
ETHNO EVENT IN THE FUNCTION OF DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS: CASE STUDY “COUNTRY WEDDING” AT GOSTOLJUBLJE

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ABSTRACT

Ethno events have a driving role in the effective development of rural tourism. The goal of the research is to point out the importance of ethno event such as “Country wedding” as an innovative tourist product in enriching the tourist offer of rural areas, in the protection of intangible cultural heritage and affirming rural tourism. The research analyzed the motives, reasons, assessment of stay, sources of information of 346 visitors to the Gostoljublje farm in Kosjerić. Research has shown that in practice, ethno event directly affects the more effective valorization of the tourist potential, image improvement, enrichment and affirmation of the tourism product of the farm, stimulates the increase in employment of the local population and affects the raising of awareness about the importance of tourism in rural areas. Further research should be focused on improving marketing and promotional activities in order to achieve recognition and create a sustainable, professionally designed tourist brand “Country Wedding” in Kosjerić.

Introduction

Tourism represents an important component of integral and sustainable development of rural areas. Rural tourism is type of tourism that has numerous potential benefits for including employment growth, an extended economic base, repopulation, social development and a revival in local crafts (Nicolaidis, 2020). Rural tourism directly affects the reduction of

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migration flows and retention of the local population in the villages, creates new jobs and increases employment, creates additional income for rural agricultural holdings. There are several benefits that arise with introduction of agro-tourism activities and services at the farm. Farm is in position to gain additional profit influencing the long-term farm stability and sustainability. Farm supports the welfare of the wider community (advances the image of the local community, employs local labor, affects the reduction of migration process, especially of youth and female population, empowers the local budget, etc.) or it supports „silent“ national export (by hosting the foreign tourists) (Jeločnik et al., 2020). The special importance of rural tourism is reflected in its influence on the preservation of natural resources, ecological protection, preservation of cultural and historical monuments, preservation of customs, old rural crafts as a specific tourist attraction.

Rural tourism is considered not only a type of tourism, but also a kind of instrument for the development of rural areas, their revitalization and increase in attractiveness (Hakkarainen & Tuulentie, 2008). This type of tourism in countries has a significant role in balancing the country's regional development (Mafunzwaini & Hugo, 2005). Rural tourism is considered a source of income for the local community and is one of the directions of diversification of economic activities in rural areas (Clark & Chabrel, 2007). However, countries in their development strategies emphasize the necessity that rural tourism must be based on an efficient management policy and the concept of sustainable development, respecting the basic principles: the principle of economic sustainability, the principle of social and cultural diversity, the principle of ecological sustainability.

Rural tourism is a form of tourism characterized by sustainability (Vesić et al., 2022). Rural tourism is highly correlated with other types of tourism in the Republic of Serbia, and one of them is sustainable tourism – nature-based tourism which has recently gained more and more importance and it is believed that in the future „it will gain even more momentum“ and become a trend on a global level (Borović et al., 2022). Rural tourism attracts a smaller number of tourists and tourists are interested in local natural beauty, local culture, customs and traditions. However, sustainability can be questioned if factors such as: seasonal character, insufficiently developed infrastructure, large investments in the construction or adaptation of accommodation facilities, relatively low capacity occupancy are taken into account (Košić, 2009). That is why in contemporary professional literature and practice, the importance of integral rural tourism is increasingly being discussed as an approach that integrates natural and anthropogenic tourism resources, tourist infrastructure and superstructure with the local community, its economy and environment in the most effective way, building, at the same time, a concrete product (Saxena et al., 2007; Bousset et al., 2007). The connection and integration of all interest groups in the use of natural, human and financial resources has a direct impact on the fact that, thanks to tourism, the rural population achieves a better standard of living, and tourists have more varied experiences (Salvatore et al., 2018).

The tourist offer of rural destinations in the Republic of Serbia is relatively similar. In order to achieve coherence, it is necessary to introduce innovations in the enrichment of the tourist product in rural destinations (Vuković & Kljajić, 2023). The demands, motives and interests of tourists have become more complex. This is directly reflected

in further directions in the development and improvement of the tourist product in rural areas (Ivloga & Shakharamanian, 2019). Tourist destinations in rural areas offer visitors new experiences: getting to know culture, ethno customs, traditions, gastronomy, old crafts (Cvijanović et al., 2022). Intangible heritage and cultural heritage represent the basis for the development of ethno tourism in rural areas. That is why it is necessary to improve and strengthen promotional activities in the development of rural tourism (Cvijanović et al., 2022). Culture is an indispensable and integral part of the tourist offer of rural destinations through introducing tourists to rural heritage (architecture, history), rural lifestyle (tradition, music, gastronomy) and rural activities (local events, customs) (Lin et al., 2022). Therefore, special ethno events have great popularity because they contribute to destinations sustainability (Noh et al., 2024).

Contemporary research indicates the increasing importance of the terms event tourism, event marketing and event management in the development of various types of tourism, especially in the field of rural and ethno tourism (Getz, 2005; Wood, 2009; Van der Wagen & Carlos, 2005; Kotler & Kelle, 2021). Event tourism represents a specific form of tourism that unites and integrates the needs of tourists for recreation, culture, ethnographic heritage, and entertainment in rural tourist destinations (Bjeljac et al., 2014; Dugalić, 2020). Event marketing is an integral part of organizing tourist destination events. From the point of view of marketing, an event is an activity designed to offer visitors something worthy of their attention, which will attract them to the destination where it is organized, i.e. to gather a certain group of people at a certain time, in a certain place with a special reason (Van Der Wagen & Carlos, 2005). Kotler emphasizes the importance of events as an event designed to convey certain messages to a target group (Kotler & Kelle, 2021). Event marketing influences consumer attitudes towards different brands, consumer behavior and stimulates purchases (Seturi, 2023). Getz believes that the common feature of all events is periodicity and that each manifestation is an exceptional driving force in the mix of management, programs and people (Getz, 2005).

Contemporary trends indicate greater motivation and demand for staying at tourist destinations in rural areas (Christou et al., 2018; Xue et al., 2017). In this sense, in the development and promotion of rural tourism, well-designed and organized events and ethno manifestations are of special importance, which help in the effective affirmation and promotion of tourist products and services and thus enable direct interaction of visitors with the product and service of the tourist destination (Wood, 2009). Today, rural and ethno tourism are accepted in many of countries as the main drivers of development and revitalization of rural areas (Brandth & Haugen, 2011; Gao & Wu, 2017; Raspor et al., 2020; Randelović, 2022). Ethno, cultural and event tourism represent the fastest growing forms of tourism in many countries (Pantović et al., 2023). However, in modern literature, relatively little attention is paid to researching the motives of travel in cultural frameworks and the role of ethnic groups in the development of rural tourism (Terkenli & Georgoula, 2021). The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of an event based on local cultural heritage with which tourists have direct contact, as well as the effect that an ethno event has on increasing the attractiveness of a rural tourist destination.

Two research hypotheses were set, according to the available literature:

- Ethno event, as an innovative approach in the development of the tourist product of the rural economy, encourages the development of rural tourist destinations
- Ethno event contributes to raising the quality of the tourist product, expanding the assortment of the tourist offer, valorizing and protecting the intangible cultural heritage and through promotion shapes a new brand of the tourist destination.

Materials and Methods

The structure of the work and conducted research are aligned with the use of relevant data from the internal data of agricultural holding Gostoljublje in Kosjeric, as well as with the use of current scientific and professional domestic and foreign literature.

In order to effectively research tourist supply and demand and determine the market capacity of tourism, a survey was conducted. The instrument used for the research is a survey questionnaire compiled by the authors. The research was carried out in the period from March to October 2023, using the standard procedure of distributing questionnaires among the tourists in agricultural holding Gostoljublje in Kosjerić. The questions were asked in Serbian for domestic and in English for foreign tourists. According to the internal data of the Gostoljublje farm, 1153 visitors participated in the ethnic event “Country Wedding” out of the total number of tourists in the observed period. The questionnaire was conducted on a sample of 346 respondents, which represents 30% of the total number of participants of this event.

The purpose of the questionnaire is to indicate the importance of the ethno event as an innovative tourist product and its influence on the fluctuation of tourists, the reasons and motives of the visit, satisfaction with the stay and sources of information about the tourist destination. These indicators show taking further steps in the affirmation, promotion and further development of the tourist destination. Research should indicate the importance of modern approaches of event marketing in the development of rural tourism on specific example of the agricultural holding Gostoljublje in the municipality of Kosjerić.

In addition to field research, various scientific methods were used, namely the inductive deductive method, the method of analysis and synthesis, the method of description.

Research aims to point out the importance of organizing an ethno event as an innovative tourist product, through the promotion of local customs, old folk Serbian traditions, which contributes to the development and enrichment of the offer in rural tourist destinations.

Results with Discussion

Current trends in tourism indicate that the modern tourist is not satisfied only with the basic products of a tourist destination. That is why it is necessary to affirm new tourist products that complement the content of the tourist destination and fulfill the expected need of tourists, which is to participate in the life and customs of rural areas and to spend their stay at the destination in an active way.

The importance of the development of rural, ethno event and other forms of tourism is also recognized in the sustainable development strategy of the municipality of Kosjerić and contained in the vision: “Kosjerić is a municipality with a preserved population, stable economic development and a healthy environment that provides conditions for a peaceful and quality life of the local community, while the nurturing, the cultural, historical and traditional values makes it an attractive destination for domestic and foreign guests” (Sustainable Development Strategy of the Municipality of Kosjerić, 2018-2028).

Research is focused on the ethno event as a specific tourist product in a rural destination. The ethno project “Country wedding in Kosjerić” was implemented in the tourism offer of the Gostoljublje farm, which recognized the needs of the market and introduced an innovative and authentic tourist product.

This ethno project represents the permeation of the customs, climate and gastronomy of the ethnographic features of the destination as a way of experiencing the cultural essence of Serbia through a touristic ethno event. This represents a significant shift in the tourist offer of rural areas where, in addition to natural beauty and cultural monuments, the target group of tourist consumers realizes directly participates and interacts with the basic product and service of the tourist destination. The ethno event “Country wedding in Kosjerić” is an example of an efficient business venture, but also an increasingly popular form of entertainment and leisure time which, as a specific attraction, contributes to the prosperity of the farm, town and region as a tourist destination in the rural tourism of this region.

The essence of this event, as an innovative tourist brand, refers to the presentation of ethno celebrations and serves the purpose of affirming the local community and its culture. The originality of this event contributes to the protection of intangible cultural heritage, the preservation of traditions, customs, culture, lifestyle and nutrition of this climate and offers direct involvement and interaction to the target group of domestic and foreign tourists to share a new experience through their participation.

In addition, this ethno event expands the activity of the farm as a tourist destination and enables sustainability through an innovative program that provides tourists with an insight into the culture of living of the local residents, familiarization with traditions, customs, people’s behavior, clothes, music, song, dance, gastronomy as part of intangible cultural heritage. Local residents, representatives of cultural and artistic societies, the ambience of the ethno farm, artists on old folk instruments are included in the event. Such a specific ethno event has a unique ability to unite people through common goals, interests and experiences and contribute to the development and attractiveness of a tourist destination in a rural area.

Event marketing of this ethno manifestation is based on six stages: the display of customs (planning the theme of the event, event agenda and its phases through display of customs ambience, ethno scenography and costumes, culinary and gastronomic products), promoting the event (through the selection of the appropriate channel of communication with the target groups of visitors), social networks (through specific ways of promoting the event such as Facebook, Instagram), monitoring the progress of the campaign, implementation of the event (in which visitors and tourists are actively involved in the implementation of

the event) and evaluation. In order to effectively research supply and demand, the influence of the organization and implementation of ethno events in the affirmation of the market capacity of the Gostoljublje farm, a survey was conducted. The aim of the research was to survey the visitors about their attitudes, preferences, reasons and motives for the visit, evaluation of the stay, sources of information and satisfaction with the trip. The research was conducted on a representative sample of 346 respondents.

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. From total respondents, 79,77% belong to the domestic and 20,23% belong to the foreign tourists. Also, a total of 42,2% of men and 57,8% of women participated in research. In the research, 47,98% of the age between 18 and 35 years and 52,02% of the age about 35 years participated. In total 54,91% of participants are with completed secondary school, 15,32% with a college degree and 29,77% with university academic degree (Table 1.)

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Type of tourists			
	domestic	276	79,77%
	foreign	70	20,23%
Gender			
	Male	146	42,20%
	Female	200	57,80%
Age (years)			
	18-35	166	47,98%
	>35	180	52,02%
Level of education			
	No formal education	0	0
	Primary	0	0
	Secondary school	190	54,91%
	College degree	53	15,32%
	University degree	103	29,77%

Source: authors' calculation

Table 2. summarize the tourist traffic in the observed five-year period (2019-2023).

Table 2. Number of domestic and foreign tourist arrivals in agricultural holding Gostoljublje

Tourist	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Domestic	2500	905	1223	2154	2700
Foreign	1330	0	0	80	754
Total	3830	905	1223	2234	3454

Source: Internal data of agricultural holding Gostoljublje, Annual Report, 2023

The lowest number of tourists was recorded in 2020 and 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is primarily characteristic of the category of foreign visitors due to the inability to travel. From 2022, there is a constant increase in tourists, which almost doubled in 2022 compared to 2021, and also an increase was recorded in 2023 compared to 2022.

The number of foreign tourists is also increasing, although it has not yet reached the level of 2019. Based on the data presented, an increase in domestic and foreign tourists is evident.

Table 3. Total overnight stays of domestic and foreign tourists in agricultural holding Gostoljublje

Tourist	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Domestics	1723	2430	2220	1855	1700
Foreign	150	0	0	65	100
Total	1873	2430	2220	1920	1800

Source: Internal data of agricultural Gostoljublje, Annual Report, 2023

According to the data from Table 3., a total of 1,800 overnight stays were registered, which is about 6,25% less than in 2022. In 2023, domestic tourists had 1,700 overnight stays and domestic tourists accounted for 94.44% of the total number of overnight stays. Foreign tourists make 5.56% of the total number of overnight stays in 2023. The largest number of overnight stays by domestic tourists was realized in 2020 during the pandemic due to the need of tourists to stay in rural areas. With the enrichment of the tourist product and promotion, an increase in the number of overnight stays at this tourist destination can be expected in the coming period.

Table 4. Reasons for the visit and arrival of tourists in agricultural holding Gostoljublje

Reasons for the visit	% answer yes		% answer no	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Natural attractions	182	52,60%	164	47,40%
Cultural and historical heritage	120	34,68%	226	65,32%
Active vacation, sports, entertainment	81	23,41%	265	76,52%
Hospitality	299	86,41%	47	13,59%
Quality of accommodation	208	60,11%	138	39,89%
Gastronomic offer	230	66,47%	116	33,53%
Ethno event - Country wedding	266	76,88%	80	23,12%
Business events	18	5,20%	328	94,80%
Health reasons	38	10,98%	308	89,02%
Good price-quality ratio	90	26,01%	256	73,99%
Traffic infrastructure	9	2,60%	337	97,40%

Source: authors' calculations

Table 4. presents the motives and reasons for the visit and arrival of tourists to this tourist destination, summarized in the percentage of yes and no answers. The most common reason for choosing the tourist destination "Gostoljublje" is represented by natural attractions (52.60%), hospitality (86.41%) and quality of accommodation (60.11%). In addition, the data indicate that one of the most common motives for the arrival of tourists to this destination is the ethno event, the "Country Wedding" event (76.88%). A high percentage of surveyed visitors (66.47%) stated the excellent gastronomic offer of traditional cuisine.

Other parameters, such as business events (motivational weekends, team-buildings, company get-togethers) (5.20%) or traffic infrastructure (2.60%) are represented with a lower percentage. It can be concluded that one of the defining motives and reasons for visiting this destination is the ethno event “Country Wedding” as part of the specific cultural, ethno and gastronomic heritage of this region.

Table 5. shows the respondents’ answers regarding the assessment of the visitor’s stay at the tourist destination “Gostoljublje” within ten key indicators. The best rated parameters are accommodation quality (4.90), gastronomic offer (4.56) and cleanliness (4.80). An extremely high score (4.86) is characteristic of the ethno event “Country Wedding”, which greatly contributes to the attractiveness of the tourist offer. The price-quality ratio parameter is also high (4.46), as well as the availability of information about the destination (4.65), thanks to the modern approach to promotion at the internet and social networks. The lowest score (3.00) has the parameter that refers to the still inadequate traffic infrastructure.

Table 5. Evaluation of the tourist’s stay at the tourist destination

Residence initiators	Grade*
Quality of accommodation	4,90
Gastronomic offer	4,56
Natural attractions	4,30
Cultural and historical heritage	4,84
Ethno-event Country wedding	4,86
Fun, going out	3,64
Cleanliness	4,80
Availability of destination information	4,65
Price-quality ratio	4,46
Transport infrastructure	3,00

Source: authors’ calculations, (*the table shows the grades: 1 is minimum and 5 is maximum)

The average rating of satisfaction with the visit and stay of tourists at the tourist destination “Gostoljublje” is very high and amounts to 4.40 out of a possible five.

Conducted research on the assessment of tourists’ satisfaction with a visit to the tourist destination (Table 6.) shows that by far the largest number of tourists, more than two-thirds of the respondents (70.52%) rated the visit to the tourist destination as completely satisfied. A far smaller number rated their stay at this destination as mostly satisfied (19.08%) and partially satisfied (10.40%). Out of the total number of surveyed visitors, none declared themselves dissatisfied.

Table 6. Rating of tourists’ satisfaction with a visit to the tourist destination

Category	Frequency	Percent
Completely satisfied	244	70,52%
Mostly satisfied	66	19,08%
Partially satisfied	36	10,40%
Dissatisfied	0	0%
Total	346	100%

Source: authors’ calculation

This indicates a high level of visitor satisfaction with the stay and a high level of development of the tourist product of this destination.

Table 7. summarizes respondents' answers about sources of information about this tourist destination. As the main source of information about this tourist destination, the largest number of surveyed visitors (34.97%) used internet sites. A significant percentage of the respondents received the basic source of information about this tourist destination based on experience and recommendations from friends and acquaintances (25.14%).

Table 7. Sources of information about the tourist destination

Source of information	Frequency	Percent
Internet sites	121	34,97%
Social networks (instagram, twitter...)	52	15,03%
Electronic media (radio, TV...)	35	10,12%
Tourist agencies	32	9,25%
Presentations at fairs	6	1,73%
Print media	11	3,18%
Billboards	2	0,58%
Recommendations from friends	87	25,14%
Total	346	100 %

Source: authors' calculation

In order to better inform tourists, it is necessary to expand promotional activities to other sources that are not sufficiently represented. This primarily refers to more intensive cooperation with travel agencies, promotions at fair events, print and electronic media, and social networks.

In order to plan and direct further activities for the development of farming holding Gostoljublje as a tourist destination, it is necessary to answer two questions: what is the current level of tourism development and what environmental factors affect its future development. The answers to these questions are shown by SWOT analysis (Table 8.). The answer to the first question is obtained by accessing strengths and weaknesses. The achieved level of development of a professionally designed tourist product, the attractiveness of the ethno event "Country Wedding" which has become a brand, the high level of accommodation facilities and gastronomic services, as well as the potential of the local workforce with a positive attitude towards tourists, represent the basic strengths.

Table 8. SWOT analysis

STRENGTH	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -good positioning of the destination on the market -achieved level of development of a professionally designed tourist product intended for the domestic and foreign markets - the attractiveness of the “Country Wedding” event, which has reached a level of recognition and has become a brand - High level of accommodation capacity -various gastronomic offer - hospitality and positive attitude of employees and local population towards tourists - local knowledge and skills and potential of the local workforce - positive image of the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mismatch of traffic infrastructure with the needs of tourists - lack of greater cooperation between the public and private sectors in the development of products and the establishment of a more efficient value chain - lack of professional staff in tourism and catering - demographic structure, depopulation and unfavorable migration trends - insufficient cooperation between the public and private sectors in marketing and promotional activities - insufficient level of use of information technologies in the promotion of the destination
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - creation of new opportunities for employment and education of employees at all levels - improvement of traffic infrastructure (activation of Ponikve airport, highway Belgrade-Sarajevo, Belgrade-South Adriatic) - improvement of existing and development of new tourist products - favorable trends in tourist demand: vacation in preserved nature, tourism, ethno event, short vacations - improvement of marketing and promotional activities adapted to the needs of the destination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Economic crisis - Delayed implementation of infrastructure facilities (highway, airport) - Negative growth and outflow of professional staff from the hospitality and tourism industry - Mismatch of educational profiles in tourism with market needs - Emergence of new destinations on the tourist market

Source: Authors' development

Weaknesses relate to the unfavorable demographic structure and depopulation, and thus the lack of professional staff, the lack of meaningful cooperation between the public and private sectors in promotional activities, and especially the mismatch of the transport infrastructure with the needs of tourists.

The assessment of factors from the environment refers to the determination of further opportunities for successful development, but also the assessment of potential threats that can slow down or reduce the development of tourism in this destination.

Conclusion

Research has shown that farms in rural areas in the modern design of the tourist product, in addition to preserved nature and a healthy environment, historical attractions, should especially affirm ethno events that through the interactive participation of visitors and their direct acquaintance with culture, customs and ethnographic heritage enriches the tourist product and stimulates the increase in the attractiveness of the destination. If we analyze the respondents' answers related to the motives and reasons for staying at the Gostoljublje farm, we can conclude that the ethno event “Country Wedding” has

the potential to become a recognizable manifestation in ethno tourism. This is shown by the indicators of the high rating of the tourist stay in the ethno event category (4.86 out of a possible 5), as well as more than two thirds of the visitors in the extremely and completely satisfied category. One of the indicators also refers to the sources of information and demonstrates that, in addition to Internet sites, an important source of information about this tourist destination and event is obtained based on the experience and recommendations of friends, which results in the return of tourists to this destination and the expansion and promotion of this event as an attractive tourist product.

The study was limited by the time frame with regard to seasonal character of this ethno event. Also available literature with specific results and with a large sample is lacking.

Taking into account the current trends in the tourist market, the further development of this tourist destination can be defined through the creation and improvement of the integrated tourist product of the farm "Gostoljublje" (rural tourism, ethno tourism, ethno manifestations) which will enable the satisfaction of the most sophisticated demands of tourists and the achievement of a strategic position that will be competitive in the environment and take a leadership position in the rural tourism of this region. Research confirm hypotheses and has shown that in practice, such an ethno event is an effective way for the local community in rural areas to direct its activities towards certain goals, such as: valorization of capital, change of image, increase in the scope of services and their improvement, increase in employment of the local population, stimulating the economy and at the same time helping the economy to present, improve and affirm its tourist products and services.

Research in the work, through the example of the successful business practice, such as "Country wedding" of the Gostoljublje farm, contributes to the affirmation of further research in the planning, organization and implementation of ethno events in rural tourism. Special steps in further research should be focused on the improvement of marketing and promotional activities in order to achieve a level of recognition and create a sustainable, professionally shaped, positive tourist brand "Country Wedding" in Kosjerić.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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