. The goal of the visitor's experience is informal education and direct learning about heritage (Moscardo, 1996) or the natural environment (Sharpe, 1982).

Chronis (2012) mentions *Gettysburg* as the meeting place of two armies during the American Civil War, which is today a dual place - for some, a place of fratricide, while for others, a battlefield for freedom and equality. However, around 2 million tourists visit this historically significant town

every year. The main problem is how to interpret the story, as the emotions related to this place are different from one group to another (and emotions are everywhere in tourism (Aho, 2001). Chronis (2012) reminds that there is an increasing number of recognizable tourist places thanks to the stories about them, which are the main reason tourists come to visit (d’Hauteserre, 2011; Hughes, 1992; Meethan, 1996; Reijnders, 2011; Urry, 1995; Chronis, 2012). Interpretation of heritage is not at all a simple job, as Hummon (1992) mentions that the meaning of a place has a double character: one is related to the place itself (facts), and the other is people’s emotions related to that place.

The American author Tilden laid the foundations of the theory of heritage interpretation (1977) and states that *“heritage interpretation is an educational activity whose task is to interpret the heritage of the public through various media, combined with the direct experience or contact of visitors with the object of interpretation, while trying to avoid a mere enumeration of dry fact”* (Tilden, 1977; Krivosheev, 2014). Therefore, facts alone are not enough for tourism. They are only a valuable basis for stories to be built on and tourists leaving a tourist destination or attraction with a particular experience.

Tilden gives six basic principles of interpretation (Tilden, 1977; adapted from Krivosheev, 2014):

1. “Respecting the experiences, demands, and wishes of the visitors (without respecting this principle, the interpretation will not be able to convey the desired message),
2. Interpretation is not only information, although it contains it; information is the starting point of interpretation that must try to shed light on the hidden meaning contained in the information,
3. Interpretation combines different arts and skills; to be effective, oratory, acting, painting, photography, reconstruction, text, design, and architecture are used.
4. When interpreting, one should not impose an opinion but encourage thinking; interpretation should not present only one opinion, just as it should not provide answers to all questions,
5. The interpretation must represent a whole; it must not be disjointed, nor should it be primarily based on only one element while neglecting others,
6. The interpretation must differ depending on the visitors; the interpretation intended for children is not the same as that intended for adults, and the interpretation for average visitors and those desiring additional professional knowledge is also different.”

Applying Tilden’s six principles can serve as a practical guide in promoting geoheritage and geolocalities in Serbia. Not all geolocalities are inherently interesting or attractive for tourism, but by crafting compelling narratives, incorporating geomythology, and delivering engaging presentations, these sites can become self-sustainable tourist destinations. This approach aligns with the needs of 21st-century tourism planning.

## CONCLUSION

The tourist guide’s role is significant and multifaceted, especially when interpreting cultural and natural and, therefore, geoheritage sites. Nowadays, it is not enough to see something, people also need to understand and experience it, leaving the destination satisfied as one of the main motives for traveling (Pereira et al., 2022). Travelers going on geotours often need more knowledge about the localities, and tourist guides are some of the most valuable people with sufficient knowledge and storytelling techniques to explain destinations and present geomyths. Costumes often help, transferring people to the original era in the location and getting a “first person interpretation” effect. In addition, the use of costumes in the interpretation of heritage contributes to preserving traditional culture and encourages it in modern communication strategies, as it reflects the culture of the past (Minhus & Huie, 2021).

For tourist guides to interpret heritage effectively, continuous education is not just a suggestion but a necessity, as the quality of tourist guides determines tourists’ satisfaction (Hwang et al., 2020). Creating standardized training for tourist guides is necessary, especially for those working at the specific destination. Most existing training relies only on what is being discussed rather than how it is being discussed. Particular attention should be paid to how to talk to different target groups, mainly depending on the culture from which the guests come (Kovalenko et al., 2021). In addition, interpreting for adults, children, those with prior knowledge, or people with special needs requires different approaches (Brooks et al., 2022). This understanding, coupled with market segmentation, ensures that satisfaction is maximized, making the role of the guide even more valuable.

As geotourism is a relatively new concept in practice, there are no classic instructions on how the interpretation should be developed, leaving everything to the tourist guides and their senses. However, as many destinations offer standardized products (views, nature, historical sites, etc.), they need help to stand out. In such situations, the importance of a tourist guide, quality stories, and interpretations are reflected. These elements help the destination distinguish itself by creating a strong emotional connection through storytelling (Kvítková & Petrů, 2021). During traveling, most tourists want to enjoy experiences different from those in their daily lives, searching for something unique and memorable, whereby people on the destination need to pay more attention to those unique offers. With that in mind, effective promotion and quality guiding services can increase tourists' satisfaction, create destination loyalty, influence higher return intent, and promote positive word-of-mouth (Zhang & Walsh, 2021).

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