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**Contribution to the Research on Rural Resorts  
in the Function of Tourism Products  
and Services Distribution:  
the Example of the Republic of Croatia**

**Abstract**

The primary function of the rural resort is to renovate and put into function existing, old, abandoned buildings/constructions, giving them a new purpose for tourism services. At the same time, construction of new buildings/structures, which can distort the authentic rural environment, is reduced. This paper intends to identify and analyse the elements of the tourism market in the Republic of Croatia which affect the process of revitalisation of the historic settlements through tourism products and services, while these elements are maintained, and popularise traditional culture and create an additional source of income in the countryside. The aim is to explore the place and role of rural resorts to enhance the distribution of tourism products and services, and the relevance of the application/use of tourist valorisation potentials of rural areas in the continuous efforts of improving tourism in the Republic of Croatia. The above is presented through a marketing policy and destination and space management, with a focus on limiting administrative, organisational and financial factors that influence the prosperity growth and substantial investment cycles in this segment in the Republic of Croatia.

**Keywords:** Republic of Croatia, rural resort, tourism, management, destination, distribution, products, services

## Introduction

Global movements in the tourism market and the competitiveness of certain tourist destinations are strongly connected with the dominant trends in the market. The tourist is active today, focused on experiences and stories; he wants to be a participant and tends to journeys that will contribute to his personal development. In contrast, Croatian tourism today has a very characteristic seasonality and concentration of tourist traffic on the narrow strip of coast of the Adriatic Sea. Such reliance on the product “sun and sea” will not contribute to long-term, more distinctive improvement of the competitive position of the Republic of Croatia as a tourist destination. Also, the product “sun and sea” will not increase tourism spending, nor will it make better use of development resources. It is therefore necessary to develop tourism products that will enable the use of available capacities beyond the summer months and activate tourism potentials of the continental Croatia. Creation and new-generation products development, in which tourist valorisation of old villages is included, enable creative expression and interaction of tourists with local ambience. In this way, Croatia opens access to new consumer segments. Tourists are interested in experiencing the atmosphere and identity of the place they are visiting; at the same time, important for them are a pleasant environment, typical ambience, and tourist attractions (Gredičak 2012, p. 14). It should be pointed out, in the case of Croatia, that the new facilities/buildings in rural tourism have predominantly a brownfield character and it is about a conversion (reuse) and adaptation of different, currently unused facilities/buildings.

Based on the foregoing, the hypothesis in this paper is that with the scientific methods it is possible to prove that reconstruction/restoration and tourist valorisation of old villages as rural resorts contribute to the development of economic activities in rural areas.

## Research methods

In the research, formulation and presentation of the results in this paper used analysis and synthesis, comparative, descriptive and historical methods.

In order to realise the research objectives, the methods for the collection of secondary data are used. Secondary data were collected by the historical method. By applying these methods, relevant bibliographic materials, scientific texts/articles, publications and websites are analysed. In the analysis of data and facts relating to the research in this paper, the method of analysis and synthesis is important. Using the method of analysis, as one of the basic methods, complex data are broken down into simpler data, and some units are separated into sections. The terms are explained by the separation of their individual parts. After the process of analysis we obtained certain knowledge about the subject, i.e. the topic of this research/study, as well as the components from which this paper is composed. Thereafter, using the method of synthesis, this process is returned back. With the use of the method of synthesis, the elements that have been reached in the process of analysis have been re-connected, which made it possible to draw up a new entity. With the method of comparison, the data and the occurrence of the same kind are compared to each other with the aim of drawing conclusions. Using a method of description, we registered and described the facts relating to the effective management of a rural destination, the history of the villages, and rural resorts to enhance the distribution of tourism products and services.

### **Literature Review**

Regarding tourist valorisation of rural areas in the function of tourism products and services distribution, at this point we point out several recent key papers of Croatian scientists/researchers who deal with specific problems of the mentioned area, with the intention that readers are introduced to the thoughts and views of Croatian scientists/researchers whose articles they are probably not familiar with, and these articles were used as a starting point for research in this paper.

Tourist valorisation of rural areas in the function of tourism products and services distribution in the Croatian territory pronouncedly researched T. Gredičak, who mentioned problematics treated independently or in co-authorship with other Croatian researchers, and the key papers/articles are briefly reviewed further in the text.

In the paper "Marketing in rural tourism: the Croatian example", Demonja and Gredičak (2013) treated the importance of effective marketing

management as an essential factor in the evaluation of the content of natural and cultural heritage in rural areas in terms of sustainable tourism development. The resources on the territory of Croatia are identified and the holders of tourism development projects are defined. This paper shows the importance of implementing marketing approach evaluation of the rural resource potential in the function of rural tourism development as a powerful tool for achieving competitive advantages in the global economy and the continuing effort of improving tourism. Consequently, the experiences of effective implementation of the marketing management of tourism resources in rural areas of the Republic of Croatia were presented and critically evaluated. In this way, marketing management of tourism was shown from an economic point of view, which may affect the sustainable development of tourism in general, and the economy as a whole, regardless of where it is being applied and enforced.

The paper "Cultural tourism and market segmentation" (Gredičak 2012) shows the importance of the market segmentation process in the function of cultural tourism development. The contribution of market segmentation of cultural heritage was analysed as a specific tourism product in terms of sustainable tourism development, which ensures the creation of competitive advantages in both domestic and foreign markets, and has found that the effective marketing management of tourist valorisation of cultural heritage affects the overall tourism development.

In Croatia, there are real but insufficiently explored possibilities of implementation and development of cultural heritage content in terms of sustainable tourism development. It is therefore necessary to determine the elements that influence the possibility of inclusion of cultural heritage in tourism flows in order for effective marketing management of cultural heritage to influence the overall tourism development in certain tourist destinations. The application of this concept insists on emphasising satisfying the needs of the target market and society as a whole. This means that the introduction, exploitation and development of each product, including the tourism product, which is based on the use of cultural heritage value, should take into account the necessity of preserving all of the characteristics of the environment of tourism determinants in social, cultural and environmental terms (Gredičak 2011a).

The paper "Rural tourism in the function of preserving the traditional identity" (Gredičak 2011b) discusses the importance of resources to meet

the needs of tourism, with special emphasis being placed on characteristics or elements that affect the possibility of inclusion of natural and cultural resources of rural areas in tourism flows, and with effective marketing management, at the same time, contributing to the preservation of tradition and sustainable tourism development.

The article “Marketing strategy of rural tourism” (Gredičak 2010), among others, deals with effective ways in which proper marketing strategies, within the overall tourism offer, realise humanistic content of tourism, which is one of the new tourism flows.

Tourism in many countries, as well as in the Republic of Croatia, can contribute to sustainable economic development. In such continuous efforts, the primary task should be to use a source of cultural heritage which has emerged over the centuries in the territory of today’s Croatia. Valorisation of cultural heritage in the function of national tourism insists on the acceptance of history as a national contributor to general cultural values, which is discussed in the T. Gredičak paper “Cultural heritage and economic development of the Republic of Croatia” (Gredičak 2009).

Based on research conducted by T. Gredičak (Gredičak 2008), it can be predicted that the marketing approach valorisation of cultural heritage in the coming time will realise intensive development, expanding its influence in all areas of human activities, including tourism. The conclusion is that effective marketing management of cultural heritage in the Republic of Croatia needs to develop a state of awareness about the need for evaluation of the potential of cultural heritage in the function of tourism development as a powerful tool for achieving competitive advantages in a globalised economy.

One of the last significant contributions of the importance of the inclusion of traditional architecture for commercial purposes, i.e. in tourism, which would successfully preserve the traditional heritage of one part of Croatian territory, the Podravina region, is the book “Traditional architecture in Podravina region. Overview with characteristic examples” (Somek 2011). The author has properly concluded how there is an urgent need to preserve the traditional architecture in the Podravina region in such a way that parts of traditional facilities/buildings appropriately adapt and use it for commercial purposes, primarily in tourism. The identification of these problems from the state and local government is also emphasised, particularly non-governmental organisations, which are more active,

but still insufficient, and they are included in the actions and financial support to revitalise, restore, and preserve the traditional architecture of the Podravina region towards sustainable development of the whole area. The author emphasises, to achieve what has been mentioned in the most qualitative way, how it is primarily necessary to insist on building awareness of the value of the most precious traditional architectural heritage in the Podravina region, which must be functionally incorporated into modern life of Podravina villages, because without new functions it will not survive.

R. Baćac and D. Demonja in two joint papers dealt with the research and interpretation of procedures and steps required for successful implementation of tourism products and services in rural tourism, which aim to exploit all available resources of one rural household, regardless of whether it concerns traditional architecture, traditional activities (traditional crafts), agricultural production or presentation of rural life. This is especially important because rural tourism is a generator of extra income and achieving full employment of the rural household, which is able to integrate all resources and diversification of activities. Thus, in the article of the mentioned authors, "Contribution to the development of rural tourism in Croatia: proposed steps for successful business", a special emphasis is placed on the types of tourism services in rural tourism through a typology of rural family farms and connecting with the market (Demonja, Baćac 2012). In the paper "Rural architectural heritage in the function of Croatian tourism offer" (Demonja, Baćac 2013), the authors discuss one segment of the rural heritage: the role of traditional architecture in creating tourism offer of Croatian rural areas, i.e. they presented architectural heritage and its basic characteristics, primarily the attractiveness of the rural household, which is one of the components of a traditional rural household that gathers tourist specificity based on preserved tradition of living and working in the countryside. In this sense, the authors, among others, presented and analysed Croatian best-practice examples, whereby listing proposals for possible future use and greater involvement of the rural heritage in Croatian tourism offer.

## Discussion

### *Managing the destination*

Environmental issues and environmental responsibility are among the most actual challenges of the future. Considering that tourism, among other things, is based on the quality of the environment, it will more intensively use environmentally responsible eco-concepts at the level of individual service providers and the entire destinations. Integrated management of a rural resort represents a framework to encourage the development of sustainable tourism, which aims to conserve the landscape and natural and cultural resources. Considering the Republic of Croatia belongs to the countries that attract the most tourists due to the natural area and the wealth of cultural and historical heritage, and less because of the quality, availability and diversity of new tourist attractions, it is necessary to use these competitive advantages. However, it should be emphasised that without newly created tourist contents, it is extremely difficult to establish the preconditions for achieving the internationally recognisable tourist image, season extension, and development of continental tourism.

Because of the many limitations, the level of investment activity in Croatian tourism in the last 20 years was not satisfactory, and even anticipated investments in the rural resorts are not realised. The development of private entrepreneurship projects negatively affects the investment climate. Thus, some of the obstacles are as follows: excessive paperwork, incompatible land registry, long periods of obtaining the necessary permits, incompatibility of the legislation, the absence of the usual model of property management, a general lack of clear procedures for the realisation of investments, and uncertainty.

To a large number of potential investors, both domestic and foreign, business considerably complicates complex and unclear legislation. The existing legal framework is not sufficiently functional, inappropriate, uncoordinated and incomplete. With a few specific laws regulating the tourism activity, livelihood/enterprising in tourism is largely determined by a series of laws and/or implementing regulations under the authority of many other ministries: Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, Ministry of Environment

and Nature Protection, Ministry of Construction and Physical Planning, and others.

Considering that there is not enough quality management capacity and knowledge, spatial plans are undetermined and discordant with the actual needs of investment projects in tourism. Due to the excessive time reaching an agreement between the state and local levels, many assets, among other old settlements, were abandoned and unused. For the purpose of rational use of available tourism space, it is necessary to use strategic plans for tourism development as a professional background in the process of developing spatial plans. The protection and preservation of cultural and natural resources, even in a single example or a case, should not depend on the change of the political system, political parties in power, change of the government, and responsible officials. Research activity in this area could, and ought to, give an appropriate contribution to a more successful and better protection of preservation of all goods (Gredičak 2008: 231).

One of the key limiting factors for the development of economic activities in the field of tourism in the Republic of Croatia is the ineffective tourist destinations governance model. The current governance model declaratively includes a large number of subjects, but without clear rights and responsibilities. Tourist boards are the only legally regulated support to the management tourism system. Their mission in practice is mainly focused on the secondary activities, with only a small part on the product development. In a number of tourist communities it should therefore raise the level of material and human resources, and increase the functional activity. There are also a very small number of coordinated strategic documents, and decisions are made based on the individual attitudes/opinions of municipal, city or county government, or under the influence of various interest groups.

Considering the politics of marketing, it is necessary to determine quality competence of the commercialisation of tourism products at the levels of state, region, destinations and private sectors, and the promotion system should be optimised with respect to the return on investments/invested funds. At the national and regional levels, a system of special quality marks should be created for accommodation facilities. This would ensure the recognition of the special qualities, i.e. differentiated offerings. Finally, it is especially important to direct activities as quickly as possible towards electronic marketing and social web services.

***Rural resort in the function of tourism products and services distribution***

At a time when in the Republic of Croatia much discussion about the upper limit of the construction of facilities/buildings was intended for tourism, whereby putting a lot of pressure on the space/area due to the construction of new facilities/buildings, rural resorts in an entirely different way were trying to consolidate, renew, and organise the space/area.

A rural resort, i.e. an ethno-eco-village or widespread hotel, is defined as a horizontal hotel located in the historic centre of a place/site. It can be the entire place (village) or more dislocated accommodation units (rooms, houses) that are organised as a hotel with a central reception and other services (e.g. restaurant) (Demonja, Baćac 2012, pp. 141-142; Baćac 2011, pp. 42-43; Demonja, Ružić 2011, pp. 36-41; Dropulić, Krajnović, Ružić 2008; Dall'Ara, Esposto 2005). Accommodation is organised in multiple, interrelated traditional buildings (houses) with overall comfort that provides rural family hotels (Demonja, Baćac 2012: 141; Baćac 2011: 41). Guests are able to stay in separate accommodation units that are dispersed around the site (village) or on the entire micro-destination. Each accommodation unit is decorated differently. Maintenance services such as breakfast, cleaning, changing linens, and others can be organised in every building that defines the rural resort, while catering services can be organised in a central restaurant, which makes rural resorts different from rural family hotels.

The basic idea of a rural resort is to reconstruct and put into function existing, old, abandoned buildings, giving them new value through tourism services while suppressing and preventing the construction of new buildings that could disrupt the authentic rural environment. The aim is to revitalise the historic settlements through tourism services, and encourage the development of authentic tourism services, preserve and popularise the traditional culture, and generate revenue for the entire community (place, village). A rural resort is ideal for historic sites (villages) that have artistic and architectural value and attractiveness. It integrates the entire territory on which it is organised, not only through the accommodation services, but also through other services.

Management and organisation of a rural resort are possible through a joint venture of owners of certain facilities (potential accommodation units), creating a common management structure, or the management structure may organise the local community (government) through an organisation that brings together owners of accommodation units as a rural resort.

It is particularly important that a rural resort, i.e. an ethno-eco-village, be thematically defined, since the offer in all villages that are organised on the principle of a rural resort will not be identical and monotonous. Thus, for example, a rural resort can be organised thematically as follows:

- rural mountain resort – through the creation of tourism offer related to life in mountain villages,
- wellness rural resort – designed to offer wellness programmes related to tradition, e.g. aromatherapy with healing plants from the region, making tea from medicinal herbs, and traditional medicine,
- old crafts rural resort – presentation of old crafts of the region,
- wine rural resort – focused on wine as a traditional product (suitable for villages on the islands and the mainland),
- music rural resort – depicting the traditional music and singing of the region, and others (Demonja, Baćac 2012, p. 142; Baćac 2011, p. 43).

Rural resorts, respectively ethno-eco-villages or widespread hotels, may never be just an exhibit type of tourism services, but rather active presentation and organisation of tourism services that are related to the heritage and traditional life in villages and rural areas.

### *Croatian best-practice examples of rural resorts*

In the Republic of Croatia, despite difficulties and obstacles, there are several examples of high-quality private entrepreneurial initiatives of rural resorts, which are comprehensively discussed in the book 'Rural tourism in Croatia with Croatian best practice examples and European experiences' (Demonja, Ružić 2010, pp. 227–229), and here we are emphasising the following:

- Eco-ethno Village Stara Kapela ([http://www.stara-kapela.hr/Eco-ethno\\_village\\_Stara\\_Kapela.html](http://www.stara-kapela.hr/Eco-ethno_village_Stara_Kapela.html)),

- A Watermill Village Rastoke (<http://slunj-rastoke.com/?lang=en>),
- Etnoland Dalmati – Pakovo Selo (<http://www.dalmati.com/index.php/en/>),
- Ethno Village Kokorići, Vrgorac ([http://www.hotelprvan.hr/eng\\_etno-selo.htm](http://www.hotelprvan.hr/eng_etno-selo.htm)),
- Jurlinovi dvori Court, part of the village of Drage, Primošten Burnji (<http://www.jurlinovidvori.org/index.php?lang=en>),
- Baćulov dvor estate, part of the village of Drage, Primošten Burnji (<http://www.baculov-dvor.com/eng/>),
- Ethno Village Radošić – Škopljanci (Demonja, Ružić 2010, p. 228).

Here we will present and analyse, in more detail, the example of Eco-ethno village Stara Kapela in the municipality of Stara Kapela near Slavonski Brod.

Eco-ethno village Stara Kapela is a Slavonian village and has a long historical tradition that dates back to the second half of the 13th century (Demonja, Gredičak 2013: 126). The village of Stara Kapela is situated 175 kilometres east of Zagreb (capital of the Republic of Croatia), among the Požega Hills, in a valley with nine sources of drinking water, and the Požega Hills were named a tourist area. In order to preserve the ethnological and ecological values of the village of Stara Kapela, in the year 2005, based on a private initiative, the NGO 'Eco-ethno village Stara Kapela' was established. That NGO started with the arrangement of the village as a unique location, rural tourist destination of the type 'village hotel' or diffuse hotel, i.e. a rural resort.

Eco-ethno village Stara Kapela has a centralised reception and 14 restored estates/properties that were sold to those which were authentically reconstructed or revitalised using original material. In this way, restored buildings/constructions of rural architecture are used as accommodation capacities of the village of Stara Kapela for development of so-called residency tourism (Demonja, Ružić 2010, p. 228).

Simultaneously with the reconstruction and development of the village of Stara Kapela, through abandoned farms and the wider area, ethnological and ethnographic material is collected, which is used as an ethnographic collection or museum, but also for the decoration of the 20 houses in the village of Stara Kapela. Moreover, 13 km of pedestrian bike trails with six rest stops with tables and benches, as well as four sites with replicas of ancient watchtowers, were built. They serve as lookouts and reminders of

the border of the former Military Frontier (Vojna Krajina), and defend against the Turks. These tourist trails interpret panels with information about the flora and fauna with the names in Croatian and Latin, and include 120 plant species, 80 species of birds, 60 species of mushrooms, and photographs of wild animals. In the main village street *sokak* (alley), unique street lighting is set with lyrics and quotes of famous Croatian poets. In 2008, financing from the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia, the Croatian National Tourist Board, and the County Brod-Posavina was used to restore 14 farmhouse facades in the traditional style with all of the ornaments and stucco decoration.

Eco-ethno village Stara Kapela today comprises accommodation facilities with 24 beds in four houses. The plan for further development with the renewal of certain parts of the village of Stara Kapela should increase the number of accommodation facilities, continue to build the main village street *sokak* (alley) with old crafts – blacksmiths, carpenters and wrights, and at the entrance to the village organise the living space, with horseback riding as well as rural driving chariots and carriages. The ultimate goal is for Eco-ethno village Stara Kapela to start living from tourism, quality gastronomy, and hospitable hosts.

As can be seen from the example of Eco-ethno village Stara Kapela, distribution of tourism products and services takes place through interaction between agricultural production, production of traditional products, presentation of tradition, and traditional gastronomy, i.e. the use of existing resources. This is evident in the revitalisation of the existing traditional buildings/construction, i.e. heritage, giving it a new tourism purpose. Inclusion of cultural heritage in tourism offer ensures a humanistic component. This is considered a shift in the quality of tourism offer, which is increasingly trying to realise its humanistic content – that is one of the new courses/flows of tourism (Gredičak 2009, p. 200; Gredičak 2010).

### Conclusion

With regard to existing and future projects of rural resort development in the Republic of Croatia, it is essential to define and conduct policy of marketing, destination management and space management in a quality manner. Furthermore, it should remove numerous administrative, organisational and financial barriers/obstacles. Managing a rural resort in the function of

economic activities implies a balanced development of culture, economy and infrastructure in areas where tourism takes place, simultaneously with the fewest possible interventions in nature and the environment. Emphasis should be placed on the higher involvement of the local population/local people in all development activities. A local man, with his specificities, knows the space/area, nature and people, and thus creates and spreads a special atmosphere. For the environmentally conscious tourists it is very attractive because the village itself is facing nature. In the Republic of Croatia, villages rich with cultural heritage should identify, protect, take care of it, and show it appropriately. Such a relationship necessarily raises the service quality and customer satisfaction level, and spreads the positive image of tourism and positive impact on oral transmission, which is the most effective form of advertising – guests will plan another visit. The long-term objective is the development of knowledge, environmental awareness, hospitality, kindness, and friendly attitude towards tourists. Also, some of the most important priorities are to encourage and motivate the local population to engage in tourism and awareness of the importance of tourism potential of rural areas. Each listed priority should be addressed individually; in their totality, all of the activities should be carried out simultaneously in terms of a stimulating and controlled process of tourism development.

As previously mentioned, managing a rural resort in the function of tourism products and services distribution in the Republic of Croatia fits into the vision of the development of Croatian tourism. Renewal and tourist valorisation of old villages affect the development of tourism in the entire area/territory and it is possible to achieve differentiation from competing destinations. Differentiation can be based on the cultivation of a natural, socio-cultural, climatic, production and experiential authenticity, preserved environment, and eno-gastronomic offer. All of this is related to creativity in the development of a rural resort as a tourism product. It is a product that can enable the use of available capacities out of the main season, enable the development of continental tourism, and connect “blue” (marine, coastal) and “green” (continental) Croatia, as well as destination positioning. Also, manufacturers of original, local products can directly sell their products to the tourism market and, thus, create additional sources of revenue, while the tourism market expands offer.

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